

‘In no time’: Representations of Suspended Time in Contemporary Literature

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Michaelmas 2021

Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank my supervisors – Laura Marcus, for her incredible support and guidance throughout the entire process, and Adam Guy, for all his help within its final stages. I would also like to thank my brilliant family, including those absent, for their endless love and constant encouragement. This thesis is a labour of love, and each of you are in it.

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Abstract

In consciousness and literature, it is through narrative that meaning is habitually constructed, but in Anglo-American writing of the twenty-first century the relationship between time and meaning is studied, rather than routinely produced. Considering texts in which temporality is of explicit concern, my thesis interrogates how suspended time works at once in opposition and conjunction with narrative, as a being beyond meaning is explored. In representation, suspended time embeds the unseen, unknown, or unrealized *within* causality, and so forces texts too into suspension. Through metafiction, ekphrasis, intertextuality, and invocation, a lyric temporality is established within prose.

My first chapter reads works by Don DeLillo, Tom McCarthy, and Ben Lerner to consider how suspended time opens the narrativization that consciousness enforces, deferring closure in its recognition of the unknown. Pursuing the ethics to which these authors gesture, my second chapter explores the writing of Ali Smith, in which the plurality of time is consistently revealed through encounters with temporal absence or suspension. In Smith's fiction individual perceptions of time are relativized; it is an affective mode of meaning-making that succeeds. Discussing works by Denise Riley, Joan Didion, Helen Macdonald, Max Porter and Yiyun Li, my final chapter explores the genre of grief writing, which, prominent within the current period, uncovers the affective potential of suspended time itself. Imagining a disjuncture from time that is shared, the atemporality of grief, and, indeed, of the literary, maintains for these writers the connection between the living and the dead.

Contributing to recent discussions of 'the contemporary' and of literature's affective turn, my conclusion contends that in its representation of suspended time, twenty-first century writing enforces the detemporalization of its reader, promoting an affective mode of interpretation as it enables new ways of being in and being with time.

Introduction:

'Time means': Suspending Time and Narrative in Twenty-First Century Literature

The integrity of time, narrative, and meaning is intrinsic to human consciousness. Time is crucial to the framing of experience and because narrative is, as H. Porter Abbott explains, 'the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time', it is narrative through which meaning is constructed.¹ The significance of an object, person, or event is instinctively determined by a tracing of cause and effect; the present comprehended through its relation to past and future. However, in the twenty-first century enquiries into how we embody, perceive, and understand temporality have proliferated. In response to the innumerable ways in which time is lived, the causal linearity and singularity of narrative temporalization proves strikingly insufficient, and for literature the implications are substantial.

Due to the 'growing disjunction between the material conditions of contemporary being, and those spatial and temporal forms in which such conditions become collectively meaningful', there has arisen within literature, as Peter Boxall suggests, 'a persistent fascination [...] with a time that passes in a way that we cannot quite capture, that eludes our narrative grasp'.² Continuing beyond the first decade of the twenty-first century that Boxall examines, this fascination persists and remains dominant within this still developing literary period, and it is made visible, my thesis will contend, by the representation of suspended time.

In order to elucidate the counter-temporality that suspended time configures, my

¹ Quoted by Kent Puckett, 'Introduction: Story/Discourse', in *Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.1-23 (p.22).

² Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.9.

thesis will consider both the philosophy of time and narratology – fields in which, as this introduction will first discuss, the link between narrative and meaning is affirmed. In addition, however, my methodology makes use of affect theory, which attests to an alternate mode of meaning-making and thus to an alternate consciousness of time. In a historical and literary period in which the mechanics of narrative are increasingly examined, it is through a disjuncture from time that time-consciousness can most effectively be considered. Suspended time is used in contemporary writing as a way in which to understand the experience *of* time, subverting narrative’s causal portrayal of experience *in*, or *through* it.

‘the active quest [...] for those shaping ends’: philosophies of narrative time

An integrity between meaning and narrative is evident throughout the philosophy of time. In the field’s exploration of consciousness and of its framing of past, present, and future, discussions of causality and consequentiality are recurrent. However, the formation of meaning is, within such discussions of time-consciousness, examined by fewer thinkers, each of whom take the narrativization of time to be inexorable and assured. The work of French philosopher Paul Ricœur provides the most extensive example of such thinking. First published in 1983, the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* consider how time is made interpretable through emplotment – the placing of events within a linearity of causation. Noting the order of succession that competing philosophies of time share, Ricœur conceptualizes the interpretation of time through three levels of mimesis, relating a preconfiguration, configuration, and reconfiguration of time to show that within consciousness it is through continuity that meaning is attained.³

³ For Ricœur cosmological time (time’s essential linear progression) and phenomenological time (the ability to perceive this progression and thus to position

Ricœur argues that

*time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.*⁴

As the middle level of mimesis, emplotment serves a ‘mediating role’.⁵ Positioned between time and narrative, language reconfigures temporal experience through the interposition of its own ‘*configured*’ or ‘constructed’ temporality.⁶ The process is cyclical, and therefore never-ending – narrative facilitates the negotiation and renegotiation of experience, and it thus constitutes for Ricœur the essential mechanics of our very ‘human time’.⁷

Peter Osborne reads Ricœur’s emplotment alongside Martin Heidegger’s ‘*being-towards-death*’ and Walter Benjamin’s messianic ‘now-time’, to suggest that the temporalization each examines is dependent on a position of exteriority.⁸ Arguing that ‘the temporalization of history requires the standpoint of an atemporal exteriority or

present in relation to past and future) are integrated in human consciousness through the order of succession that they share.

⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), vol.1, p.52, emphasis original.

⁵ *Time and Narrative*, vol.1, p.54.

⁶ *Time and Narrative*, vol.1, p.54.

⁷ *Time and Narrative*, vol.1, p.3.

⁸ Heidegger’s ‘*being-towards-death*’ is a concept much discussed in the philosophy of time as well as in ontology. The term is used to relate how authentic being is constituted by the anticipation of the end, underlining the individualization and temporalization that death, as a conclusion enacts in its making whole of the time that precedes it. Benjamin discusses messianic time as an interruption of historicization, in which time is organized in sequence, with a historical materialism through which the past disrupts the present, revealing its significance. Whilst for Benjamin, time is constructed as different temporalities communicate in a constellation or network, meaning is nonetheless always attributed to an event ‘posthumously’ and is thus reliant on a positionality of conclusion. See Heidegger, ‘Dasein’s Possibility of Being-A-Whole, and Being-Towards-Death’, in *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1962), pp.279-311; Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol.4*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Harry Zohn, (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1940), pp. 389-400.

“end”, Osborne aligns death, eternity and the unconscious in their exposition of a ‘purely anticipatory, timeless end [...] posited in exteriority and thereby paradoxically present, phenomenologically, within the very thing to which it is by definition exterior (time)’.⁹ For Osborne temporalization has an ‘existential structure’; time is constructed in the consciousness of the individual, who, anticipating the ‘timeless end’ comprehends the present by means of its narrativization.¹⁰ It is through the exteriority of conclusion that for both individual and collective, a continuity between cause and effect can be established.

The exteriority that Osborne identifies within philosophy bears striking resemblance to that offered within literary criticism by Frank Kermode’s 1965 series of critical lectures published in *The Sense of an Ending*. Tracing the temporal implications of apocalypse from its religious comprehension as an imminent event or Parousia, to its modern incorporation or ‘immanence’ within time-consciousness, Kermode examines the temporalization of meaning-making, articulating its dependence upon narrative. Thrown into the middle, Kermode explains, man establishes ‘fictive concords with origins and ends’ in effort to make sense of his position between them.¹¹ Fiction is, as for Ricœur, essential to time-consciousness, but the emplotment that Kermode examines depends more overtly on conclusion. It is to narrative ends that Kermode’s theory most attends.

Balancing causality with contingency, Kermode’s reading of time develops from its Aristotelian conceptualization as composing both *chronos*, or ‘passing time’, and *kairos*, the Greek for ‘season’, which denotes ‘a point in time filled with significance’.¹²

⁹ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), p.128; p.113.

¹⁰ *The Politics of Time*, p.x.

¹¹ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.7.

¹² *The Sense of an Ending*, p.47.

Redeeming time from mere succession, *kairos* provides meaning, and its ability to do so is, Kermode argues, ‘derived from its relation to the end’.¹³ Dependent on retrospection, a moment becomes significant only through a conception of the consequences to which it leads, and thus whether personal or apocalyptic the end becomes, in Osborne’s words, ‘paradoxically present, phenomenologically, within the very thing to which it is by definition exterior’. Aligning with the summation of philosophy that Osborne lucidly provides, Kermode shows meaning-making to be reliant on a perspective defined not merely by conclusion, but by an imagined position of temporal exteriority. He argues in *The Sense of an Ending* that ‘[w]e project ourselves [...] past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle’.¹⁴ A virtual projection of consciousness beyond a future end is one natural means by which coherent narratives are made.

The comparison Kermode indicates between the consciousness of time and the reading of literature is clear; no matter how much chronology is resisted, the plot of a novel and the consolation of its form provoke the ‘fictive concords’ of causal meaning. It is unsurprising, therefore, that narrative theory has developed alongside philosophies of time; concordant in the temporalization that it outlines. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks explicates the complex temporality of a text’s interpretation, discussing the anticipation involved in the act of reading, where it is in narrative conclusion that comprehension is attained. According with Ricœur’s conceptualization of plot as both the events of a narrative, and the ordering of them, Brooks positions the reader as the meeting point of narrative and temporality. He contends that

meanings are developed over temporal succession in a suspense of final predication [...] what animates us as readers of narrative is [...] the active quest [...] for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of

¹³ *The Sense of an Ending*, p.47.

¹⁴ *The Sense of an Ending*, p.8.

reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle.¹⁵

Brooks' argument is convincing, and it is highly significant within literary analysis, pertaining not only to the meaning-making of conclusion as a temporal end, but to the effects this has on the temporality of reading as soon as a text is begun. For Brooks, the reader's interception of narrative events is always anachronous, discrepant to their narrative temporality. He explains that,

[i]f the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it.¹⁶

The making present of the past that reading involves concurs with the transformation of this past-made-present into future-past in anticipation of significance. The act of reading is defined by a desire to reach the 'shaping ends' of narrative in order to comprehend that which precedes them.

The same temporal transformations that Brooks identifies are examined by Mark Currie, whose more recent narratology makes explicit the field's intersections with the philosophy of time. Currie argues that the 'proleptic nostalgia' that the act of reading entails demonstrates in microcosm the time-consciousness of the twenty-first century. Showing, like Brooks, sense-making to be inherently nostalgic, he contends that

the ascendance of anachrony, and in particular the fashion of prolepsis, is a performative function which produces in the world a generalised future orientation such that the understanding of the present becomes increasingly focused on the question of what it will come to mean.¹⁷

Whilst, for Currie, fiction entails the making present of the past, it also absents its reader from the present they inhabit, mimetic of the cultural time-consciousness he identifies, in

¹⁵ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.19.

¹⁶ *Reading for the Plot*, p.23.

¹⁷ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.22.

which the present moment is experienced as past in the anticipation of its retelling.¹⁸

Currie thus argues that,

the present of a fictional narrative and the lived present outside of fiction are both experienced in a future anterior mode [...] When we read a novel we make present events that are in the past, and when we live life we often do the opposite: we live the present as if it were already in the past, as if it were the object of a future memory [...] it is possible that the reading of narrative fiction, in instructing us in the presentification of the past, also robs us of the present in the sense that it encourages us to imagine looking back on it.¹⁹

Proposing, in this way, that ‘there is a hermeneutic circle between the presentification of fictional narrative and the depresentification of lived experience’, Currie extends the traditional understanding of narrative as a mode of comprehension, examining its distortions of time-consciousness.²⁰ Asserting the necessity of narrative within consciousness, he explicates meaning’s reliance upon critical distance, and shows it to be through a positionality of conclusion that such distance is attained. Yet he further underlines how the adoption of such a position serves to mediate, rather than simply to make sense of the present – an issue with which contemporary literature continues to contend.

The depresentification that Currie’s narratology identifies aligns with the ‘standpoint of [...] atemporal exteriority’ that runs throughout the philosophy of time, with both demonstrating the phenomenon of ekstasis. Originally defined as ‘insanity’ or ‘bewilderment’, ekstasis, or *ἔκστασις*, came, in late Greek, to mean the ‘withdrawal of the

¹⁸ Currie here reformulates the theory of Ricœur, for whom ‘[t]he attitude of relaxation signalled by the narrative tenses is not limited [...] to suspending the reader’s involvement in his or her real environment. It suspends even more fundamentally the belief in the past as having-been in order to transpose it to the level of fiction’. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, p.75.

¹⁹ *About Time*, p.30.

²⁰ *About Time* p.31.

soul from the body’, denoting a trance-like state of self-estrangement, or detachment.²¹ The narrativization of time within both consciousness and literature effects such self-estrangement. Projecting consciousness forwards in time and beyond an imagined narrative conclusion, subjects become removed from the moment they inhabit in order to make meaning of and from it.

Yet whilst indubitably valuable for its exposition of meaning’s temporalization, the hegemony of such end-directed theory tends to occlude the innumerable other ways in which time is both experienced and understood.²² Whilst we may indeed, ‘measure and order time with our fictions’, as Kermode already notes in 1965, ‘time seems, in reality, to be ever more diverse and less and less subject to any uniform system of measurement’.²³ There is a gap between the experience of time and the order that narrative provides, and it is my argument here that contemporary writing responds to the contradiction, finding literature to be not only inextricable from it, but also a privileged space for its address. Such writing shifts ekstasis from its conclusionary position to the sheer exteriority of suspended time instead.

Comparable to, but not synonymous with, the more often discussed counter-temporalities of waiting, delay, and repetition, suspended time is explored in this thesis not as a duration in which time is extended, but in which it is indefinitely removed. More specifically, in fact, my thesis explores not only the removal of time, but also from it, examining an experience of ekstasis defined by a subject’s exteriority rather than by their

²¹ ‘ecstasy, n.’. *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2021) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59423?rskey=iVfj0l&result=1>> [accessed October 18, 2019].

²² This is not to suggest that time is only perceived and cognized through a narrative framework, or, indeed, that all narratives are purely chronological, but rather that the representation of time, whether in consciousness or in literature, ‘cannot help but be configured in terms of new norms of temporal organisation that are still perceived as temporal’, and thus as narratively structured. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.2, p.25.

²³ *The Sense of an Ending*, p.63.

anachronistic displacement. As a stop or pause of limited but unspecified duration, suspended time is a temporal marker of temporal indeterminacy, and its aporetic nature is, I argue, fundamental to its representation, and fundamental too to the ways in which it is used in contemporary literature to challenge the integrity between meaning and narration.

Like the *kairoi* of Kermode, suspended time enables a meeting of temporalities through which the ‘fullness of time’ or *pleorema* is revealed, but the ekstasis it entails is not one of conclusion, but one instead of radical exclusion. Not produced in retrospection, nor deriving meaning from the end, suspended time provides a ‘point [...] filled with significance’ in which beginnings and conclusions are themselves held open rather than being causally conjoined. Freeing time from the constrictions of temporalization, suspended time destabilizes meaning, opening narrative to a multiplicity of possible interpretations, as well as to those impossible, indeterminable, or unknown. In doing so, the phenomenon takes on the additional notion of ‘ecstasy’ that ekstasis, in etymology, conveys. Making accessible an ‘exalted state of feeling’, which, ‘engrosses the mind to the exclusion of thought’, it offers a non-narrative mode of making meaning in the affective intuition that it provokes.²⁴

‘a state of suspense’: the temporality of affect

The experience of suspended time resists interception, evading the narrative representation that interpretation would entail. As its relation to ecstasy suggests, it can, therefore, be considered a pre-, or supra-conscious state correlative to that which affect theory outlines. Defined in psychology as ‘[a] feeling or subjective experience accompanying a thought or action or occurring in response to a stimulus’, and in

²⁴ ‘ecstasy, n.’. *OED Online* (June 2021).

philosophy as ‘[a]n emotional, unreflective response’, affect denotes a somatic intuition that operates in connection with, but discrete from consciousness.²⁵ Rooted in the seventeenth century philosophy of Benedictus de Spinoza, and more fully developed by that of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in 1980, questions of affect, as I will discuss, have become dominant within contemporary literature, culture, and thought, in an increasing recognition of feeling, sensation, and subjectivity, and their significance to human experience and understanding.²⁶

As a pre-conscious, pre-linguistic, and pre-personal state, affect operates in the extensity of the boundaries of the self, or in between the self and that with which they engage, and for this reason, the phenomenon is often portrayed in spatial terms. Yet the positionality of ekstasis that such descriptions imply, further indicates affect’s temporal implications. The ekstastic relationality of affect’s spatial position confers a temporal perspective that is not, as in the narrativization of time, anachronistic, but instead disjunctive from the present that it perceives. This is clearly articulated by Brian Massumi, a translator of the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and a leading theorist in the field. In his influential study, *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi declares that ‘intensity’, a term synonymous with affect in his writing,

would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonance and feedback that momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future. Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static – temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense,

²⁵ ‘affect, n.’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2021) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3321?result=1&rskey=gdr5AP&>> [accessed October 19, 2019].

²⁶ In philosophy Spinoza’s exploration of emotion in his magnum opus *The Ethics* is developed in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, in which the terminology of affect is established. In psychology, the theory of affect is led by the work of Silvan Tomkins, which identifies nine positive and negative affects and discusses them in distinction from emotions.

potentially of disruption. It is like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it.²⁷

As an awareness of the imperceptible affect is theorized to be both constitutive of and facilitated by a virtual site that is disjunct from linear temporality. Operating as ‘a state of suspense’, it counters the narrative conceptualization of time; the mode of meaning-making that remains integral to consciousness.

In the counter-temporality that affect thus provides feeling is opposed to thought, and in making this distinction Massumi, like many in his field, differentiates the preconscious forces of affect from emotion, through which such forces are made active and cognized.²⁸ Rather than propounding the opposition, however, affect theory works instead to examine the interdependence of the two systems of knowledge that it relates.²⁹ My thesis will ally with this approach, contending, moreover, that it is precisely this combination of feeling and thought that contemporary literature both elicits and employs.

The correspondence is usefully elucidated by the work of Lauren Berlant, an affect theorist for whom suspension is essential. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant considers the ‘extended now’ by which an individual interprets and adjusts to the permanent state of crisis that is the present. She argues that,

the present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back [...] If the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect, it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are

²⁷ Brian Massumi, ‘The Autonomy of Affect’, in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 23-45 (p.26).

²⁸ The etymology of emotion, it is interesting to note, is itself indicative of ekstasis, its root in the Latin verb *ēmovēre* defining a displacement or stepping aside.

²⁹ Ruth Leys provides an example of this merging of affect and conscious modes of thought in her essay, ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’, *Critical Inquiry*, 37.3 (2011), 434-472. It is also underlined by Naomi Greyser, in consideration of the affective turn within feminist discourse and its complication of the public/private divide. See ‘Review: Beyond the “Feeling Woman”: Feminist Implications of Affect Studies’, *Feminist Studies*, 38.1 (2012), 84-112.

happening in an extended now whose very parameters [...] are also always there for debate.³⁰

Contrasting the affective experience of the present with its interpretation as ‘an epoch on which we can look back’, Berlant places the ekstasis of affect before the ekstasis of conclusion upon which consciousness depends. Preceding temporalization, affect precedes narrative time, operating instead as an ever-changing and ‘extended now’ with no fixed parameters or boundaries by which it can be categorized. A ‘temporal genre’ always evasive of the ‘filtering’ that its inexplicability inspires, affect works against the mode of understanding by which it is instinctively approached.

The transition Berlant highlights between affective perception and its consciousness concords with that examined in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, which although contrasting significantly to Spinozian philosophy, shares in its exploration of time and meaning several of affect theory’s key concerns. Using affect to establish and individuate the subject, Levinas differs from theorists like Massumi and Berlant, who examine affect’s operation in autonomy. However, in Levinas’ exploration of subjectivity’s extension, and in affect theory’s consideration of affect through the subject, the difference is, I would suggest, more superficial than may first appear.

Levinas’ identification of a lapse in time between a sensation and the meaning it is given compares to Berlant’s determination of affect as a preconscious state of possibility that works against the temporalization it nonetheless incites. His 1965 essay, ‘Intentionality and Sensation’, states that ‘[c]onsciousness of time is not a reflection upon time, but temporalization itself; the *after-the-fact* of realization is the *after* of time itself [...] the consciousness of time is the time of consciousness’.³¹ This *intentioned*

³⁰ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p.4.

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Intentionality and Sensation’, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. and ed. by Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1998), pp.135-150 (p.143).

consciousness is likewise contrasted in *Totality and Infinity* with a consciousness that precedes representation. Explaining, in this earlier text, that representation is ‘belied by the life that is already implanted in the being representation claims to constitute’, Levinas considers an embodied ethics of intersubjectivity in which the responsibility to the other, or exterior, is foregrounded.³² Central from the outset, it is an intuitive consciousness that Levinas’ philosophy uncovers. He declares that

To be conscious is to be in relation with *what is*, but as though the present of *what is* were not yet entirely accomplished and only constituted the *future* of a recollected being. To be conscious is precisely to have time – not to exceed the present time in the project that anticipates the future, but to have a distance with regard to the present itself, to be related to the element in which one is settled as to what is not yet there.³³

Perceiving the present from a position of disjuncture, consciousness operates for Levinas within an open temporality – a time ‘not yet entirely accomplished’. The present is intuited as a future, rather than as a future past, and this makes immanent the possibility of time, rather than its closure. In contrast, therefore, to the sense of ending that narrative theory describes, Levinas’ phenomenology aligns with affect theory in the ‘state of suspense’ that it conveys. His articulation of time compares directly, in fact, with Massumi’s explanation that affect

is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonance. And it is not yet activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) toward practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims (if only on screen).³⁴

This evocation of affect as a state of suspension itself marked by suspense reverberates throughout its critical and theoretical engagement, and is used both to examine an individual’s perception, intuition and understanding of the present, and to consider the relationality that it reveals. Considered through Levinas, this relationality becomes

³² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.169.

³³ *Totality*, p. 166, emphasis original.

³⁴ *Parables*, p.26.

grounded within ethics. Rather than examine affect as operating in autonomy from the subject, Levinas, as already indicated, positions affect in relation to an ethical intersubjectivity, theorizing an encounter with the ‘other’ as an interruption of the totalization that both history and individual enact.³⁵ As Joshua Lupo suggests, ‘[a]ffect, for Levinas, both closes off the subject from the outside world (by affirming his experience as a unique individual) and opens him up (by making it possible for him to be affected by the other person)’.³⁶

Thus, positing the unknowable within the present as the ‘not yet’ of the future, Levinas aligns with Massumi in portraying affect as a site of possibility, but he moreover locates this possibility specifically within the other. Equated with ‘the future’, it is the other who is essential to the formation of personal duration, and the consciousness of time is therefore interpersonal. Highlighting the plurality, sociality, and relationality of time that an encounter with the other reveals, Levinas explains that

the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship. The condition of time lies in the relationship between humans, or in history.³⁷

According with affect’s in-between, or ekstatic positionality, time is, for Levinas, produced in relation with the other, and it is this same condition of relatedness that suspended time reveals. Conceiving the present as a site of possible futures, rather than as a future past, suspended time denies the closure of meaning. But it is not only future possibilities that are revealed within the present, but those of the past, those of the other, and those impossible or imagined. Apparent throughout the portrayals of time that my

³⁵ In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that ‘[t]otalization is accomplished only in history – in the history of historiographers, that is, among the survivors. It rests on the affirmation and the conviction that the chronological order of the history of the historians outlines the plot of being itself, analogous to nature’. *Totality*, p.55.

³⁶ Joshua Lupo, ‘The Affective Subject: Emmanuel Levinas and Michel Henry on the Role of Affect in the Constitution of Subjectivity’, *Sophia*, 56 (2017), 99-114 (p.106).

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Time and the Other’, in *Time and the Other and additional essays*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p.79 (p.79).

thesis progresses to examine, suspended time opens narrative in an embrace of what exceeds it. The imagination of possible difference denies the temporalizing and totalizing force of representation, and has, moreover, inevitable implications for the temporality of literary form.

‘the thought of feeling’ (and the feeling of thought): literature’s ‘affective turn’

As indicated by the theorists above, affect aligns suspended time with a preconscious experience of embodiment. Yet in countering the totalization of narrative at the same time as recognizing its predominance, affect moreover combines feeling and thought in the consciousness of time that it provokes. In contemporary literature it is with the interaction between feeling and thought that the representation of suspended time actively engages. Just as affect marks a preconscious state that, Massumi comments, ‘is not exactly outside experience [...] it is immanent to it – always in it but not of it’, so suspended time, as a contradictorily temporal condition, combines thought and feeling in the convergence that its representation requires.³⁸ ‘[I]n but not of’ narrative, suspended time is employed within contemporary writing to open the causality of narrative itself. Destabilizing the conclusionary position upon which narrativization is reliant, suspended time introduces to the meaning-making habitual within consciousness and literature the affective perception that its alternate ekstasis empowers.

Apparent in current philosophy, cultural theory, and psychosocial studies, the discursive impact of affect is visible also in literary criticism, where the ‘affective turn’ of twenty-first century writing is increasingly examined. Such criticism notes as characteristic of contemporary literature a (re)turn to sincerity, marking a decisive move away from the ‘waning of affect’ that, for Frederic Jameson, postmodernism’s ironic

³⁸ *Parables*, p.33.

reflexivity entailed.³⁹ In efforts to establish and to clarify the shift, numerous terms are offered, with ‘post-postmodernism’, ‘cosmodernism’, and ‘metamodernism’ regularly appearing at the forefront of discussion. Whilst varying in the parameters they establish, these periodizing terms cohere in a wariness of periodization, suggesting that criticism should acknowledge what David James terms the ‘aesthetic, philosophical, and political valences that exceed compartmentalization’.⁴⁰ Questioning the classification of ‘contemporary literature’ and contemporaneity itself, the affective turn of literary criticism blurs the temporal boundaries of the field, and it is to this obfuscation that my thesis aims to contribute its additional focus upon time.

Robert L. McLaughlin argues that

post-postmodernists write out of the complex dilemma bequeathed them by postmodernism: while understanding that truth is contingent, to speak the truth; while acknowledging that representation is self-referential, to represent the real; while conceding that the human subject is constructed via socially charged discourse, to value the individual; while knowing that epistemological systems are contingent, to commit to an ethical and productive knowledge.⁴¹

Whilst McLaughlin focuses exclusively on American literature, the ‘idea of a return to sincerity, realism or ethics via the deployment of postmodernist devices’ is, as Jan Alber and Alice Bell suggest, ‘[c]ommon to many theories of what comes after postmodernism’, and is expressed explicitly, moreover, by contemporary authors themselves.⁴² The

³⁹ Frederic Jameson, ‘The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1992), pp.1-54 (p.10).

⁴⁰ David James, *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.224.

⁴¹ Robert L. McLaughlin, ‘Post-Postmodernism’, in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp.212-223 (p.222).

⁴² Jan Alber and Alice Bell, ‘The importance of being earnest again: fact and fiction in contemporary narratives across media’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 23.2 (2019), pp.121-135, (p.122). David Foster Wallace’s essay, ‘E Unibus Pluram’ provides a leading example, and is much used within discussions of the affective turn. In the essay, Foster Wallace, contesting that postmodernist irony has become the mainstream mode of U.S. television, and contemporary consciousness, offers sincerity as the goal of the next

‘affective turn’ of academic criticism is led by that of the literature it studies, and the latter is, I argue, made manifest in contemporary writing’s representations of time. Merging a postmodernist awareness of the construction of a narrative temporality that is, as Ursula K. Heise explains, ‘detached from any specific human observer’, with a modernist enquiry into the relationality, multiplicity and subjectivity of time, the writing of time within the twenty-first century demonstrates many of the contradictions that McLaughlin’s criticism of post-postmodernism discerns.⁴³ It is, I contend, specifically through the suspended time of lyric that such contradictions are most effectively approached.

So called for its association with the lyre and thus originally intended to be sung, lyric is lexically defined as ‘the name for short poems [...] usually divided into stanzas or strophes, and directly expressing the poet’s own thoughts and sentiments’.⁴⁴ Indicating the genre’s link to subjectivity, this definition aligns in its foregrounding of the poet with a conception of lyric that has since been much debated. Yet whilst divergent interpretations of the genre question the identity and the status of the speaker, its counter-narrative temporality remains a constant theme. Professing what Sharon Cameron terms a ‘presence [...] distinguished from action or story’, and what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls a ‘non-assertive conclusion’, lyric accords with contemporary literature’s

literary rebellion. More recently, Zadie Smith’s essay, ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, similarly explores the capacity of realism to incorporate an acknowledgement of its own contingency, examining lyrical realism in relation to a representative mode that foregrounds its own factitiousness. David Foster Wallace, ‘*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*’, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13.2 (1993: Summer), 151-194; Zadie Smith, ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp.71-98.

⁴³ Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, narrative and postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.64.

⁴⁴ ‘lyric, adj. and n.’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2021) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/111676?rskey=546Dsy&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 19 July 2021].

examination of consciousness and its efforts to weaken the strong affiliation between meaning and narrative time.⁴⁵ As a ‘departure [...] from temporality’ that is also, Cameron notes, a ‘despair of complete knowledge’, lyric’s counteraction of narrative and causation corresponds to the ways in which suspended time operates within contemporary writing to open the closure that meaning would confer.⁴⁶

My own interpretation of lyric in this thesis takes its lead from Jonathan Culler, whose seminal text, *Theory of the Lyric*, remains invaluable to engagements with the genre. In a decisive move away from Romantic and Modern conceptualizations of lyric poetry as denoting either the evocation of authorial experience, or the expression of a persona’s subjectivity, Culler contends that the genre should be read according to its original understanding, as an epideictic, or non-mimetic mode. In support he identifies and examines four strands to the lyric genre, noting that not every strand must be visible for a poem to be classified within it. Lyric is, for Culler, a mode of enunciation in which the reader’s speaking of the poem displaces the emphasis on the relationship between speaker and addressee. It evokes the present of discourse, rather than entailing the relation of past events. It foregrounds characteristics of ritual, including rhythm and iterability (the possibility of its repeated occurrence as an act of speech). It is defined by hyperbole (an exaggerated statement of longing or desire), the sincerity of which coincides with an acknowledgement of futility. In each of these strands, temporality emerges as a central and essential concern.

⁴⁵ Sharon Cameron, ‘Time and the Lyric’, in *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp.201-260 (p.207); Barbara Herrnstein Smith, quoted by Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), p.282.

⁴⁶ ‘Time and the Lyric’, p.208; Sharon Cameron, “‘A Loaded Gun’: The Dialectic of Rage”, in *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp.56- 90 (p.71).

The time of lyric is established in Culler's theory predominantly through the second generic strand that he identifies, which describes the presentness of lyric discourse and its contrast to narrative's linear mechanics. Whereas fiction, Culler argues, 'is about what happened next; lyric is about what happens now'.⁴⁷ As opposed to the analeptic relation of events in the past, it attests to the significance of the present – not historical, but textual; the moment of the poem itself. Stating that the lyric poem 'aims to be an event, not a representation of an event', and likewise that, '[n]othing need happen in the poem because the poem is to be itself the happening', Culler's consideration of lyric as a non-mimetic genre displaces it from linear time and it is thus that poetic power is affirmed.⁴⁸

Reflecting on subsequent engagements with his theory a few years after its publication, Culler reiterates that the aim of *Theory of the Lyric* was to 'propose as a default model a more classical conception of the lyric as *epideixis*, like oratory, celebratory speech making claims about the world, not constructing fictions'.⁴⁹ Due to this desire, he explains, his text resisted 'the notion of lyrical elements that might appear in all sorts of writing: novelistic, nonfictional, descriptive, autobiographical, etc.'.⁵⁰ Whilst 'understand[ing] that people might want to use the term "lyrical" [...] to designate passages that foreground their affective, descriptive, melodic character', for him, 'such thinking avoids the questions of genre' he wishes to examine.⁵¹ As the extra-poetic engagement with his theory indicates, however, questions of lyric can extend with, rather than in separation from questions of genre, and it is this concordance that my research

⁴⁷ *Theory*, p.226.

⁴⁸ *Theory*, p.137; p.226.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Culler, 'Extending the *Theory of the Lyric*', *Diacritics*, 45.4 (2017), 6-14 (p.10, emphasis original).

⁵⁰ 'Extending', p.10.

⁵¹ 'Extending', p.10.

also seeks to pursue. Whilst the foregrounding of prose writing's 'affective [...] character' is indeed central to the argument of my thesis, I am not concerned with using 'lyrical' as a purely descriptive term. The chapters that follow aim to tease out the ways in which properties of 'lyric' as a genre are transposed within twenty-first century narrative prose.

The appearance of lyric outside of poetry is not specific to the contemporary period, and as the broad application of Culler's theory shows, my exploration of prose by way of lyric does not mark new territory for literary criticism, and nor for its discussion of time. The precedence of all three is indicated, for example, in Elisha Cohn's reading of 'still life' within the Victorian novel, which is notable in particular for its examination of suspension. Discussing moments in which the developmental narrative of *Bildung* becomes stalled by 'suspended structures of feeling', Cohn aligns the lyrical pause with affect, explaining that '[s]uspension contains a paradoxically static intensity'.⁵² Examining the non-operative presence of such moments, she considers how

[a]rresting the ordinary conditions of consciousness [...] creates a subtle disturbance in received categories of thinking, knowing, and doing that organize development – but only for a moment. Thus it does not function simply as the negation in a dialectical process of coming to knowledge, but instead feels more like the negative of a negative. The lyrical moment within the novel remains moody and implicit, not to be translated into revelations of depth or immanent transformation.⁵³

It is not in the presence, but in the portrayal of lyric moments that contemporary writing differs from its lineage. Rather than 'moody and implicit', suspension within twenty-first century literature is revelatory and explicit, and the contradictions of its representation are overt. There thus exists between lyric suspension and narrative a different kind of

⁵² Elisha Cohn, 'Introduction', *Still Life: Suspended Development in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.5.

⁵³ 'Introduction', p.5.

tension; moments of ‘non-reflection’ are not left unattended, they are made visible and reflected upon.

Lyric’s conceptualization of the text as an event runs parallel to its use of hyperbole throughout the works my thesis considers, as the sincere desire each express for the suspension of representation contends with the temporal demands of narrative form. Explored in my first chapters through techniques of metafiction and ekphrasis, the interconnection is considered in my final chapter in relation to apostrophe – a mode that for Culler denotes ‘a special “now” of discourse’.⁵⁴ Yet whilst my examination of suspended time responds primarily to these lyric characteristics, those of enunciation and of ritual will also be discussed, as my conclusion brings together the deliberations of my chapters to consider more fully the experience of the reader. It is Culler’s suggestion that with lyric, like with song,

we allow ourselves to be seduced without much guilt by sensuous form and to dwell in the realm of sonorous patterning without an insistent quest for the meaning, but this does not imply that our discriminating faculties are somehow switched off [...] as we pursue our pleasure, we develop considerable expertise [...] attending to our pleasure while also gaining confidence in our ability to appreciate what secured our attention.⁵⁵

Lyric’s opposition to narrative relies upon the experience of its reading, and moreover on the reader’s attention to it. Led by a meaning of what is felt rather than what is thought, lyric affirms the legitimacy of affect within interpretation, and it is this that twenty-first century writing reconfigures in its inclusion of suspended time alongside and within the narrative time of prose.

Apparent in temporal analyses of trauma, precarity, and the unnatural, the counter-temporality that affect provides more broadly informs critical engagements with gender,

⁵⁴ *Theory*, p.229.

⁵⁵ *Theory*, p.352.

race, technology, and discourse.⁵⁶ Yet whilst such criticism acknowledges affect's destabilizing of time in the narrative constructions of selfhood and of history that it examines, the temporality of affect itself is rarely considered. Manifest not across contemporary writing, but in the works of specific authors, the representation of suspended time cannot be deemed emblematic of literature's affective turn, but it is, I would argue, symptomatic of it. Examined in texts directly concerned with temporality and its embodiment, the attention suspended time affords to the ontology and the epistemology of time, and to how they interrelate both within and *through* representation, makes it a useful category through which to contribute to the field.

As suggested by the connections that the phenomenon promotes, portrayals of suspended time extend beyond any parameters that criticism assigns, and they far outstretch those I have set for my research here. Paying attention to the specificity of affect's temporality, my thesis will limit its scope to Anglo-American prose of the current century, examining works in which time is a prominent concern. This focus hopes to elucidate the ways in which affect and narrative contend and combine within

⁵⁶ Examined as a temporal rupture that leads to a fixation on or pursuit of the past, trauma's relationship to affect is explored predominantly in relation to afterwardsness and repetition. The disruption of meaning-making that it incites is captured, for example, in Jonathan Safran Foer's novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, where a causative narrative is avidly pursued by a child in response to the loss of his father after the collapse of the Twin Towers. The affective turn is, indeed, often discussed in relation to 9/11, demonstrated, for example, in the criticism of Rachel Greenwald Smith. Jago Morrison discusses precarity in relation to post-9/11 fiction, examining an increased interest in the individual, the dynamics of seeing, and the staging of vulnerability and violence. The affective turn within black studies is reviewed by Margo Natalie Crawford in a reading of melancholic hope in contemporary black affect. Providing an overview of current theory, Crawford positions the affective temporality of a transgenerational melancholia, repeatedly reconstituted, in opposition to grand narratives of history and progress. See Foer, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (London: Penguin Books, 2006); Greenwald Smith, 'Organic Shrapnel: Affect and Aesthetics in September 11 Fiction', *American Literature*, 83.1 (2011), 153-174.; Morrison, 'The Turn to Precarity in Twenty-First Century Fiction', *American, British and Canadian Studies*, 21.1 (2014), 10-29.; Crawford, 'The Twenty-First-Century Black Studies Turn to Melancholy', *American Literary History*, 29.4 (2017), 799-807.

contemporary writing, and within the consciousness of time that it responds to, examines, and impels.

‘In no time’: representations of suspended time

My thesis contends that in contemporary literature, the experience of affect is made intelligible by and through suspended time, as in the relationality and imagined reciprocity that it makes possible, it alters the mode of meaning-making that subject, text, and reader each employ. In consideration of the relationship between time and meaning, my first chapter looks at a selection of authors whose work interrogates the experience, observation, and representation of time. Using psychology and theories of perception to establish attention’s relation to narrative, it examines contemporary literature’s explicit interest in time-consciousness by way of three of its most prominent writers: Don DeLillo, Tom McCarthy, and Ben Lerner. Through an attention to attention, and the ways in which meaning is made, these authors show being’s reach beyond knowledge. Portraying slow-motion, delay, and detachment respectively, they refuse the foreclosure of narrative, and revealing meaning’s reduction of experience, they acknowledge the significance of the inexplicable or indeterminate, making visible the plurality of time. Suspended time invokes not only, as Boxall determines, an ‘unthought futurity’, but the polytemporal possibilities and *impossibilities* by which any moment is always already imbued.⁵⁷ In its overt interest in time’s perception and cognition, contemporary writing imagines and promotes an alternate mode of meaning-making that, attentive to its limits, is open both to otherness and to change.

Suggested by the acts of interpretation and unfinished creation that each portray, the ethical potential of suspended time is moreover enacted by these writers in the

⁵⁷ *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p18.

metafictional strategies that they employ. Whether drawing attention to the physicality of the text, or overtly describing its composition, the conclusion that literary narrative impels is successfully delayed. In the self-referential nature of the works that they produce, and in the exegesis that these require, DeLillo, McCarthy, and Lerner ground an ethics of relationality in the open aesthetics of their novels' forms. By deferring the closure of narrative and the judgement of their readers, they indicate literature's own suspension from time and affirm its own ethical potential. Fiction makes imaginable for its readers the possibility of inexplicability and of difference.

Taking three male authors as representative of contemporary writing's exploration of time and meaning raises the question of gender's significance within my research. The question is legitimate. In theories of women's time, female cyclicity has often been opposed with male linearity, whilst the phenomenon of affect has traditionally been associated with a female sensibility, and with a female authorship less serious, and less demanding than male works.⁵⁸ However, whilst representations of suspended time can be approached in this way, an examination led by gender would eclipse the more textually focused enquiry that my thesis aims to pursue. It would also risk continuing the binary conceptualization of gender, recently much debated, and thus of reinforcing boundaries that, in its use of suspended time, contemporary writing seeks to overcome. My thesis does not discriminate between the gender identities of the authors it explores. Believing the counter-temporality that it examines and the affective aesthetics of its representation to work across contemporary authorship, my choice of authors is led by my choice of texts, which each show an explicit and self-reflective interest in the experience of ekstasis

⁵⁸ Cohn's reading of lyric in the Victorian novel similarly references the 'uncertain agency' of suspended time in relation to inaction's traditional feminization. 'Introduction', p.5.

they portray.

Examined in my second chapter, the writing of Ali Smith compares to that of DeLillo, McCarthy, and Lerner in its representation of suspended time. Countering narrative in its disruption of causality, suspended time works throughout Smith's fiction in similar opposition to the numerous historical, political, and social frameworks of time by which she shows life to be categorized and managed. Portrayed throughout her novels of the current century as an ekstasis of connection, rather than of distance, suspended time broadens individual perception by joining the times of self and other, real, remembered, and imagined, and revealing the affective structures that unite them. Encounters with spaces and spectres of absence, or absent time, are for this reason repeatedly staged by Smith in conjunction with vision, revealing to her characters the myriad 'ways of seeing' that are possible and the relations by which their perceptions are informed.

Like DeLillo, McCarthy, and Lerner, Smith also embeds representation within the story-worlds she creates in interrogation of the suspended time of fiction. Encounters with visual art thread throughout her novels, and in their interpretation affective attachment overpowers critical distance. Similarly resistant to totalization, Smith's writing, I contend, demands from its readers an affective and ethical engagement mimetic of those that it describes. Her novels open both in content and through form the temporal fixity, singularity, and closure of narrative meaning in an appreciation of the value of mystery that suspended time reveals.

Repeatedly evoked by the absences that percolate Smith's fiction, the affective potential of suspended time is made emphatic within grief writing, which has become a prominent literary genre of the twenty-first century. Explored in the final chapter of my thesis through works by Denise Riley, Joan Didion, Helen Macdonald, Max Porter and Yiyun Li, the genre's contemporary re-emergence is impressively diverse, yet a critical

examination of the effects loss has on the consciousness of time proves consistent. Each of the writers my chapter considers portrays grief as an experience of suspension that reveals time's interpersonal formation after the loss of the person with whom it had been shared. Whilst signalling its conclusion, however, suspended time paradoxically enables the continuation of connection. As individuals in mourning incorporate the absent within their consciousness, they experience a temporal disjuncture that attenuates, or complicates, their presence, but the process is reciprocal, as the dead, rather than progressing into the past, gain futurity in the imagination of the present.

As its autobiographical foundations imply, what is at stake in the portrayal of suspended time becomes, in grief writing, a matter of great personal concern. As the narrative temporality of linguistic and of literary representation is interrogated and contested by the content that it relays, contemporary grief writing embeds time's exteriority within the linearity of its form. Narrative time and the mode of meaning-making that it supports become disrupted in the enfolding of the other that the writing of loss performs. Discussing how elegy – a form of lyric – extends beyond poetry to essay, memoir, and fiction, it is, my chapter suggests, through this literary contradiction that consolation is tentatively forged.

In every text that my thesis examines suspended time confers a form of self-distance comparative to that identified by the philosophy of time and narratology with which this introduction began. Yet, progressing from an examination of the relationship between self and world to that of the one-to-one relationship upon which the experience of loss centres, the narrowing focus of my chapters attest to an alternative ekstasis, showing suspended time to incite not a solitary depresentification, but an absence that is imaginatively shared. A meeting with, or position *in* the outside of time offers access to an affective intuition of the interpersonality, multiplicity, and heterogeneity of being in

time, and the ethics of this affective time-consciousness lie not simply in its imagination of the inexplicable or unknown, but in the ineluctable impossibility of its knowledge.

It is, however, not only suspended time that my thesis aims to examine, but also the representation of it. My interest in the encounter with, or experience of ekstasis is precursory to my interest in how ekstasis is portrayed within the narratives of time that consciousness and literature habitually construct. It is, therefore, suspended time's simultaneous resistance to and dependence on causality that directs my enquiry, as well as the implications that this aporia bestows upon authorship and readership, and upon contemporary literature itself. Disjunct from time, literature operates in ekstasis. Inciting not the *depresentification* but the *detemporalization* of its reader, it reveals the innumerable ways in which time can be lived – and in which, therefore, it can be thought and felt.

Chapter 1:

‘Time is supposed to pass’: Time and Meaning in Twenty-First Century Fiction

Introduction: ‘attention is what makes time narrative’

The integrity of time and meaning is evidenced in attention, the embodiment of which, as Jonathan Crary elucidates, binds perception with temporality and cognition. Yet, as Crary’s 2001 text, *Suspensions of Perception*, contends, attention, whilst embodied, operates in extension of the subject, and it is due to this that suspension becomes key. Crary explains that,

[t]he roots of the word attention in fact resonate with a sense of ‘tension,’ of being ‘stretched,’ and also of ‘waiting.’ It implies the possibility of a fixation, of holding something in wonder or contemplation, in which the attentive subject is both immobile and ungrounded.⁵⁹

Suspension is, for Crary, ‘a hovering out of time’; ‘a looking or listening so rapt that it is an exemption from ordinary conditions’.⁶⁰ Concurrently, however, it is ‘a cancellation or an interruption [...] indicat[ing] a disturbance, even a negation of perception itself’, and it is in this exposure of attention’s instabilities that a ‘reinvention of perceptual experience and of representational practices’ is enabled.⁶¹

The instabilities that Crary identifies are exploited within twenty-first century literature, in which new kinds of realism are emerging. Understood as an aim to represent reality in its material or concrete terms, lyrical realism has become a way in which to examine the difference inherent within mimesis, and ironically deployed within postmodernism, this now strikes a sincere tone. Demonstrating what Dominic Head refers to as the ‘falsity of the realism/experimentalism dichotomy’, contemporary writers

⁵⁹ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p.10.

⁶⁰ *Suspensions*, p.10.

⁶¹ *Suspensions*, p.10; p.9.

approach mimesis as a representation, rather than imitation of the world.⁶² Responding to the ‘crisis of attention’ within contemporary culture, authors suspend the sequential time of narrative to examine the ways in which our sense of the real is formed. Interested not in what is perceived, but in the act of perception, they attend not to experience, but to the experience of experience instead.

This shift is usefully illuminated by the criticism of Alice Bennett, which, informed by philosophies of perception, theories of attention, absorption and distraction, as well as by narratology, uncovers an ‘aesthetic of inward attention’ within literature of the twenty-first century.⁶³ Bennett defines ‘inward attention’ as ‘a variety of meta-attention that deflects part of readers’ attention back from the book and onto the texture or fluctuation of reading attention itself’.⁶⁴ Identifying a trend within contemporary writing in which the consciousness of experience is explored, she considers how narratives of attention direct the readers’ own.

In Bennett’s theory it is with narrative that attention is normatively paired, and her analysis in this way reaffirms the anticipation and retrospection that consciousness commands. In addition to the narratology of Peter Brooks and Mark Currie, she employs the theory of Paul Ricœur to underline attention’s habitual practice of ‘emplotment’. Ricœur’s *Freedom and Nature* (1966), Bennett relates, ‘proposes a connection between time as succession, the voice, and attention’:

Imagining ‘that silence in which all voices echo’, Ricœur concludes by suggesting, ‘It is always attention that creates time, wins time, so that all these

⁶² Dominic Head, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.10. Ricœur’s theory of mimesis, Head explains, makes redundant the contrast between realism and experimentalism as the difficulty of a text causes the reader’s increased engagement with it, thus impacting more greatly at the third level of mimesis Ricœur identifies, the ‘active process of reception’ (2012, p.12).

⁶³ Alice Bennett, *Contemporary Fictions of Attention: Reading and Distraction in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.8.

⁶⁴ *Contemporary Fictions*, p.8.

voices speak distinctly, that is to say, in a succession' (163). Narrative is what makes time meaningful, according to Ricœur, and attention is what makes time narrative. Narrative places those voices in succession by placing them in time and therefore makes them distinct and intelligible.⁶⁵

Attention, then, equates to the construction of narrative sequence, and it follows that in an attention *to* attention, momentum is forestalled. It is within suspension that the mechanics of consciousness are revealed, and through suspension that habitual modes of making meaning can be questioned. Seizing the potential of attention's triadic definition as focus, care, and pause, Bennett's work divides its reading of contemporary fiction between the temporal, social and textual implications that attention's inward turn brings into force. Whilst each is highly productive, however, the lines of enquiry remain largely distinct, separating a consideration of temporality from both that of affect and of literary form. The three strands of analysis are, in fact, thoroughly intertwined.

Elizabeth Grosz provides, in this way, a useful companion to Bennett's analysis, aiding my chapter's consideration of what becomes cognizable when the limits of attention are attended to. In a philosophical exploration of the integrity between materiality and ideality that she terms an 'ontoethics' of the incorporeal, Grosz proposes that

We know that there are things we do not know. These things we do not know confirm the independent reach of ontology outside and beyond what our current epistemologies allow us to understand – indeed they are the continuing condition of an ever changing and more refined epistemology.⁶⁶

In signalling an ontology beyond the reaches of epistemology, the inexplicable incites for Grosz a move away from preestablished forms of meaning, but it also makes possible the formation of alternate modes. The philosophy she explores elicits, therefore, an onto-epistemology – a 'mode of reason, not given in advance', but borne from an

⁶⁵ *Contemporary Fictions*, p.59.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.3.

‘understanding of and immersion in the things, events, and processes of the world and that is capable of changing itself to the extent that it understands more and more’.⁶⁷ Both ‘reflective’ and ‘intuitive’, the immersed perception Grosz uncovers situates ethics within the incorporeal – cognizant of ‘the potential of things in the world to be otherwise’.⁶⁸

This chapter will show how, examining individual consciousness as it interprets, portrays, and *alters* lived experience, contemporary writers employ suspended time to expose and to destabilize the connection between narrative and meaning. As the temporal mechanics of consciousness are made conscious, what lies ‘outside and beyond’ habitual modes of understanding is considered, introducing an ethics and a textual practice of suspension, by which a potential to be otherwise is explored. Suspended time does not only expose, and paradoxically enable narrative as it reveals ‘that silence in which all voices echo’; it establishes an inter- and intra-personal ethics in the ontological multiplicity that it supports.

Visible across contemporary writing, the ethical potential of meaning’s suspension is manifest within the twenty-first century fiction of Don DeLillo, for whom time has always been a central concern. Hailed by reviewers as a leading observer and chronicler of the contemporary period, DeLillo’s work is routinely read for its analysis of the national and global events to which it responds, and is even considered, on reflection, to have anticipated their occurrence.⁶⁹ His interrogation of what it means to be in the present and of the ways in which the meaning of the present is interpreted, or attributed,

⁶⁷ *The Incorporeal*, p.255.

⁶⁸ *The Incorporeal*, pp.255-256.

⁶⁹ Charles McGrath, for example, describes a common conception of DeLillo’s novels as ‘almost eerily prophetic’, whilst David Cowart notes ‘DeLillo’s uncanny sensitivity to the most disturbing currents of the age – often before they become perceptible, before their media metastasis’. Charles McGrath, ‘A Writer By Accident Whose Course Is Deliberate’, *New York Times*, 04 February 2010, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/04/books/04delillo.html>> [accessed 30 August 2021]; David Cowart, ‘The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 53.1 (2012), 31-50 (p.39).

runs throughout the eighteen novels he has authored. Paralleling the vast scales of geological and historical time, the mediatized time of technology and global economy, and the temporal experience and cognition of the individual, DeLillo's fiction exposes the multiplicity of any moment, and thus the fiction of any given narrative. It is, overwhelmingly, through the suspension, or the slowing of time that this revelation, or convergence, is achieved.

The turn of the twenty-first century marks a shift in DeLillo's interrogation of temporality, as he moves from an historiographical approach to time to focus more exclusively upon its consciousness. This shift is joined by an investment in enigmatic plots, spectral characters, and elliptical phrases and, as is much noted within both popular and critical reception, by a significant reduction in length.⁷⁰ Described by its publishers as 'lean', and elsewhere as a 'slim novella', and a 'tiny, intimate affair', *The Body Artist*, published in 2001, was succeeded by the similarly 'sleek' *Cosmopolis*, 'more prose-poem than novel', *Falling Man*, *Point Omega*, *Zero K* and, most recently, *The Silence*, all of which contribute to 'the sparseness that marks DeLillo's late-career writing'.⁷¹ Rather

⁷⁰ The formal implications of this shift are noted, among many others, by Martin Paul Eve in his suggestion that '[t]he aesthetic *telos* of DeLillo's novels is best described in terms of a formal career-long movement from postmodern play, through to quasi-encyclopaedicism to a contracted minimalism'. Martin Paul Eve, "'Too many goddamn echoes": Historicizing the Iraq War in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*', *Journal of American Studies* 49.3 (2015), 575-592 (p.576).

⁷¹ Quoted by Frank Kermode in 'The Small Noise Upstairs', *The London Review of Books*, 23.5, 08 March 2001, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v23/n05/frank-kermode/the-small-noise-upstairs>> [accessed 12 September 2021]; 'The Body Artist', *Publishers Weekly*, 06 February 2001, <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-7432-0395-1>> [accessed 12 September 2021]; Adam Begley, 'Ghostbuster', *New York Times*, 04 February 2001, <<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/01/02/04/reviews/010204.04begleyt.html?0202bk>> [accessed 10 October 2021]; John Updike, 'One-Way Street: A new novel by Don DeLillo', *The New Yorker*, 24 March 2003, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/31/one-way-street>> [accessed 10 October 2021]; Blake Morrison, 'Future tense', *Guardian*, 17 May 2003, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/may/17/fiction.dondelillo>> [accessed 10 October 2021]; Alex Preston, 'The Silence by Don DeLillo review – Beckett for the Facebook age', *Guardian*, 27 October 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/>>

than narratives that demand ‘our full attention’, these recent works, as this chapter will examine, compel an attention to the time of the literary instead, underlining how the temporal intuition and interpretation of the reader is influenced by the textual form of each specific novel, as well as by the genre as a whole.⁷² Rather than the medium through which experience takes place, time is in these novels an objective focus; an examination of time’s experience is pursued. Stagings of slow time or slow motion are accordingly prolific. Removed from the regulated temporal rhythms of the city either through physical dislocation or aesthetic encounter, DeLillo’s characters are repeatedly confronted by a limit to the epistemologies they employ. Suspended time coincides with a perception, in Grosz’s terms, of an ontology that lies beyond the grasp of knowledge. Exposing time’s normative narrativization, it unfolds the multiple temporal scales with which any individual, at any moment, is entwined.

Such temporal multiplicity is demonstrated in *Point Omega* as the interaction between time and meaning is explored. More than any other, DeLillo’s 2010 novel investigates the ways in which time is framed, navigating attempts to establish meaning through language, and through the narratives of identity, art, and history that language supports. In the novel’s own structure, however, narrative is framed by an alternate temporal perception, and this, alongside the elusive events that it contains, indicates a deferral, rather than a fixing of meaning. The ethical potential of a perception without interpretation is considered at the same time as its fragility is relayed.

As the spectral presences of *Point Omega* demonstrate, other ways of seeing and feeling time consistently correspond in DeLillo’s work, to an evocation of time’s

2020/oct/27/the-silence-by-don-delillo-review-beckett-for-the-facebook-age> [accessed 21 February 2021].

⁷² Peter McKay, ‘A Literary Giant Hits Home with Epic Tale of America’, *Daily Mail*, 09 January 1998, p.52.

unbodying. Incorporeal temporalities permeate his texts, evading the narrative form that literature requires. It is the ethical possibility of such attenuation that *The Body Artist*, most prominently, explores. Taking grief as its focus, the novel conveys an encounter with non-time through the quiet intrusion of the mysterious ‘Mr. Tuttle’, a figure who exists beyond or outside of every preestablished temporal frame. As its title, and thus the profession of its protagonist, implies, *The Body Artist* attends not only to the cognition of time, but also to its embodiment, presenting an erasure of the self as a reaching out towards the other, as the ethics of recognizing ‘the potential of things in the world to be otherwise’ is both physically, and textually performed.

Representative of DeLillo’s late fiction, both *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist* present their readers with narratives that eschew closure; there is no stable narrator through which meaning is parsed, and no solution to the mysteries depicted. In the metafictional strategies he adopts, DeLillo forces the reader’s attention from narrative to the *experience of narrative*, necessitating a reading practice concordant with the ‘inward attention’ that Bennett explores. Demanding the reader’s involvement within meaning’s formation, DeLillo pushes the text itself into suspension, and this is repeated throughout contemporary writing as narrative is made inconclusive, and open to change.

It is by using metafictional strategies that DeLillo suspends the motion of his narratives, and in the writing of Tom McCarthy and Ben Lerner, these strategies are emphatic. For McCarthy ‘[n]othing is less contemporary than contemporary art or fiction. Than art that has something to say about the now [...] the whole point of the now is that it’s precisely what we can’t articulate’.⁷³ Co-founding the ‘semi-fictitious’ International

⁷³ Tom McCarthy and Jonathon Sturgeon, ‘Kafka and the Crash of the System: An Interview with Tom McCarthy’, *Flavorwire* 26 February 2015, <<https://www.flavorwire.com/506844/kafka-and-the-crash-of-the-system-an-interview-with-tom-mccarthy>> [accessed 09 September 2021].

Necronautical Society (INS) with philosopher Simon Critchley in 1999, McCarthy's critical work, as well as his art and fiction, asserts an explicit interest in the act of temporalization. Avowing to turn away from the narrative of progress that the Enlightenment's 'totalizing [...] idealist vision' of time purports, the INS propose a recognition of 'entrenchment', and a belief in '[l]oops, not lines'.⁷⁴ Indeed, describing mankind as 'repetition-engines', whilst asserting, in its founding manifesto, that '[o]ur very bodies are no more than vehicles carrying us ineluctably towards death. We are all necronauts, always, already', the INS is both 'rear-facing' and futural in the journey that it plots.⁷⁵ The 'necronauts' project *is*, as Dennis Duncan notes,

both forwards- and backwards- looking, and yet that 'always, already' suggests an inherent futility in thinking of time in these terms at all. Rather it implies a rejection of both [...] for the necronaut, time past and time future are both perhaps contained in time present.⁷⁶

For the INS the present is not positioned as a point from which a fixed narrative of causation can be made but rather as an extended moment of crisis and potential that, enfolding myriad times within it, is insistent in staying open to change. It is a temporality that is linked specifically to the thinking that it scaffolds. Contending that '[m]eaning takes place in the symbolic', the INS promotes a mode that is 'open, ongoing, and – most important – contestable', identifying an exteriority to epistemology as the reason 'we have art in the first place'.⁷⁷ The work of the INS intercepts and influences the priorities of McCarthy's fiction. Examining the ways in which the present is experienced and interpreted, an enquiry into mimesis extends throughout his work, and this often centres

⁷⁴ International Necronautical Society, 'Declaration of the Notion of The Future', *The Believer*, 2010, <<https://believermag.com/declaration-of-the-notion-of-the-future/>> [accessed 10 October 2021].

⁷⁵ International Necronautical Society, 'INS Founding Manifesto', *The Times*, 14 December 1999, p.1.

⁷⁶ Dennis Duncan, 'Introduction: Calling All Agents' in *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays*, ed. By Dennis Duncan (Great Britain: Gylphi, 2016), pp.3-17, (p.9, emphasis original).

⁷⁷ 'Declaration', 2010.

around the issue of communication. The portrayal of individual consciousness and embodiment that his first novel, *Remainder*, foregrounds is followed by the networks and signals that *Men in Space* explores, and subsequently by *C*, a novel of ‘technology and mourning’ that demonstrates a fascination with transmission and reception – a theme upon which McCarthy’s essays also build.⁷⁸

Such strands of enquiry continue in McCarthy’s 2015 novel, *Satin Island*, in which, through an anthropology of the present, the temporality of meaning is explored. Demonstrating the impossibility of observing one’s own era, the novel underlines the ‘entrenchment’ of its narrator, using the delayed temporality of ‘buffering’ to expose meaning’s temporalization, and to signal the exteriority that narrative refuses and upon which it simultaneously relies. Through sustained interactions between matter (or material reality), and mediality (the communication, representation, or *mediation* of reality), *Satin Island* examines how temporal experience is cognized, and this is, in the novel, emphatically metaleptic, indicative of literature’s own temporalization. McCarthy’s writing is consistently read as a challenge to lyrical realism, championed, as this chapter will examine, as an exemplar of the contemporary avant-garde. As McCarthy has asserted, realism is ‘as laden with artifice as any other literary convention’.⁷⁹ However, as my discussion of *Satin Island* will contend, the alternate mode his writing offers should be read not as an act of erasure, but as a shift of focus. Through metafiction McCarthy transfers the priorities of realism from narrative to text, suspending the form of his novel within the ekstasis of ‘buffering’ that its content explores.

⁷⁸ Tom McCarthy and Andrew Gallix, ‘C By Tom McCarthy’, *Dazed & Confused*, 2.89 (2010), p.196.

⁷⁹ ‘Writing Machines: Tom McCarthy on realism and the real’, *London Review of Books*, 36.24 (2014).

Whilst the tone of Lerner's work is very different to McCarthy's, the authors compare in the attention that they pay to the making of meaning. The writers have a 'similar tendency', according to McCarthy, to explore 'this idea of experience standing beside itself, and that décalage of consciousness and of being aware of codes that one can't quite meet'.⁸⁰ Lerner is American, rather than British, but the context of his fiction is comparable to McCarthy's. Both authors express a self-awareness, bordering on self-consciousness, of the privileged position from which, as educated white Western men, they find themselves benefitting, if never actively seeking benefit from. Both, perhaps in direct response, form means of countering the institutions by which they have been shaped – with Lerner's critical writing, and his co-founding and co-editing of *NO: A Journal of the Arts* comparative, in its querying of habitualized ways of thinking, to the non-fictional and 'semi-fictitious' work that McCarthy and the INS pursue. Lerner's literary career, however, contrasts to McCarthy's, emerging through poetry rather than through prose, and this impacts forcefully on the structure of his novels, and on the form of temporality that they work to maintain.

Lerner's interest in the positionality of the contemporary is clear. Taking his own literary career as their basis, his three novels explore the relationship between word and world at different ages and through different linguistic forms. *Leaving the Atocha Station* considers the capacities of poetry backgrounded by its narrator's scholarship in Spain, *10:04* portrays the difficulties of penning a second novel and negotiating the temporal demands of its production, and, heading back in time, *The Topeka School* relates the linguistic fortitude of the debating competitions of its protagonist's adolescence,

⁸⁰ Tom McCarthy, James Corby, and Ivan Callus, 'The *CounterText* Interview: Tom McCarthy', *CounterText*, 1.2 (2015), 135-153 <<https://doi.org/10.3366/count.2015.0014>>.

alongside the psychologistic discourse of his parents. Attending as they do to both the interception, and representation of time, it is the first two novels of Lerner's trilogy that this chapter will explore.

In *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*, durations of suspension work to expose the narrativization by which interpretation is supported; thinking and the 'feel of thinking' are made conscious, rather than habitually performed. In an extended study of the actual and the virtual – terms he takes, as will be discussed, from the poetic theory of Allen Grossman – Lerner refuses the actualization of form and of its closure, suspending his narrators' and thus his own work in a persistent state of becoming or formation. Offering a recognition of meaning's multiplicity, Lerner's novels steadily build a transpersonal ethics that extends beyond and through the textuality of his writing to implicate the reader's own engagement. More assured than that of McCarthy's novel, the layered self-referentiality of Lerner's fiction suspends both text and reader, as through the artistic, and the literary encounter, a non-narrative mode of making meaning is attained.

Each text this chapter considers makes visible a counter-narrative ethics that runs, in quieter ways, throughout much contemporary literature in its representation of, and *as*, suspended time. Recognizing the inexplicable, the absent, or unknown, and refusing to enclose it within narrative, suspended time offers a mode of attention and representation in which the directedness of meaning is deferred. Opening narrative's foreclosure, it moreover opens meaning to the other, and it is this potential that the works of DeLillo, McCarthy, and Lerner make explicit. By making consciousness conscious, these writers use suspended time to indicate an exteriority to preestablished epistemology, and in doing so, they demonstrate literature's own suspension – its capacity to make accessible to readers other ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling (in) time.

‘Real time is meaningless’: unbodying time in the writing of Don DeLillo

As already discussed, the focus of Don DeLillo’s fiction has narrowed in the twenty-first century, becoming, as described by the author himself, ‘more philosophical, for better or worse, and more interested in the subject of time’.⁸¹ However, history and politics remain integral to DeLillo’s writing, and his response to contemporary events is, moreover, illuminative of his novels’ philosophical and temporal concerns.

In ‘In the ruins of the future’, an essay concerning the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in September 2001, DeLillo overtly interrogates the preestablished relationship between meaning and time. Providing a ‘counter-narrative’ to the ‘Us and Them’ polarization dominant in public and critical reaction, he attends to the affective, small, and heterogenous narratives of which any event is in truth comprised. Imagining diverse experiences and representations of the attacks, all of which exist in the conditional, the essay expresses a collective need for ‘the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day [...] to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practised response’.⁸² DeLillo equates what is explicable with what is visible. Beyond the ‘frame of practised response’, the events of 9/11 are impossible to ‘tilt [...] to the slant of our perceptions’.⁸³ New ways of seeing, and of relating what is seen are necessary, and the independence of both from the foreclosure of meaning is shown to be imperative.

Arguing that DeLillo both advocates and adopts a ‘stance that aesthetically aims at the world rather than represent it’, Marco Abel locates the ethics of DeLillo’s essay within the suspension of perception it promotes.⁸⁴ Perception, Abel underlines,

⁸¹ Quoted by McGrath in ‘A Writer By Accident’.

⁸² Don DeLillo, ‘In the ruins of the future’, *The Guardian*, 22 Dec 2001.

⁸³ ‘In the ruins’, 2001.

⁸⁴ Marco Abel, ‘Don DeLillo’s “In the Ruins of the Future”’: Literature, Images, and the Rhetoric of Seeing 9/11’, *PMLA*, 118.5 (2003), 1236-1250 (p.1237).

commonly equates to judgement, and its fixing of form is for DeLillo inevitable in the linear temporality of the ‘plots’ and ‘narratives’ his essay indicts. ‘Plots reduce the world’ to a singular perspective rather than perceive its multiplicity, and it is as consciousness itself becomes the object of perception, that a non-narrative mode of making meaning is revealed.⁸⁵ As Abel argues,

As opposed to position taking that presumes the speaking subject’s perceptual mastery of the event, which is then affirmed as a generality, as the right way of seeing or representing it, a stance *as* suspension puts the capacity to perceive at stake. Suspension constitutes an immanent response [...] whereas judgement begins from outside the object or event to be judged, and the judging subject sits safely afar or above – unaffected and, allegedly, objective.⁸⁶

In the counter-narrative non-time of suspension, an ethical encounter is made possible that recognizes the interconnection with the other that it faces at the same time as their alterity is maintained. Levinasian in its formation, this ethics enacts, for Abel, a viewpoint that ‘begins and ends in the middle’.⁸⁷ It contrasts to a perception that, as in the theory of Kermode, negotiates the present’s ‘middleness’ by ‘establish[ing] fictive concords with origins and ends’.

For Abel, an attention to the *act* of seeing is foundational to the ethical stance of 9/11 fiction, and this self-reflection coincides with both a deferral of judgement, and a position of immersion, by which ‘the subject becomes able to see the world [...] as it “is”’.⁸⁸ Suspended time provides the conditions for a way of seeing that is enacted

⁸⁵ DeLillo, ‘In the ruins’, 2001.

⁸⁶ ‘Literature, Images’, p.1237, emphasis original.

⁸⁷ ‘Literature, Images’, p.1238.

⁸⁸ ‘Literature, Images’, p.1238. In *Falling Man*, a novel that takes the terror attacks of September 2001 as its focus, DeLillo similarly signals a need to see and think in different ways, as choosing to portray the perspectives of both the victims of the attacks, and of those who carried them out, DeLillo imagines the event from multiple angles. This is indicated, indeed, as the novel’s primary protagonist walks, disorientated, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, beginning ‘to see things, somehow, differently. Things did not seem charged in the usual ways, the cobbled street, the cast-iron buildings. There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means [...] Maybe

without interpretation and without closure, and this counteracts the propulsion of representation, with which DeLillo's essay articulates frustration. Rather than 'assign[ing] sense', DeLillo inaugurates a mode of representation in which the fixity of meaning and the foreclosure of narrative are repeatedly and assiduously deferred.⁸⁹ It is, indeed, not representation, but its preestablished trajectory that DeLillo resists. Indicating, and even celebrating, the human tendency to comprehend events through the construction of sequence, he does not deny the possibility of representation, but is wary of the predominance of any one narrative of time. Attentive instead, as Abel explains, to the 'point that plot – or systematicity – is constituted by affect or continual variation', DeLillo's essay, like his twenty-first century fiction, points towards what narrative occludes.⁹⁰ Adopting a 'stance *as* suspension', he practices a mode of realism that defers the judgement of conclusion, and that operates through an open network of connection. It is this that his essay enacts in its imagination of the attacks' experience, and this too that *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist* each pursue.

'in the smallest registers of motion': time and perception in *Point Omega*

DeLillo's demonstration in 'In the ruins of the future' of 'how intensively inhabiting – suspending – an event can bring ethical responsibility to it', is built on in *Point Omega*'s navigation of competing narrative frames.⁹¹ Placing the voice of Richard Elster, an academic who advised the US government on the war in Iraq, among and in relation to a range of 'more marginal stories', the novel explores the predominance of

this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them'. Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (London: Picador, 2008), p.5. Removed from the critical interpretation of their viewer, the world is perceived, in Abel's terms, 'as it "is"', an always becoming middle' ('Literature, Images', p.1238).

⁸⁹ Abel, 'Literature, Images', p.1239.

⁹⁰ 'Literature, Images', p.1243.

⁹¹ Abel, 'Literature, Images', p.1241.

narrative epistemologies – whether individual, political, social, historical, or technological in scope. It is through durations of suspended time that these narratives are exposed and can be questioned, as rather than taken as a medium through which sense is formed, time itself becomes the object of perception. Encountered in the desert landscape, a slow-motion video installation, and in Elster's daughter, suspended time presents an exteriority to meaning, and indicates, to use Grosz's phrase, 'the potential of things in the world to be otherwise'.

Particularly significant in novels such as *End Zone* and *The Names*, the desert landscape is used throughout DeLillo's writing to portray an epistemological or representative limit, and in *Point Omega*, the temporal implications of this limit are examined. Following its narrator, Jim Finley, in his pursuit of Elster's agreement to participate in his next artistic project, the novel's central story moves from city to desert, and its dyadic topography engages with what Crary describes as 'the specifically modern problem of attention'.⁹² No longer enacted by an autonomous subject and thus related to 'an intensification of a sense of selfhood', attention is, according to Crary, 'turned inside out' in the modern era.⁹³ Managed by the external forces of capitalism and technology, it becomes 'a condition of externalization':

a depthless interface simulates and displaces what once might have been autonomous states of self-reflection or a *sens intime*. The logic of spectacle prescribes the production of separate, isolated, but not introspective individuals.⁹⁴

⁹² *Suspensions*, p.79.

⁹³ *Suspensions*, p.79. The 'intensification of a sense of selfhood' to which Crary contrasts modern attention belongs to a theorization of attention that came to prominence in the nineteenth century. Led by the thinking of Theodore-Armaud Ribot, and developed by Henri Bergson, it presented attention as an inhibition of movement and a perceptive focus that excluded certain objects in favour of others. As Crary's analysis suggests, an autonomous vision is implied throughout such theory due to its consideration of individual embodiment and subjectivity.

⁹⁴ *Suspensions*, p.79.

In a shedding of mediality, the geographical shift of *Point Omega* sees the ‘train stations, bus routes, taxi meters, surveillance cameras’ of a landscape ‘built to measure time’ give way to reveal the ‘waves of space’ that they have so far served to hide.⁹⁵ Encapsulated in Elster’s view of the ‘terror’-filled motion of the city, the ‘logic of spectacle’ that Crary identifies is both exposed and resisted in the desert’s temporal expanse. Elster relates that

‘Day turns to night eventually but it’s a matter of light and darkness, it’s not time passing, mortal time. There’s none of the usual terror. It’s different here, time is enormous, that’s what I feel here, palpably. Time that precedes us and survives us.’ (p.56).

Understanding that ‘time is blind here’, Finley’s consciousness of time is similarly overwhelmed, as he rejects the technology he has brought with him and stops counting the days since his arrival (p.81). DeLillo uses the desert as an exteriority through which time is encountered independent of its habitual and preestablished narrative frames. Akin to slow motion, its immeasurable temporality provides what Boxall terms a ‘counter-narrative’, working against ‘the flow and stress of contemporary flight and speed’.⁹⁶

The temporal contrast of the novel’s topography bears a significant impact on the ways of thinking it explores. For Crary,

spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject *see*, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and *inhabit time* as disempowered. Likewise, counter-forms of attention are neither exclusively nor essentially visual but rather constituted as other temporalities and cognitive states.⁹⁷

As a ‘counter-form of attention’, the desert space confers in DeLillo’s novel an alternate perception and inhabitation of time. Rather than ‘trance or reverie’, however, the cognitive state that is established is one of self-reflection.⁹⁸ Instead of simply challenging

⁹⁵ *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2010), pp.56-57; p.81. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁹⁶ Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The possibility of fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p.79.

⁹⁷ *Suspensions*, p.3, emphasis original.

⁹⁸ *Suspensions*, p.3.

the measuring of time within contemporary culture, it induces an awareness of what such measurement fails to grasp, and this recognition of inexplicability directs attention away from the consciousness of time to the temporality and *temporalization* of consciousness. In the desert setting of *Point Omega*, “[c]onsciousness accumulates. It begins to reflect upon itself [...]” (p.91). The suspended time of the landscape catalyses the ‘inward attention’ that Bennett identifies throughout twenty-first century fiction; deflecting attention back onto attention, it reveals the invisible mechanics of how time is made to mean. Whilst manifest in Elster’s and Finley’s recasting of temporal frames, however, this self-attentive perception and consciousness of time is most explicitly examined in *Point Omega*, in the ‘counter-form of attention’ that art itself achieves.

In the framing sections of DeLillo’s novel, it is through representation’s own manipulation of time that an enquiry into its consciousness is staged, as an extended viewership of Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* is portrayed. First exhibited in 1993, Gordon’s video installation projects Alfred Hitchcock’s famous thriller onto a translucent, freestanding screen and plays it without sound at approximately two frames per second – the whole film lasting twenty-four hours in duration.⁹⁹ Like much of Gordon’s work, the piece is structured around the perception and the experience of time. At a lecture given at its first exhibition in Germany, Gordon discussed his interest in how an artwork encountered in a gallery is ‘felt and experienced as a variety of durations rather than a single static moment’ – and this is heightened in his own installations.¹⁰⁰ As Klaus Biesenbach discusses, Gordon plays upon ‘the discrepancy between viewers’ immediate

⁹⁹ In 2008, Gordon followed *24 Hour Psycho* with *24 Hour Psycho Back and Forth and To and Fro*, playing his own installation on two adjoining screens, forwards on one, and, on the other, in reverse. This offered a further distortion, as the two screens, portraying converse temporal directions, showed the same image for just one twenty-fourth of a second every twenty-four hours.

¹⁰⁰ Klaus Biesenbach, ‘Sympathy for the Devil’, in *Douglas Gordon: Timeline* (New York: *Museum of Modern Art*, 2006), pp.10-31 (p.14).

perception of the works in the exhibition space and the associations, memories, and ideas that the work triggers in their minds'.¹⁰¹ Directing his audience's attention to this palimpsestic convergence, 'Gordon sculpts time into a physical experience'.¹⁰²

Moving from one side of the screen to the other to see its images in reverse, *Point Omega*'s viewer demonstrates the merging durations that Gordon's installation is intended to unveil. Aware of the narrative of Hitchcock's thriller he estimates the temporality of his viewership, anticipating time, rightly or wrongly, through his memory of its plot. His perception of time is moreover impacted by its setting, reactive to the museum's approaching close and the too brief viewership of others. It is in addition imbued with his affective response, as he compares himself and his relationship with his mother to that of Norman Bates and parallels the time of a single movement on screen with the 'flow' of his own consciousness, as 'an array of ideas involving science and philosophy and nameless other things' runs through his mind (p.5). It is the confluence of times both actual and virtual that the 'absolute alertness' of DeLillo's viewer yields (p.5). Attention is portrayed not as an inhibition of perception, but as a mode of seeing in which it is, in fact, 'impossible to see too much' (p.5).

Engaging with its viewer 'at a depth beyond the usual assumptions', *24 Hour Psycho* suspends time to uncover the 'things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing' (p.7; p.13). It indicates, like the desertscape of the novel's centre, a plurality of times that reach beyond and lie beneath the singularity of its narrative conceptualization. Thus, whilst portrayed in a dark room with no sound, and controlling the viewer's inhabitation of time, *24 Hour Psycho* could be read, in Crary's terms, as an example of technologically managed attention, a reading of the installation as a contemporary 'counter-form of

¹⁰¹ 'Sympathy', p.10.

¹⁰² Biesenbach, 'Sympathy', p.10.

attention' coheres more closely to the viewership the work directs. As already discussed, both attention and its counter-forms are explored by Crary not through visual perception, but in terms of temporal engagement and experience. The counter site of Gordon's work depends therefore on its generation of an altered temporal state, and in the primary viewer DeLillo's novel provides, this alteration is explicit. Rather than resisting exterior forces that disempower him, however, it is overwhelmingly to his own embodiment and inhabitation of time that DeLillo's viewer becomes attentive. It is not only an increased perception of time, but also an alertness to time's perception that *24 Hour Psycho* impels. Demonstrating 'inward attention', *Point Omega*'s viewer relates that '[t]he film made him feel like someone watching a film', and this self-reflexive attention to the terms in which viewership takes place coincides with an exposure of and *to* the inexplicable (p.11). The novel's unnamed viewer confesses that '[t]he meaning of this [feeling] escaped him. He kept feeling things whose meaning escaped him' (p.11).

Mark Hansen argues that new media art, of which Gordon's is exemplar, 'invests in the bodily experience of affectivity' as it 'enlarge[s] [...] the threshold of the now'.¹⁰³ Engaging directly with his artwork, Hansen suggests that Gordon considers 'issues of cinematic time, the time-image, and specifically the interstice or between-two of images' that Gilles Deleuze's theory of cinema expounds.¹⁰⁴ Explaining that Deleuze's 'time-image' involves 'an opening of the image to something not only outside the frame but also outside the whole set of images that can potentially be framed', Hansen indicates an essential exteriority to what is perceived, arguing that 'only by opening an outside, an *interstice*, between two images can cinema present a direct image of time'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Mark Hansen, 'The Time of Affect, or Bearing Witness to Life', *Critical Inquiry*, 30.3 (2004), 584-626 (p.589).

¹⁰⁴ 'The Time of Affect', p.590.

¹⁰⁵ 'The Time of Affect', p.590, emphasis original.

Equating the inexplicable to reality, DeLillo's anonymous figure experiences a vision of time in line with that which Hansen explores. He states that Gordon's film

felt real, the pace was paradoxically real, bodies moving musically, barely moving, twelve-tone, things barely happening, cause and effect so drastically drawn apart that it seemed real to him, the way all the things in the physical world that we don't understand are said to be real (p.18).

It is through a separation of 'cause and effect' that the unseen and the unknown can be cognized – that 'something outside the frame' can be acknowledged. But this vision of time in the opening of narrative nonetheless competes with the compulsion to form meaning. As Katrina Brown notes, Gordon's work 'lay[s] bare the irresistible drive to build narrative from the simple succession of images in time', and in DeLillo's novel it makes emphatic consciousness' temporal mediation.¹⁰⁶ Yet, whilst demonstrated by the anonymous viewer of Gordon's work, as well as by Elster and by Finley, the narrative impulse is significantly not visible in Jessie, when it is to her that exteriority is exposed.

'here and now [...] somewhere, or not': Jessie's absent presence

Regarded by the viewer of Gordon's installation as 'a shadow unfolding from the wall', Jessie's presence is different from the others depicted in *Point Omega*, and it is, as the novel's anonymous figure infers, 'a question of actuality' (pp.140-141). Jessie exists within the virtual. Never fully present even to herself, Elster relates that as a child she required constant reminders of her own corporeality – 'her body was not there until she touched it' (p.86). Consistently described in terms of her spectrality, she is 'sylphlike', an imaginary spirit of the air, who gives 'the impression that nothing about this place was different from any other' and 'move[s] through places in a soft glide, feeling the same

¹⁰⁶ Katrina M. Brown, 'Douglas Gordon', *Gagosian Quarterly*, Spring (2018), <<https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2018/02/23/douglas-gordon/>> [accessed 02 September 2021].

things everywhere, this is what there was, the space within' (p.62). Unaffected, it seems, by the actuality she inhabits, Jessie's turn to 'the space within' is indicative of her disembodiment, and her incorporeality explicates her exteriority from the narrative frames in which meaning is made and time constructed. '[A]ttentive to some interior presence', Jessie also hears 'words from inside them', has no interest in names, and is often connected with a silence that is not nothing, and as such, she is associated with the imperceptible – that which in the 'shallow habit of seeing', others consistently fail to recognize (p.50).

Jessie's own exteriority from time is indicated in her viewership of Gordon's installation. Giving her 'time to lose interest in things', *24 Hour Psycho* provides for the novel's female lead, not an attention to attention, but an opportunity for distraction instead (p.136). Understood as 'a parontological relationship of thought to non-being and its variants: not-quite-being, more-than-being, not-yet-being, no-longer-being', distraction is equated by Paul North, to the 'unthought', and it is concordant to the epistemological exteriority that Hansen's reading of Deleuze defines.¹⁰⁷ Hansen explains that in Deleuze's theory,

the direct image of time is made possible precisely by a complete disembodiment; as the impossible copresence of variant virtual series of images opened by the *interstice* or irrational cut between two images, time becomes available for an experience that is and can only be one of pure thinking.¹⁰⁸

Whilst in others Gordon's installation counters this experience as it draws attention to the body, it is precisely to Deleuze's time-image that Jessie's viewership corresponds. She determines '[t]he whole point of nothing happening' as the root of *24 Hour Psycho's* appeal; "The point of waiting just to be waiting [...] Because even when something

¹⁰⁷ Paul North, *The Problem of Distraction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.13.

¹⁰⁸ 'The Time of Affect', p.590, emphasis original.

happens, you're waiting for it to happen.” (p.60). Inhabiting the ‘*interstice*’, or the ‘direct image of time’, her perception is corollary to her disembodiment, and this is reaffirmed within the novel’s central narrative, as contrasted with her father’s physicality, Jessie’s incorporeality is underlined.

Elster is consistently described in terms of his appearance and embodiment, and this is implicitly linked to his inability to acknowledge that which lies beyond his vision and the meaning it informs. Viewing Gordon’s installation, Finley senses Elster’s resistance to the temporal exteriority it exposes, noting that

Something was being subverted here, his traditional language of response. Stillborn images, collapsing time, an idea so open to theory and argument that it left him no clear context to dominate, just crisp rejection. Out on the street he spoke at last, mostly about his aching knee (p.78).

Elster’s association with narrative time, speech, and corporeality invert the atemporality, silence, and disembodiment of his daughter, and the contrast is reasserted by DeLillo in the metalepsis of his title. Theorized by Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, point omega defines an evolution into pure consciousness, a ‘detaching [of] the mind, fulfilled at last, from its material matrix’.¹⁰⁹ This definition, however, is never made explicit in DeLillo’s narrative, in which the concept is instead misrepresented by Elster. With the word order of the term reversed, Elster’s ‘omega point’ defines ‘[a] leap out of our biology’ that entails the end of consciousness, rather than an ascension into it – a transformation back ‘to inorganic matter’ (pp.66-67). It is in Jessie’s disappearance that this is most clearly challenged.

Reading DeLillo’s ‘late style’ as ‘evinc[ing] an extraordinary lack of spatial or temporal awareness’, Boxall contends that,

if [*Point Omega*] is named for this moment of historical completion, the burden of the narrative is the failure of this point to arrive and the bathetic

¹⁰⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. by Bernard Wall (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), p.288.

collapse of such theorizing into a recognition of the unstructured quality of passing time, or of time that seems to pass.¹¹⁰

It is, indeed, ‘the unstructured quality of passing time’ that is revealed in DeLillo’s narrative. Whilst the desert seems to offer ‘pure time’ in its escape from the measurement of modernity’s capitalist infrastructure, time remains mediated by individual consciousness. Elster’s desire to protect his reputation and his fascination with mortality, and Finley’s obsession with the future of his project determine their respective temporal perceptions. Jessie, on the other hand, resists such mediation. Through his ‘nonencounters’ with Elster’s daughter, Finley becomes aware that

[h]ers was another life, nowhere near mine, and it offered a release from the constant self-tunneling of my time here and also a kind of balance to her father’s grip on my immediate future (p.53).

Mouthing words rather than speak them, Jessie, like Hitchcock’s silenced film, induces ‘a kind of meditation on such subjects as time and motion, what we see, how we see, what we miss seeing under normal circumstances’.¹¹¹ It is through the temporal suspension of her incorporeality that individual conceptions of time are accordingly exposed, and this is accentuated within her disappearance, as having left ‘no word, no sign’, her absence proves all narratives redundant (p.101).

Met with the inexplicability of Jessie’s disappearance, theories ‘about matter and being [...] transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness’ become no more than a ‘dead echo’ (p.124). As Finley considers ‘Point omega. A million years away’, he reasons that,

[t]he omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man’s grand themes funnelled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not (p.124).

¹¹⁰ Peter Boxall, ‘Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century’, *Contemporary Literature*, 53.4 (2012), 681-712 (p.689; p.695).

¹¹¹ Don DeLillo and Thomas DePietro, ‘Don DeLillo: A Conversation with Thomas DePietro’, *Barnes and Noble Review*, 01 February 2010 <<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/review/don-delillo>> [accessed 31 August 2021].

Narrowing to ‘here and now’, the parameters of the present reduce to the immediate and individual. However, reading Jessie’s disappearance through the novel’s title as a sign of failure or of bathos risks missing the ethical potential that can be found in denying ‘historical’, or any narrative ‘completion’. Boxall prioritizes presence in his reading of Teilhard de Chardin’s point omega, but DeLillo’s novel is, in fact, only ‘burden[ed]’ by ‘the failure of this point to arrive’ if it is read in line with Elster’s definition. Through point omega’s original theorization Jessie’s vanishing reads not as an end of consciousness, but as a leap *into* it instead. As a ‘body out there somewhere, or not’, her disappearance confirms not absence, but virtual presence. Representative of Teilhard de Chardin’s point omega, she ‘escapes [...] the time and space which [she] gathers together’.¹¹²

Point Omega’s desire to ‘see time as it really is’ culminates in a vision of its timelessness, productive in the recognition of inexplicability that it affords. Aligning with both the ‘pure thinking’ of Deleuze’s time-image evinced in Gordon’s work, and with the reflection of consciousness back upon itself that the desert’s atemporality incites, Jessie’s disappearance completes her characterization as a being exterior from the normative modes of seeing and cognizing time. Her ekstasis not only exposes to others the habitual temporalization of consciousness but also makes possible their adoption of what Abel calls a ‘stance *as* suspension’ as it puts their capacity to perceive at stake. Thus, whilst at the novel’s close Finley and Elster both return to the measured time of the city, their perception, understanding, and embodiment of the present is irrevocably changed. Unable to find closure, judgement is deferred, and recognizing that ‘[m]ystery ha[s] its truth, all the deeper for being shapeless’, it is ‘an elusive meaning’ that Finley intuits (p.83).

¹¹² *The Phenomenon of Man*, p.271.

Framing time and narrative: *Point Omega*'s form

The structure of *Point Omega* both exposes and exploits the temporal expectations of its reader. Framing the novel's narrative with two sections that evade its temporal chronology, along with the literary conventions of character and plot, DeLillo implicates his reader within interpretation. Titled 'Anonymity' and 'Anonymity 2', the sections form a temporal sequence, interrupted by the main content of the text. 'Anonymity', preceding the narrative, remains an intellectual engagement with time, explored through the ekphrasis of Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*. 'Anonymity 2', however, whilst continuing the narration of its counterpart, is imbued with the interceding narrative, leading the reader to infer the identity of its narrator.

To read the novel in this way is, however, to submit to the narrative impulse that DeLillo works to disrupt. It is, of course, possible that Jessie is murdered by Dennis – the man she has recently met, it is possible too, that Dennis is the anonymous narrator of the novel's frame, but it is equally possible that neither is the case. Jessie may have been murdered by someone else, or she may not have been murdered at all – it is her existence as 'a body out there somewhere or not' that gives her the power of a virtual presence. Suspended from time, Jessie 'disappears from the narrative grasp of the novel', and as Liliana M. Naydan's reading of DeLillo's 'off-screen' violence suggests, the 'absent presence' that her disappearance creates 'engages [...] readers in a creative process of making meaning and seeing possibilities'.¹¹³ Read by Naydan in line with the mysteries of Catholicism, which 'exist to be contemplated – to create engagement on the part of the

¹¹³ Boxall, 'Late: Fictional Time', p.696; Liliana M. Naydan, 'Media Violence, Catholic Mystery, and Counter-fundamentalism: A Post-9/11 Rhetoric of Flexibility in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.1 (2015), 94-107 (pp.103-104).

Catholic believer and to render faith as a valuable phenomenon that is and should remain juxtaposed with fact', DeLillo's use of the unexplained in *Point Omega*, attests to its significance in the perception of the real, but it further incites the reader to contemplate their act of contemplation.¹¹⁴ Highlighting its power to manage and manipulate temporal experience, the structure of DeLillo's novel concurrently ensures the mediation of the fictional present by the past or future alongside which it is read. Making the reader conscious of their own desire to attribute meaning and the narrative scaffolding of the apparatus they seek to apply, the novel raises and denies the expectations of conclusion. It guides its reader into a 'stance *as* suspension' in what Finley describes as the 'elusive meaning' that it portrays instead.

Biesenbach describes Douglas Gordon as a 'relational artist' as his 'slow projection of a familiar film' in *24 Hour Psycho* urges viewers 'to invent or imagine a number of possible continuations and endings'.¹¹⁵ In Gordon's work, '[t]he audience is creatively engaged [...] The interruption of the story allows for such reflection and for the creation of a public space in which to discuss what has been seen'.¹¹⁶ Interrupting his own stories by incorporating durations of suspended time within them, DeLillo similarly seeks his readers' creative engagement. As Andrea Pitozzi suggests in her reading of his 'chronography',

The suspension of narrative time is [...] a strategy to create an interstice, a space, where other times, lives and identities can be re-organized and defined by their specific otherness. This way of dealing with time *as* a non-subjective experience allows for the opening of a space where infinite narrative possibilities can coexist together in a meaningful and always novel way.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ 'Media Violence', p.100.

¹¹⁵ 'Sympathy', p.14.

¹¹⁶ 'Sympathy', pp.14-15.

¹¹⁷ Andrea Pitozzi, 'Time-Images in Don DeLillo's Writing: A Reading of *The Body Artist*, *Point Omega* and *Zero K*', *Transatlantica*, 1 (2020), 1-17 (p.14, emphasis original).

The ‘infinite narrative possibilities’ of DeLillo’s chronography lie within the temporal exteriority that his novel enfolds, offering a realistic portrayal of a world that is, as Abel suggests, ‘always [...] becoming middle’, and that is thereby always open to change. The multiple timescapes of his works perform, as David Watson contends, ‘an oddly political work’.¹¹⁸ Yet whilst plurality is, as *Point Omega* shows, central to DeLillo’s politics, Watson’s argument that ‘what is at stake is exactly what mode of time, or rather timescape, we can turn to for making sense of events’ implies that there is in fact sense to be made.¹¹⁹ Rather than simply disrupt preestablished temporal orders, DeLillo’s fiction asserts a profound inexplicability in its extended representation of suspended time. The connections to which his narratives’ own temporal orders gesture remain discrepant and forever out of reach. Deferring the closure of singular meaning, DeLillo positions each of his novels within an interstice of meaning-making, and thus draws the reader into the fictional space. He is, like Gordon, a ‘relational artist’.

‘outside the easy sway of either/or’: framing time in *The Body Artist*

Published ten years prior to *Point Omega*, *The Body Artist* similarly uses suspended time as an expression of the inexplicable and a vehicle of affect. Rather than culminating in loss however, the narrative of DeLillo’s earlier novel is inaugurated by it, and the ekstasis from time that it portrays is, therefore, extended. Whilst the site of displacement is more domestic than that of *Point Omega*, it is nonetheless through topography that *The Body Artist*’s ‘apparition of a space set off from time’ is produced.¹²⁰

Detached from the city, the seclusion of the rented house in which the action of the novel

¹¹⁸ David Watson, ‘Vanishing Points; or, the Timescapes of the Contemporary American Novel’, *Studia Neophilologica*, 88 (2016): 57-67, p.66.

¹¹⁹ ‘Vanishing Points’, p.66.

¹²⁰ Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist* (London: Picador, 2001), p.22. Further references to this edition will be given after quotations in the text.

takes place incites in its protagonist an altered sense of time, but it fails to remove her from her habitual framing of it. Noting that '[w]e're out of the city. We're off the calendar', Lauren is surprised by how the days of the week become confused – whilst 'Thursday seems like Friday', marking her displacement from the present, Friday nonetheless retains its 'identity' (p.21). Whilst not removed, temporalization is made conscious. The suspension of sequence exposes humanity's dependence upon it in the perception and interception of the world.

Related as a series of intricate physical movements and positions of habit, the opening of DeLillo's novel – the routine morning it portrays – is recurrently intercepted by Lauren's viewership, which consistently takes place in stasis. Recalling Crary's definition of attention as a 'possibility of fixation [...] in which the attentive subject is both immobile and ungrounded', Lauren's acts of looking, disjunct from sequence, demonstrate a shift in her perspective.¹²¹ '[S]uspension', as Crary claims, 'indicates a disturbance, even a negation of perception', but whilst demonstrated in the novel's opening scene, the 'reinvention of perceptual experience' that suspension concurrently produces is felt most keenly in the portrayal of Lauren's grief.¹²²

After the sudden suicide of her husband Rey, Lauren's sense of time is more forcefully reformed. Grief casts Lauren outside of time altogether, making her tangential to the moment she inhabits, and it is through this liminal state in which 'all happens around the word *seem*', that what was previously invisible is perceived (p.31, emphasis original). Like Elster in *Point Omega*, Lauren repeatedly sees, after her loss, 'something [...] out of the corner of her right eye', finding that when she 'turn[s] her head [...]

¹²¹ *Suspensions*, p.10.

¹²² *Suspensions*, p.10; p.9.

nothing was there' (p.76).¹²³ DeLillo portrays grief as a visual awareness of what is absent, making both his characters, and as Chiara Patrizi suggests, his readers, 'conscious that there are certain experiences in life that cannot be fully grasped by looking at them from the outside and which therefore cannot be explained by a linear narration'.¹²⁴ Intractable to narrative, grief makes possible a perception unassimilable to judgement in its resistance to being 'grasped [...] from the outside'. Refusing critical distance, it installs in DeLillo's novel what Abel identifies as his 'stance *as* suspension', and the capacity of perception itself is accordingly put 'at stake'. As Patrizi's pairing of critical perception and linear narration intimates, grief ruptures habitualized ways of seeing and of making meaning, and the reflexivity it produces opens epistemology to an ontology that remains beyond its grasp. In DeLillo's novel such inexplicability assumes a human form. The unexplained presence sensed by Lauren whilst Rey is living becomes visible to her after his death – embodied in an elusive and atemporal stranger by whom all narrative logic is defied.

It is, rather than the absence of Rey, the quiet intrusion of an otherworldly presence around which the turning point of *The Body Artist* and its reforming of perception is arranged. Able to ventriloquize Lauren's past and *future* conversations, the figure of Mr. Tuttle provides an encounter with an 'other' whose alterity to the self is defined predominantly through time. Finding him sat on her bed in his underwear, Lauren makes sense of the sudden apparition of this stranger through an instinctive and immediate construction of narrative, coming 'in the first seconds' of her encounter with him, to conclude that his arrival was 'inevitable' (p.41). Faced by the inexplicable, Lauren

¹²³ *Point Omega's* relation of Elster's perception of absence repeats the description of Lauren in *The Body Artist*, noting that '[h]e began to see things out of the corner of his eye, his right eye [...] When he turned his head, nothing' (p.86).

¹²⁴ Chiara Patrizi, 'Body and Time in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*', *Annali di Ca'Foscari*, 49 (2015), pp.239-252 (p.244).

casts the present as an end point to form a causal explanation, feeling ‘her way back in time to the earlier indications that there was someone in the house and arriv[ing] at this instant, unerringly, with her perceptions all sorted and endorsed’ (p.41). In looking at the stranger ‘from the outside’, Lauren seeks to make sense of experience ‘through linear narration’, and this narrativization is continued in both her need to name the ‘other’, and her desire to determine the place from which he has come.

Mr. Tuttle’s resistance to Lauren’s narrative consciousness of time is attributable to his own suspension from it, and this is made clear in his physical discomfort and in his discordance with Lauren’s own modes of vision and speech. Mr. Tuttle is unable either to adapt to his physical form, or to adapt it to the surroundings he inhabits. He moves ‘uneasily in space’, and having left him locked in her car, Lauren returns to find him ‘sitting in piss and shit’ (p.45; p.64). Determining him unable ‘to search out and shape things’, Lauren moreover contrasts Mr. Tuttle’s perception to that she considers ‘normal’; a vision co-constituted by both space and time, in which ‘[t]he eye is supposed to shape and process and paint’ and to tell ‘us a story we want to believe’ (p.80). Thus, positioning Mr Tuttle as ‘other’, Lauren articulates the embodiment of her own chronologized perception, underlining the everyday manipulation of the senses that the human need for narrative capacitates. Such a meeting of temporal frames is staged repeatedly in the novel as its protagonist attempts to comprehend the alterity to which she is exposed, but it is, unsurprisingly, examined most predominantly through narrative’s intimate relationship with language.

Lauren imagines Mr. Tuttle as otherworldly, existing in ‘the deepest description of space-time’ and sliding into her own, and ‘everyone’s’ experience of it as ‘the standard sun-kissed chronology of events’ (p.83). For Mr. Tuttle all times exist at once, and whilst this provides comfort to Lauren in his repetition of the past – giving her access to the

voice of Rey – it is vehemently resisted by her in the pre-formation of the future that it implies. Whereas Mr. Tuttle’s future is ‘already there, susceptible to entry’, Lauren desires agency over her own, not wanting to ‘enter a state already shaped to her outline’:

Something is happening. It has happened. It will happen. This is what she believed. There is a story, a flow of consciousness and possibility. The future comes into being (p.98).

Such narrative conceptualization of time is unavailable to Mr. Tuttle, he ‘hasn’t learned the language’, and this binding of time and language is central to DeLillo’s writing in its exploration of how meaning is formed (p.99). Whilst for Lauren, ‘[t]ime unfolds into the seams of being [...] making and shaping’, Mr. Tuttle’s consciousness of time is coincident with his language, described as ‘his palpable verb tense, his walking talking continuum’ (p.99; p.91). Defining ‘continuum’ as ‘a continuous thing, a continuous whole’, Lauren explicates the synchrony of Mr. Tuttle’s temporal perception, and in doing so she becomes attentive to the ‘arbitrary divisions’ of her own (p.91). Exposed to ‘sheer’ exteriority, DeLillo’s protagonist questions her own interception of the world around her, and in positioning her need for ‘names and dates and distinctions’ in relation to ‘another [...] kind of time’, the ethics of suspension are uncovered (p.77). Lauren realizes that

The laws of nature permit things that in fact, in practice, she thought, never happen.

But could.

But could not.

But could. If only in his mind, she thought (p.77).

Free from the movement of ‘sequence, passing, flowing, happening’, Mr. Tuttle operates within the liminal realm of simile – of ‘seem’ and ‘as if’ (p.77). The enigmatic figure signals an inexplicability integral, but inaccessible, to the present. As Lauren imagines what is possible in the mind of the stranger before her, laws of nature prove to exceed those of either ‘fact’ or ‘practice’ as the ‘inborn ability’ to conceive of time as a narrative or sequence is examined. Revealing ontology’s extension beyond the reach of

explication, the unknown that Mr. Tuttle makes briefly visible indicates to the novel's protagonist other ways in which time can be perceived, and other ways in which the present can be lived.

‘a body slate erased’: imagining time unbodied

Lauren's exposure to the exteriority of time that Mr. Tuttle personifies is corollary to her own disembodiment or 'displacement of self' (p.75). Listening to Mr. Tuttle's chanting, in which past, present, and future tense combine, Lauren's way of intercepting meaning alters, moving from consciousness to a somatic intuition as 'an easing in her body' draws 'her down out of laborious thought and into something nearly uncontrollable' (p.74). Whilst she desires to attribute meaning, Lauren cannot hear the meaning she prescribes. Instead, '[t]he words [run] on, sensuous and empty', producing the realization, as she progresses 'out of herself', that

This was the point, yes, this is the stir of true amazement. And some terror at the edge, or fear of believing, some displacement of self, but this is the point, this is the wedge into ecstasy, the old deep meaning of the word, your eyes rolling upward in your skull (p.75).

Whilst in finding the 'point' Lauren constructs meaning, the meaning she makes is itself inexplicable, positioned 'at the edge' of knowledge – or in ekstasis from it. Ecstatic both as a 'stepping outside' and in the sublimity that it produces, the epistemological threshold to which Lauren is exposed coeffects her self-displacement. The arrival of Mr. Tuttle coincides with self-erasure, as working on her body the titular figure of DeLillo's novel attenuates her presence in the world.

Whilst placing Mr. Tuttle in opposition to her own understanding of time, Lauren gradually reduces the difference she identifies. Explaining that '[y]ou are made out of time. This is the force that tells you who you are', Lauren, as already explored, repeatedly highlights the embodiment of her chronologized perception (p.92). Her manipulation of

her body, therefore, alters not only her corporeal, but also her temporal presence. Once exposed, time's own arbitrariness is uncovered:

Time is the only narrative that matters. It stretches events and makes it possible for us to suffer and come out of it and see death happen and come out of it. But not for him. He is in another structure, another culture, where time is something like itself, sheer and bare, empty of shelter (p.92).

Making her own body 'sheer and bare' in the self-etiolation she enacts, Lauren enters the continuum 'where time is something like itself', independent of its arbitrary logic. Her inhabitation of time's exteriority compares, in this way, to 'the non-time of sheer stasis' that, as the final chapter of this thesis will examine, contemporary grief literature more broadly portrays.¹²⁵ Quoted by Denise Riley in her essay, *Time Lived Without Its Flow*, DeLillo's novel captures the 'altered temporal sense' that these writers document, offering what Riley deems to be 'an extraordinarily precise account of the feeling of a life that continues, but does so outside of any changing time' (p.69). However, whilst for Riley such liminality is shared between present and absent and thus makes it possible for a communication with the dead to be maintained, in DeLillo's novel it works to different effect. Lauren's multiplied presence is not simply embodied, it is physically performed, and it results not in an imagined communication with Rey, but in a polyvocality almost violent in its ventriloquism.

There is, according to Amelia Jones, an estrangement intrinsic to body art, which 'through its very performativity and its unveiling of the body of the artist, surfaces the insufficiency and incoherence of the body/self (or body-as-subject) and its inability to deliver itself fully' to either artist or audience.¹²⁶ This staging of unknowability, and the alienation of subject and body in which it results, enables in DeLillo's novel an extension

¹²⁵ Denise Riley, *Time Lived Without Its Flow* (London: Capsule Editions, 2012), p.50. Further references to this edition will be given after quotations in the text.

¹²⁶ Quoted by Patrizi in 'Body and Time', p.249.

of the self. In *Body Time*, the performance piece to which the novel builds, Lauren ‘shake[s] off’ her body as she physically assumes the identities of others (p.104). As the narrative’s embedded review of her piece reports, her work ‘is not self-strutting or self-lacerating’ because it is not about the self; Lauren is ‘always in the process of becoming another or exploring some root identity’ (p.105). Her art, like that of *Point Omega*’s narrator, exists within and through the deferral of its form.

Finley’s one ‘finished’ film creates a perception of incompleteness. Described by its viewers as ‘an idea for a film [...] An idea, they said, that remains an idea’, the project maintains a sense of its own formation (p.25). It is, as a subsequent description of the piece makes clear, to the film’s lack of narrative that this can be attributed. Arranging clips of Jerry Lewis in ‘unsequential edits’ and placing onto these ‘modern music [...] rows of tones, the sound of a certain re-echoing drone’, Finley places his subject ‘outside the moment, in some larger surround’, making him ‘ahistorical’ as he discards the clarity of a temporal frame (p.26). This dissociation from time is further underlined in the film’s own duration, which, ‘a freakish fifty-seven-minute[s]’ could have lasted ‘a hundred and fifty-seven minutes, could have been four hours, six hours’ instead (p.27).

Similarly, *Body Time*’s stretched duration does not go far enough for Lauren, and it is this sense of suspension that is passed on to its audience. Lauren offers in interview that ‘the idea’ of her piece ‘is to think time differently’, to

Stop time, or stretch it out, or open it up. Make a still life that’s living, not painted. When time stops, so do we. We don’t stop, we become stripped down, less self-assured [...] What’s left? Who’s left? (p.107).

Lauren’s art operates at the limits of the known, and it is comparable in its stripping back of self-hood to the work of French body artist Orlan, which is used by Boxall to consider contemporary representations of embodiment. Through a series of gruelling surgical

procedures (during the majority of which she is conscious), Orlan aims to be recognized as and attain a new legal identity. As Boxall discusses, her

denudation of the body [...] confronts us with the vertigo of unknowing that occurs when the conventions of seeing and knowing are removed, scraped off [...] the absence of knowledge that they produce opens onto an encounter with what Agamben calls the very ‘possibility of knowing’ [...] what we see here is knowability itself.¹²⁷

Arresting habitual modes of perception and showing them to be inadequate, Lauren’s art, like Mr. Tuttle’s presence, demands a re-conceptualization of the ways in which understanding itself is formed. Her denudation of the body is also one of time. Through slow motion and repeated gestures, it exposes the self’s temporal construction (‘[w]hen time stops so do we’) and it is this stripping down of the body, this opening up of time, that enables corporeal boundaries to be extended. The effects of Lauren’s art impact not only her sense of self but also that of her viewing audience, as through varying levels of attention and distraction, they become other to themselves. As Mariella’s review concludes, the piece whilst ‘begin[ning] in solitary otherness becomes familiar and even personal. It is about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are’ (pp.109-110). Rather than a performance of identity, it is the performativity of identity that *Body Time* reveals.

Boxall argues that Orlan’s work ‘opens the skin to forge an unfathomable relationship between discrete bodies [...] summon[ing] a kind of life that does not yet have a form which contains it, a kind of life which is experienced as pure possibility’.¹²⁸ It is this possibility of otherness that Lauren’s art effects, as, like Orlan, she ‘disseminate[s] her] disassembled body into the spaces of others’.¹²⁹ Yet, where Boxall reads Orlan’s art as demonstrative of a utopian unthought futurity, and locates within this the ethical

¹²⁷ *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.96.

¹²⁸ *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.107.

¹²⁹ Orlan, quoted in Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.95.

potential of twenty-first century fiction more generally, the art of DeLillo's protagonist lacks such direction, indicating instead a potential that is always outside of time. Boxall argues that '[u]topian thought'

has always found its transformative potential partly in the expiry of existing categories, in the collapse of the forms which have allowed us to conceive of statehood or of political subjectivity. It is in the realisation of such absence, in the failure or inadequacy of our existing political realities, that the possibility of a new future emerges, even if that possibility remains undisclosed or unrealised.¹³⁰

In the utopianism he uncovers, Boxall explicates the ways in which limits of knowledge are recurrently exposed within contemporary literature, art, and thought. Rather than heralding a future potential for new forms of thinking and seeing, however, my own reading of DeLillo suggests that what contemporary representations of the 'unthought' offer is an ethics in which the realization of form is altogether denied. Unlike the work of Orlan, which proclaims a future goal, Lauren's art denies that goal's foreclosure. The ethical potential that Boxall aligns specifically with futurity, takes place instead in a suspended present – a present alive not only to the possible futures immanent within it, but also to the plethora of other possibilities and impossibilities that the deferral of meaning persistently maintains.

DeLillo's novel does, however, recognize the dominance of narrative, showing its protagonist to be reliant on its resumption in order that her sense of self can be remade. As Riley explains, 'time is the person', and it 'defines [...] existence' for Lauren as 'she comes to want to find again 'the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was' (*TBA*, p.92; *TL*, p.69). This desire marks, for Riley, the contrast between DeLillo's fictional portrayal of grief and her experience of it – her own return to time is both resisted and unconscious. Yet Lauren's longing to feel time does follow a re-presenting over which

¹³⁰ *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.107.

she has no control and as in *Point Omega* it is, moreover, a broader consciousness of time that is displayed. Lauren's reformed perception and embodiment of time converges the temporality that she inhabits with those remembered and imagined, altering her construction of identity.

In a reading of what he calls 'the temporal turn' of contemporary American fiction, Hikaru Fujii traces the disruption of narrative, or linear time, in relation to a 'critique of the self'.¹³¹ Fujii argues that in the conceptualization of the American self, 'the spatial outside goes hand in hand with a stable sense of time or historical sense of time; the space ahead, waiting to be reached [...] produces a linear notion of time'.¹³² A critique of the self, it thus follows,

must be accompanied by attempts at activating different modes of time. The exploration of the 'outside,' then, ceases to be a journey to an external space where one can achieve a sense of freedom and wholeness. Rather, it seeks to reach the idea of time as a force of difference by which current subjectivity, both in its individual and collective aspects, is transformed. Elizabeth Grosz's thesis, 'the outside is the transmutability of the inside,' best describes such a view.¹³³

It is this transformation of selfhood that DeLillo's novel relates as Lauren's self-erasure coincides with the polymorphous identity she attains. Lauren's body does not constitute a totalization, and thus temporalization, of her identity, but acts as a threshold through which time becomes suspended as inside and outside interact.¹³⁴ Rather than challenged, this is confirmed, for Fujii, at the end of DeLillo's novel. Fujii contends that,

Though 'she' appears as the subject of every sentence in the concluding paragraph, the narrative has already constituted her bodily existence as an interface, always open to the process of difference, which Lauren reaffirms by opening the room to the outside. It is a gesture that declares her

¹³¹ Hikaru Fujii, 'Introduction', in *Outside, America: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary American Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), ix-xv (p.x).

¹³² 'Introduction', p.x.

¹³³ 'Introduction', pp.x-xi.

¹³⁴ This temporalization of identity correlates with that which Ricœur considers in *One Self as Another*, as the emplotment of the self through narrative is explored.

detachment from [...] linear temporality.¹³⁵

The gesture Lauren makes is repeated by DeLillo, as in its multiplicity of implied meanings, *The Body Artist* avoids the fixity of form. '[A]lways open to the process of difference', the text refuses its own closure, and it thus directs its readers to examine instead the narrative expectations by which reading is led.

'around the edges of [...] life': unbodying the novel's temporal form

Demonstrating what Fujii describes as 'her bodily existence as an interface', Lauren's art enfolds the narrative of the novel in which it is contained. Impersonating those around her and incorporating both the answerphone machine and the video she obsessively watches of the road in Kotka within her piece, Lauren recontextualizes her experience, and the recontextualization is temporal. The slow-motion of *Body Time* refracts and alters the physical movements of Lauren's neighbours, the phone's repetitive dial tone, and the 'unyielding frame' of time and space that the video had provided, and in the same way, the rendition of *The Body Artist* that *Body Time* produces delineates the narrative framework of the novel (p.38).¹³⁶

As Mark Osteen argues, in 'recycling elements from his own novel and in slowing narrative movement to a crawl, [DeLillo] mirrors Lauren's mechanic muse'.¹³⁷ His representation of representation directs his reader's attention to the intertemporality of the text they handle – its position between times and in connection of them. Osteen notes

¹³⁵ Hikaru Fujii, 'Time and Again: The Outside and the Narrative Pragmatics in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*', in *Outside, America: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary American Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 83-94 (p.92).

¹³⁶ Lauren's recontextualization compares to the 'renditions' that *Point Omega* explores. Introduced via an essay of Elster's, the definitions of the term 'rendition' suggest a recasting of existing structures that is integral to the novel's understanding of time and representation (pp.32-34).

¹³⁷ Mark Osteen, 'Echo Chamber: Undertaking *The Body Artist*', *Studies in the Novel*, 37.1 (Spring 2005), 64-81 (p.75).

that ‘consciousness is not a narrative, or even a dialogue, but an echo chamber, a room we share with the chorus of all the living and the dead’, and the same can be said of art and of literature.¹³⁸ Deferring conclusion, or narrative closure in the enfolded it enacts, DeLillo’s novel draws attention to the impersonal and interpersonal temporality of representation. Indeed, the temporality of the ‘echo chamber’ is best captured in ‘an art that [...] undertakes the world to which it responds, refracts it, and then gives back a newly configured body’, an art, therefore, that must ‘restlessly change its form’.¹³⁹

Directed by a desire to alert the reader to preestablished ways of seeing and making meaning, *The Body Artist* opens narrative in the engagement it requires. As the description of Mr. Tuttle suggestively merges with that of Rey and that of Lauren, DeLillo’s novel, like its protagonist, combines real and imagined in the reality it portrays. Attesting to the necessity for the convergence, the novel, to use Fujii’s words, ‘practices a mutational temporality’, and this, at the same time as it involves the reader within interpretation, directly challenges their desire for explication.¹⁴⁰ Regularly transgressing the conventions of form, the narrative voice of DeLillo’s text, addressing both protagonist and reader, asks:

Is the thing that’s happening so far outside experience that you’re forced to make excuses for it, or give it the petty credentials of some misperception?

Is reality too powerful for you?

Take the risk. Believe what you see and hear. It’s the pulse of every secret intimation you’ve ever felt around the edges of your life (p.122).

The Body Artist alerts its readers to the limitations of their consciousness, and it moreover indicates the ethical potential that inheres within such limits. Demonstrating ‘inward

¹³⁸ ‘Echo Chamber’, p.78.

¹³⁹ ‘Echo Chamber’, p.78.

¹⁴⁰ Fujii, ‘Time and Again’, p.92.

attention’, DeLillo’s novel in this way also examples the ‘threshold’ that Bennett, like Fujii, considers, and that, in being seen, is made unstable. Bennett states that,

If the threshold is [...] the model of the division between the self and the world, then attention is what troubles that boundary. Moreover, if attention is under our control, then it is also an agent for feeling at a distance, outside of the walls of the self. And if it is determined by stimuli beyond us [...] then our attention betrays us – it is part of the outside inside us.¹⁴¹

In drawing attention to attention, DeLillo suspends the temporal progression and conclusion of his text, and it thus becomes ‘an agent for feeling at a distance, outside of the walls’ by which the novel form is built. Exposing the reader to their habitual narrativization of time and attesting to the ‘elusive meaning’ of the inexplicable, *The Body Artist* troubles the boundary of the threshold and so offers the possibility of difference.

‘abandon meaning to impulse’: reading as a stance of suspension

In the open modes of reading and of representation they relate, *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist* indicate an ethics and textual aesthetics of suspension. In both novels’ deferral of judgment and conclusion, time’s narrative understanding cedes to an awareness of meaning’s myriad potential, offering, in Abel’s terms, a view of the world ‘as it “is”’ – an ‘always [...] becoming middle’. DeLillo positions fiction as a site of suspension, and in a short story published in *The New Yorker* in 2009 the stakes of this suspension are underlined.

In ‘Midnight in Dostoevsky’, two teenage friends co-construct the world around them, and in the perception that they share difference is essential; an agreement of what is seen resisted in its making ‘the world flat’.¹⁴² Relating that ‘[e]ven in matters of pure

¹⁴¹ *Contemporary Fictions*, p.127.

¹⁴² Don DeLillo, ‘Midnight in Dostoevsky’, *The New Yorker*, 30 November 2009, <[https:// www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/11/30/midnight-in-dostoevsky](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/11/30/midnight-in-dostoevsky)> [15 June 2021].

physical reality, we depended on a friction between our basic faculties of sensation, his and mine’, the story’s narrator asserts an interception of the world that is attendant to the formation of meaning, rather than its form.¹⁴³ Actuality and singularity end communication and creation, as fiction’s possibility is reduced in its mimesis. It is, it follows, through the act of representation that the world can truly be perceived, as in ‘abandon[ing] meaning to impulse. Let[ting] the words be the facts’, it becomes possible ‘to register what was out there, all the scattered rhythms of circumstance and occurrence, and to reconstruct it as human noise’.¹⁴⁴ The threat of fiction’s end – either in its distinction from or elision with reality – leads to violence in the text, as one friend seeks to determine the identity of the stranger whose life-story the two together have created. DeLillo suggests the need for the interrelation of real and imagined, knowing that either the separation, or the congress of the two, would result in meaning’s totalization.

Wary of ‘meaning[s] fixed in advance’, ‘Midnight in Dostoevsky’ posits, therefore, a mode of representation that is both shared and contestable – a stance that concords more generally with DeLillo’s fiction of the twenty-first century.¹⁴⁵ As Nicholas Manning notes, DeLillo ‘often eschews realist or mimetic models, rather staging the type of unidentifiable affects which undo reassuring readerly expectations of recognising a universal “known”’.¹⁴⁶ Professing to have no ‘storytelling drive [...] to follow a certain kind of narrative rhythm’, DeLillo builds his fiction instead around the rhythm of each sentence.¹⁴⁷ His writing practice is defined by the ‘sculptural quality’ of

¹⁴³ ‘Midnight’.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Midnight’.

¹⁴⁵ ‘Midnight’.

¹⁴⁶ Nicholas Manning, “‘The uses of boredom’: affect, attention, and absorption in the fiction of Don DeLillo”, *Textual Practice*, 33.1 (2019), 155-173 (p.164).

¹⁴⁷ Don DeLillo and Adam Begley, ‘Don DeLillo, The Art of Fiction No. 135’, *The Paris Review*, 128 (1993), <<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1887/the-art-of-fiction-no-135-don-delillo>> [accessed 02 September 2021].

text, as viewing ‘words typed on the white page’ he finds ‘odd correspondences’, connecting phrasal elements ‘not just through meaning but through sound and look’.¹⁴⁸ DeLillo conceptualizes his fiction as a physical art form, treating language as a substance through which aural and visual harmony can be composed.

Led by sensuous response and a willingness to let language precede meaning, DeLillo’s aesthetic approach maintains the possibility of his writing as it refuses the conclusive meaning that narrative drives towards. In a suspension of time that draws attention to the ‘sculptural quality’ of the text, the reader too becomes suspended, and as this chapter will continue to explore, the metafictional strategies of McCarthy and Lerner have the same effect. Indeed, DeLillo’s work is metafictional. It regularly reflects on the capabilities of representation by portraying acts of creation that, as David Cowart comments, act as *mise en abymes* of the novels in which they are placed.¹⁴⁹ The unfinished works produced in *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist* suggest, therefore, the aims of DeLillo’s own. Neither Finley’s film nor Lauren’s body art ever reach conclusion, and denying their viewers a cohesive meaning, they not only demonstrate DeLillo’s approach to writing fiction, but also his belief ‘that the novel’s purpose is not to resolve and to assert’, but rather, ‘to suspend and [to] suggest’.¹⁵⁰ Making them aware of the preestablished narratives by which they perceive and make sense of time, DeLillo suspends his readers within the textual space in the affective mode of interpretation that his works require. The writing and the reading of his twenty-first century fiction is, as

¹⁴⁸ DeLillo and Begley, 1993.

¹⁴⁹ David Cowart, ‘The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 53.1 (2012), 31-50.

¹⁵⁰ Brian Chappell, ‘Death and Metafiction: On the “Ingenious Architecture” of *Point Omega*’, *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon*, 4.2.6 (2016), 1-25 (p.11).

the narrator of ‘Midnight in Dostoevsky’ elucidates, ‘never [...] a matter of literal answers’, but a testament to the literary instead.¹⁵¹

‘buffering becomes everything’: structures of time in Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island*

DeLillo’s interest in how time is experienced, embodied, and represented is shared by Tom McCarthy, in whose four novels and extensive critical work temporality is often addressed. Possibilities of connection across space and time abound throughout McCarthy’s writing, indicative of a sincerity that in criticism, I would argue, is yet to be sufficiently explored. Consistently placing the author at the forefront of the contemporary avant-garde, engagements with McCarthy’s fiction remain dominated by the consideration of his first novel, *Remainder* – the text by which this position was achieved. As a result, discussions of time in McCarthy’s work concentrate on repetition, overlooking the other temporal forms that he portrays, and neglecting too the realist mode within which his experimentalism is grounded. However, Milly Weaver’s study of indexicality and Bennett’s exploration of attention provide two notable exemptions.¹⁵² Informed, perhaps, by their selection of *Satin Island* as their focus, the counter-narrative temporalities that Weaver and Bennett each identify move away from repetition, and closer towards the category of suspension that my own reading pursues. Suspended time is central to McCarthy’s most recent novel, in which the relationship between narrative and meaning is exhumed.

¹⁵¹ ‘Midnight’.

¹⁵² Weaver provides the only reading of *Satin Island* in Dennis Duncan’s collection of critical essays on McCarthy, whilst Bennett explores the text as an example of twenty-first century literature’s turn towards attention itself. See Milly Weaver, ‘Restricted Action: McCarthy’s Modernist Legacy?’, in *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays*, ed. by Dennis Duncan (Great Britain: Gylphi, 2016), pp.95-119; Bennett, *Contemporary Fictions*, pp.93-113.

In *Satin Island*, McCarthy actively examines the perspectival position of the contemporary, employing the field of anthropology to interrogate the possibility of writing on and in the present. Staging both its incapacity to remain discrete from, and its inevitable alteration of experience, the text problematizes representation. Its reflexive approach does not, as McCarthy's criticism makes clear, mark new territory for the novel genre; its lineage is coeval with the form.¹⁵³ Particular to its twenty-first century context, however, is how the mediation intrinsic to writing additionally relates to that of the present that writing portrays. *Satin Island* is framed by McCarthy as a way in which to consider

what it means to write today – to write, that is, in the shadow of omnipresent and omniscient data that makes a mockery of any notion that the writer might have something to inform us, and of a technologically underwritten capitalism that both writes and reads itself.¹⁵⁴

That this mediation of lived experience is, for McCarthy, inextricable from questions of time is indisputable, and is convincingly captured in his co-creation of *Greenwich Degree Zero* with Rod Dickinson, in 2005. This multi-media installation took as its inspiration the death of Martial Bourdin, caused by the explosion of a bomb he was carrying near to Greenwich Observatory in 1894. Assumed to be the result of a plan to attack the Observatory itself, Bourdin's death marks an attempt to blow up time, with its failure famously fictionalized by Joseph Conrad in *The Secret Agent*.¹⁵⁵ However, unlike

¹⁵³ The influences of both modernist and postmodernist writing on McCarthy's interrogation of language and discourse are clear and signalled throughout his fiction. *Satin Island* bears the influence of diverse examples, including texts such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, which are readily visible in its portrayal of identity, history and meaning.

¹⁵⁴ Tom McCarthy, 'The death of writing – if James Joyce were alive today he'd be working for Google', *Guardian*, 07 March 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/07/tom-mccarthy-death-writing-james-joyce-working-google>> [02 May 2021].

¹⁵⁵ The history of Bourdin's death, and Conrad's fictionalization is used also by Ali Smith in *There But For The*, a novel the second chapter of my thesis will discuss in detail.

Conrad, McCarthy and Dickinson imagine the success of Bourdin's plot, manipulating film footage, records, and news reports in the remediation they perform.¹⁵⁶ *Greenwich Degree Zero* shows history to be a mediatized form of representation. But in imagining the plot's success, the installation does more than reveal history's editing of reality; it both constructs and exposes the fiction of time – layering its own authorship with that of the media it manipulates, and concomitantly, with the arbitrary temporalization enacted at Greenwich itself.

In *Satin Island* it is time's mediating function that the representation of suspended time exposes. Kafkaesque in its faceless and elusive domination, the Company at the novel's centre exemplifies the literate and literary capitalism that McCarthy identifies above, defining the parameters of meaning by which everyday life is lived. Echoing McCarthy's assertion that businesses 'have taken over universities' former role as society's prime sites of knowledge generation', the Company both exists as and provides for others (its employees and clients and thus the general population) a 'universe of consequence'; a means through which the present can be cognized.¹⁵⁷ Advising other companies, cities, regions, and governments on the best ways in which to represent their services or policies 'to the press, the public and, not least, themselves', the corporation 'deal[s] [...] in narratives' (p.16). Knowledge is not found a priori in the world but manufactured and inculcated through it. Conceptualized in literary terms, the 'fictions' of meaning in which the Company trades are temporal in composition, correlative to and exploitative of the narrative structures by which both consciousness and literature are upheld (p.56).

¹⁵⁶ In Conrad's novel, Stevie, who is carrying the bomb, stumbles and causes the bomb to explode before reaching the intended target.

¹⁵⁷ 'The death of writing'; Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (London: Vintage, 2015), p.51. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

The anthropologist is, as McCarthy explains, ‘a perfect stand-in for the writer’ and, employed for his ability to observe the present and ‘lay bare some kind of inner social logic’, it is the profession McCarthy chooses for his narrator.¹⁵⁸ Named in reference to Robert Musil’s novel, to serve as a *Man Without Qualities*, U. is at once compliant with, and resistant to the role he is attributed by his employer, but he is either way made highly conscious of it through the positionality professed by his career.¹⁵⁹ He states in the very first pages of the text, that

People need foundation myths, some imprint of year zero, a bolt that secures the scaffolding that in turn holds fast the entire architecture of reality, of time: memory-chambers and oblivion-cellars, walls between eras, hallways that sweep us on towards the end-days and the coming whatever-it-is. We see things shroudedly, as through a veil, an over-pixelated screen (pp.3-4).

For North, the ‘intermission’ of distraction ‘assumes an underlying discontinuum over which continuity has been draped like a shroud. Distraction is a reminder of the loose fit of historical life on the casket of its coherence’.¹⁶⁰ In McCarthy’s novel it is through suspended time that the shroud of continuity is unveiled. The narrative scaffolding of the rooted way of thinking that U. identifies is made visible to him in his suspension between the present as it is lived, and the present as it is temporalized.¹⁶¹ Consistently portrayed as a site of delay that both postpones and enables mediation, the ekstasis that U. occupies is shown to be a condition of consciousness, but one that is ordinarily subconscious in its

¹⁵⁸ ‘The *CounterText* Interview’. McCarthy notes, in his article, ‘The death of writing’, that more than half of all anthropology graduates work for corporations.

¹⁵⁹ The influence of Musil’s *Man Without Qualities* is related by McCarthy in an interview in which he continues to explain that *Satin Island* ‘is a contraction of that novel’, with the thrust of each text being that ‘everyone in the book is working to produce some magnificent ‘event’ that none of them understand’. Tom McCarthy, ‘Tom McCarthy interview’, *Foyles*, <<https://www.foyles.co.uk/tom-mcarthy>> [accessed 31 August 2021].

¹⁶⁰ *The Problem*, p.14.

¹⁶¹ The use of architectural imagery in U.’s description is, as this chapter will continue to consider, significant in its relation to meaning, serving here, as Weaver suggests, to reiterate ‘the attraction and typicality of concretized, rooted ways of thinking and understanding’. Weaver, ‘Restricted Action’, p.103.

use. It is encapsulated for U. by the loading bar and buffering circle that appear on his ‘over-pixelated screen’, and which grant in their delaying of technological mediality, a ‘revelation [...] of time or memory itself’ (p.85).

The buffering circle is, for McCarthy, ‘the ultimate symbol of contemporary existence’ in ‘the temporality that it imposes – a time of delay, of waiting, of anxiety, of incompleteness – [it] sums up what it is to be alive today’.¹⁶² Made conscious of consciousness and its narrative mechanics, this viewpoint is reiterated by U. Contemplating the same symbol, he relates that

We require experience to stay ahead, if only by a nose, of our *consciousness* of experience – if for no other reason than that the latter needs to make sense of the former, to (as Peyman would say) narrate it both to others and ourselves, and, for this purpose, has to be fed with a constant, unsorted supply of fresh sensations and events (p.85, emphasis original).

The gap that U. articulates is necessary. Rather than eviscerating experience, consciousness sustains it – for should meaning’s appetite be ‘too voracious to let anything gather or accrue unconsumed before it’, humanity would be ‘jammed’, able to ‘enjoy *neither* experience *nor* consciousness of it’ (p.86, emphasis original). Attuned to the narrative temporalization that the interception and interpretation of events requires, U. underlines the inescapability of matter’s mediation, and this is demonstrated throughout McCarthy’s novel in its examination of the multiple actors by whom meaning is constructed and maintained. *Satin Island*’s uncovering of contemporary experience and its consciousness takes place within North’s ‘intermission’ of distraction, and, produced through the ‘tangle’ that is ‘the thought of thinking’s meaning’, it also aligns with the ‘inward attention’ that Bennett theorizes.¹⁶³ Both critics identify the interdependence of

¹⁶² Quoted by Christa Grewe-Volpp in ‘Oil as matter, oil as discourse: Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island*’, *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 23.2 (2019), pp.141-151 (p.143).

¹⁶³ *The Problem*, p.17.

attention and distraction – suggesting that of narrative and suspended time – and both in this way align, moreover, with what Lauren Berlant determines as the ‘impasse’ of the present and the ‘mediated affect’ that it defines.¹⁶⁴

As already explored in the introduction to this thesis, Berlant argues that the present is ‘a temporal genre’ ‘under constant revision [...] whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now’.¹⁶⁵ Encountered affectively, the present is made temporal as it is cognized, linked to past and future in the formation of consequentiality. Employed ‘to garner meaning’, U. imagines his role in Berlant’s terms, envisioning himself instead as ‘a nocturnal worker’ in meaning’s manufacture: ‘The world functioned, each day, because I’d put meaning back into it the day before’ (pp.38-40). Yet whilst idealized as a service performed for the collective good, U.’s provision of meaning for others is problematic, and it is precisely the invisibility of his role that McCarthy’s novel works to undermine. In exposing the narrativization of time within the filtering of experience *Satin Island* underlines meaning’s reduction of the world, and in its representation of suspended time it indicates the possibility of difference.

‘not at, but between’: another mode of making meaning

McCarthy has related in explanation of his text, that

The anthropologist [...] looks at the world and reports on it. That is the classical model and, of course, as Levi-Strauss already understood, it’s a model that is not workable in the modern era because there has been a set of implosions and that sort of distanced mastery has been lost.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ *Cruel*, p.4.

¹⁶⁵ *Cruel*, p.4.

¹⁶⁶ ‘The *CounterText* Interview’.

Considered at length by U. in his study on club culture, the obfuscation of ‘field’ and ‘home’ is inevitable within anthropological enquiry. Thus, tasked by the Company ‘to *name* what’s taking place right now’, U. replaces the approach conventional within his field with a ‘Present Tense Anthropology™’ that recognizes the impossibility of observing from outside (p.72, emphasis original; p.90). Aligning critical distance with writing, U. considers whether the report he is completing could instead ‘be lived, be *be-*d, rather than written’, replacing representation’s temporalization of the present as ‘future knowledge’, with its experience – a ‘participation-from-within’ (p.89, emphasis original). He alters the temporal position of the anthropologist, conceptualizing a mode of meaning-making that brings the ‘true substance’ of events ‘to the fore at every instant, in the instant [...] *as* the instant itself’ (p.90, emphasis original). It is an act of de-mediation that causes within U. an ‘epiphanic tingling of *what-if-ness*’, recalling the ‘tingling’ affect that the protagonist of McCarthy’s first novel pursues (p.89, emphasis original).

Having lost a large portion of his memory after being hit on the head by an unidentified falling object (an event itself erased by his amnesia), the narrator of *Remainder* is compelled to relearn how to move and act, relaying the neural pathways of his brain. As understanding precedes action, McCarthy’s anti-hero is made aware of consciousness’ mediation of experience. He relates that

Recovering from the accident, learning to move and walk [...] all this had made me become even more what I’d always been anyway, added another layer of distance between me and things I did [...] I wasn’t unusual: I was more usual than most.¹⁶⁷

It is, as U. would say, ‘a *buffering* probl[em]’ (p.157, emphasis original). Newly aware of his artificial relation to reality, *Remainder*’s protagonist responds by spending his compensation millions re-enacting moments that, remembered or imagined, he considers

¹⁶⁷ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (Surrey: Alma Books, 2016), p.23. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

significant in the feeling of authenticity they produce. Ever more elaborate and increasing in their danger, these stagings soon overpower the reality they represent as the text critiques the quest of its narrator.¹⁶⁸ What is important, however, is what they try to capture – a being void of artifice that produces a ‘tingling’ in their director as intensity subsumes the ‘neutral’ condition by which his everyday existence is defined (p.10).

Remainder’s narrator deems his most authentic moment the experience of being ignored while posing as a beggar, standing ‘static’ among ‘hurrying, streaming’ commuters (p.39). Feeling ‘almost real’ by ‘being in that particular space, right then, in that particular relation to others, to the world’, his suspension from time, like that of DeLillo’s body artist, entails both self-erasure and extension (p.40).¹⁶⁹ The contemporary anthropology that U. imagines in *Satin Island* similarly echoes this suspension, as U. exceeds his corporeal limitations and ‘los[es him]self among’ that which he observes (p.88). U. considers

just *coexisting* with these objects and this person, letting my own edges run among them, occupying this moment, or, more to the point, allowing *it* to occupy *me*, to blot and soak me up, rather than treating it as feed-data for a later stock-taking (p.89, emphasis original).

In his imagined inhabitation and housing of ‘this moment’ consciousness is saturated by experience rather than fed upon it. Time becomes suspended and meaning is deferred. U.’s research for the Great Report evinces the same impulse; eschewing critical distance

¹⁶⁸ McCarthy is himself vocal in his loathing of the term of ‘authenticity’. The INS’ ‘Statement on Inauthenticity’, for example, asserts that ‘[a]ll cults of authenticity [...] should be abandoned’. International Necronautical Society, ‘The New York Declaration: INS Statement on Inauthenticity’, 25 September 2007, pp.1-20 <<https://tc3-production.s3.amazonaws.com/upload/52228de602e3e620b1000205/sfinsnydeclaration.pdf>> [accessed 02 September 2021] (pp.9-10).

¹⁶⁹ Examining the ‘ontological turn’ of twenty-first century literature, Mitchum Huehls reads *Remainder* for its disruption of neoliberal modes of meaning and value in its pursuit of non-identity, which, he argues, counters managed individualism. Mitchum Huehls, ‘Welcoming the World: Post-Ecological Fiction’, in *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.129-158 (p.155).

it eschews causation, taking shape instead as an increasingly inexplicable and interlinking structure, the closure of which is repeatedly withheld. Comparing it to the parachute, the function of which is extant only ‘*in transit* from point A (the aeroplane) to point B (the assigned landing-spot on the ground)’, U. removes his project from the directedness of time, displacing it within ‘a perpetual state of passage, not arrival – not *at*, but *between*’ (p.100, emphasis original). Working against the pre-established notion that meaning should have either ‘fixed location’ or end-point, U.’s Project becomes instead a ‘structure’ of permeation and entrenchment (p.100). Recalling in its ‘middleness’, DeLillo’s ‘stance *as suspension*’, it is demonstrative too of the ‘open, ongoing, and [...] contestable’ mode of meaning-making that the INS promote. Imbuing theories of time’s knowledge with a study of its being, it evinces an *onto*-epistemology that is led by intuition and is affective in the connections it creates.

U.’s research takes as its basis the ‘untimely anthropology’ of Paul Rabinow, from which McCarthy ‘freely and shamelessly lifted’ in the writing of his novel.¹⁷⁰ Published in 2007, Rabinow’s *Marking Time*, contends that the goal of anthropological enquiry should be ‘identifying, understanding, and formulating something actual neither by directly identifying with it nor by making it exotic’, but by ‘seek[ing] to articulate a mode of adjacency’.¹⁷¹ For Rabinow, an anthropology of the contemporary requires a perspectival position disjunct not merely from the present, but from the flow of time – a position of ekstasis in which observation is observed. Whilst continuing to operate as a ‘space of objectivity’, untimely anthropology discards the critical closure traditionally pursued within the field in favour of an open, multi-dimensional and collaborative

¹⁷⁰ Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.38; McCarthy, ‘Acknowledgements’, in *Satin Island* (London: Vintage, 2015), pp.221-222 (p.222).

¹⁷¹ *Marking Time*, p.39.

approach.¹⁷² Rather than temporalizing the contemporary moment as an epoch or ‘historical totality’, Rabinow posits its multiplicity and entanglement.¹⁷³

Yet whilst in this way resisting temporalization, Rabinow still professes the aim of ‘formulating something actual’ and commenting on the ‘narrative style and content’ that the anthropologist provides, it is ‘form’ that he thus seeks to establish.¹⁷⁴ What ‘untimely anthropology’ offers is not a liberation from form, but the deferral of its closure; a refusal of totalization by which reason’s contingency is maintained. Captured in the transitional functionality of his project, it is this process of form’s making that U. similarly pursues, as he tries to resist the ‘remediation’ that narrative entails.¹⁷⁵ The Great Report’s written form, and the closed, or fixed meaning it would provide is incompatible with the open temporality and ontology of U.’s assemblage. ‘[A] mechanism capable of managing and arresting, let alone pinning down and mapping the dynamics, processes and patterns’, U. notes, ‘simply wasn’t possible’ (p.146).¹⁷⁶

Explaining that ‘the whole of the novel revolves around a subject “in front of the screen” but in search of the (material) world’, Christoph Reinhardt argues that ‘*Satin*

¹⁷² *Marking Time*, p.47. In his more recent writing Rabinow re-asserts the need for this methodological shift within his field, arguing through the philosophy of Foucault, among others, that ‘it ought to be time [...] to sacrifice the *individualism* as the subject position that has been at the core of anthropology’s approach to research, publication, pedagogy, and, above all, thinking’ and to substitute it for a ‘form of collaborative sociability’. Paul Rabinow, *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.202, emphasis original; p.203.

¹⁷³ *Marking Time*, p.18.

¹⁷⁴ *Marking Time*, p.38; p.16.

¹⁷⁵ Rabinow, *Marking Time*, p.13.

¹⁷⁶ U.’s ‘assemblage’ is comparative in its method to that of Deleuze and Guattari, who Grosz explains, understand life ‘in terms radically different from its reductionist representations as assemblage, as connection’, detailing that ‘[i]t is no longer a question of what identity a life form has, what constitutes it genetically or materially, but what it does, how it acts, its modes of affecting and being affected’ (*The Incorporeal*, p.156).

Island insists on a foundational opposition of materiality and mediality'.¹⁷⁷ However as Reinfandt's own account of U.'s project infers the two are inseparable within McCarthy's work. Not only does matter continually trip up, hamper, or divert its mediation, but mediality is inevitable; habitualized and depended upon by public and private consciousness alike. The 'giving of form' is, as Rabinow claims, 'a primary task in living in general'.¹⁷⁸ It is the inseparability of matter and mediality that buffering reveals.

Just as ontology conditions epistemology, temporal exteriority instantiates narrative as, like meaning, time is constructed in response to the unknown. The mediation of consciousness is shown to be dependent on the matter which eludes it, and the inextricability is vividly evoked in U.'s dream of Staten Island. The site is framed as a liminal space between material and immaterial, with its function as a 'trash-incinerating plant' conjoined with the linguistic fabrication of its renaming (p.162). *Satin Island* signifies to U. the 'by-products' of order's mediation, the waste material expelled from the structures of meaning that anthropology, history, and capitalism each produce, and that conversely enable their production (p.161). U. relates that,

if the city was the capital, the seat of the empire, then this island was the exact opposite, the inverse – the *other* place, the feeder, the filterer, overflow-manager, the dirty, secreted-away appendix without which the body-proper couldn't function; yet it seemed, in its very degradation, more weirdly opulent than the capital it served (p.163, emphasis original).

Noting of the ooze that the incineration of waste produces, 'its colours as they morphed [...] the foil-like flashing of its folds and gashes', U. subconsciously invokes key philosophical explorations of non-narrative time previously appropriated in his dossier on Levi's Jeans (p.163). Heavily satirical in its reworking of anthropology's most famous

¹⁷⁷ Christoph Reinfandt, 'Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (2015)', in *Handbook of the English Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. Christoph Reinfandt (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp.555-574, (p.557).

¹⁷⁸ *Marking Time*, p.16.

contributor, Levi-Strauss, the dossier had employed both Deleuze's 'fold' and Alain Badiou's 'rip' in the narrative it constructed, ridding the theory of 'all the revolutionary shit' in capitalist exploitation (p.37). Denoting respectively the relationality of interiority and exteriority, and the rupture of time caused by the event, the thought of Deleuze and Badiou works sincerely in U.'s dream, indicating the temporal exteriority of Staten Island and of the meaning-making that the site portends. *Satin Island*, as Timon Beyes proposes, 'enact[s] a kind of poetics of intra-action that surpasses a "mere" satire of late capitalism's capture of practices and concepts of cultural and scholarly production'.¹⁷⁹ It is the interrelation and integration of matter and media, self and world, suspended time and narrative that instead becomes apparent, and that further informs the topography of the novel and the slow trajectory of its protagonist from the city's centre to the ferry terminal at its edge.

Beyes argues that processes 'material and immaterial, human and non-human at the same time, part of the same mangle of practice [...] inform the descriptions of organizational spaces' in McCarthy's novel, and in the portrayal of the ferry terminal this becomes emphatic.¹⁸⁰ Building on the imagery of U.'s dream, the ferry terminal parallels the Company's headquarters. Similarly described as 'all glass and metal', it reifies the logo of the Tower of Babel, with U. working through myriad languages as he weaves his way through the 'queues, lines, gaggles, general throngs of people speaking Spanish, Japanese, French, German, Mandarin and who knows what else' on his approach (p.205). Peyman pronounces that what is valuable about the Company's logo 'is its uselessness. Its uselessness sets it to work: as symbol, cipher, spur to the imagination, to

¹⁷⁹ Timon Beyes, "'The machine could swallow everything": *Satin Island* and performing organization', in *Performing the Digital – Performativity and Performance Studies in Digital Cultures*, ed. by Timon Beyes, Martina Leeker and Imanuel Schipper (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2017), pp.229-243 (p.239).

¹⁸⁰ "'The machine could swallow everything"', p.239.

productiveness’, and the novel’s secondary Tower of Babel gestures toward this promise (p.54). Suspended between the city and its ‘*other*’ and ‘between two types of meaninglessness’, it is here that U. perceives connections discrete from either the necessity or possibility of interpretation (p.213). Attesting to the value of the inexplicable, it is a demonstration that, as Rabinow and Peyman would both have it, ‘[s]ome spaces of ignorance do not need to be filled in’ (p.60, emphasis original).¹⁸¹

‘*Networks of kinship*’: the disjuncture of connection

About to be carried through with the masses onto the ferry ‘on an arced trajectory with the same, inevitable destination, it seemed, as everything else’, U. decides to hold back, working against the current of convention and finding himself ‘suspended’ ‘to the side’ (p.212; p.213). Positioned within a ‘jet lag zone of fragmentation’, U.’s disjuncture is concomitant with a recognition, in Grosz’s terms, of ontology’s reach beyond, or more accurately here *beneath*, the narrative foundations upon which epistemology depends.¹⁸² It is through a disruption of communication’s coherence that an alternate but inexplicable structure is uncovered. U. relates that,

I could see the captain talking into his radio. Radio-crackling broke out to my right and left: from the MTA man’s walkie-talkie, and from those of the security personnel scattered about the terminal. It mingled with the crackling of popcorn: several people near me were eating this as they watched the ferry dock (p.211).

Crackling, as Henderson Downing notes, is a common feature of McCarthy’s writing, signalling a materiality that, fracturing time and disrupting presence, ‘remind[s] us of that which resists representation, that which refuses to be absorbed back into the official signal

¹⁸¹ Discussing the responsibility to ignorance, Rabinow suggests that there will always exist ‘temporally unfolding spaces of ignorance that do not require filling in’ (*Marking Time*, p.45).

¹⁸² McCarthy and Sturgeon, ‘Kafka and the Crash of the System’.

of the pure space of the page or screen or brain'.¹⁸³ Yet crackling also indicates the possibility of communication, underlying in McCarthy's previous novel, the radio waves and signals that demonstrate the transmissibility of sound. The inter-corporeal, -spatial, and -temporal extension of static, 'the sound of thought itself', constructs in *C* an invisible network of connections that direct the text's relation of its protagonist's life, before converging in the delirium of his death.¹⁸⁴ It is, indeed, at the limit of life and death, that static's signification of an inexplicable unity or connection is realized in the novel, as Serge envisions signals transcendent of time – those previously theorized by his father.¹⁸⁵ Witness to 'a static that contains all messages ever sent, and all words ever spoken; it combines all times and places too, scrunching these together as it swallows them into its crackling, booming mass', Serge subsequently embodies this static, which, 'making his limbs and chest contract and shiver', forms the last words of his speech – the 'sssssss, c-c-c-c' of his own, final, transmission.¹⁸⁶ Similarly, in *Satin Island*, crackling's fracturing of time does more than refuse us meaning, it proposes connectivity, and this is highlighted in the structure of bodies that U.'s suspension from time continues to reveal.

From the adjacency he is granted, U. sees in the wakes of the ferry 'irregular and tangled patterns. *Networks of kinship*', and though swiftly disregarded in mocking self-derision, this vision nonetheless continues to inform his reading of his surroundings (p.215, emphasis original). This is, indeed, made evident as U. describes his physical position in relation to the possessors of the crackling walkie-talkies of the passage above. He relates that,

¹⁸³ Henderson Downing, 'Crypt, Craft, Crackle: The INS at the ICA.' in *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays*, ed. By Dennis Duncan (Great Britain: Gylphi, 2016), pp.19-46 (p.36).

¹⁸⁴ Tom McCarthy, *C* (London: Vintage, 2011), p.63.

¹⁸⁵ Attributing them as the cause of the 'electric blighting' of his trees, Serge's father aims to trace the brainwaves produced at significant moments of history, believing that they will still be detectable in the present as signals rebound (McCarthy, *C*, p.195).

¹⁸⁶ *C*, p.308; p.310.

for a few moments there were just the five of us on the empty concourse, stood (it seemed) in some kind of formal arrangement whose logic escaped me, amidst discarded popcorn cartons, like a sparse matinee audience at some movie in which nothing happens (p.215).

With the technologies of transmission and reception visible but unused, and the popcorn cartons discarded, crackling gives way to silence, and a relationality of bodies is uncovered. The trajectory repeats that of the narrative that U.'s girlfriend Madison relates, having been made to adopt a series of postures 'choreographed from elsewhere' by an official with a radio device, when arrested whilst protesting against the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa (p.192). As Madison recalls how 'time seemed to have stopped [...] to be suspended', radio crackle gives way to a representative impasse and 'flattened', leaves only shapes of bodies and their relation, sitting vacant, 'doing nothing, for a long, long time' (p.192; p.195). The event and its significance remain unexplained. Aligning intercorporeal relationality with the inexplicability that crackling signifies, McCarthy indicates a being beyond knowledge, and in positioning the revelation within moments in which time is suspended his novel, as Reinfandt comments, 'presents the human factor as one of the buffering phenomena in the processes of the world'.¹⁸⁷

Faithful to the non-event, McCarthy's novel ends in a vision of inexplicable connection, but subtly indicated in such details as the pixilation of U.'s perception, its mediation, and that of narrative, remains. Whilst, for Christa Grewe-Volpp *Satin Island* culminates with a vision of disconnection, as, walking "out of the terminal and back into the city" [...] We can assume that U has not changed and that he will remain a detached and alienated observer', McCarthy himself has suggested that U. takes 'a form of resistance back into the heart of the machine', and this is suggested too by the novel's

¹⁸⁷ 'Tom McCarthy', p.569.

portrayal of suspended time.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, the resistance U. conveys is itself framed by McCarthy as a counter-temporality with the potential to force open narrative rhythms:

It's unresolved, it's a gap. The book is so much about gaps and buffering – the delays, the hiatuses that open up within the rhythm of the machine. I think that is his political and aesthetic gesture at the end – taking this restlessness back into the heart of things.¹⁸⁹

Examining his work as a move away from the presentism of contemporary culture, Andrew Gibson includes McCarthy within an emergent trend that aims to ‘think beyond the anthropocentric or humanistic horizon, if only to think the absent trace of what it does not enclose’.¹⁹⁰ In refusing the ‘present’s involvement with itself’, McCarthy’s writing makes manifest ‘a passion for the outside’ that is disruptive of temporal unity or closure.¹⁹¹ U.’s form of resistance at the end of the novel gestures toward this, as he encounters and enfolds a structure that is pure externality, unassimilable to the narratives he has tried to apply in his efforts to ‘name what’s taking place right now’ (p.72). U. notes that,

As the concourse filled up with incoming passengers, our arrangement, its sculpted geometry, which had impressed itself upon me with such clarity and (at the same time) mystery for a few minutes, faded back into the general mass of bodies. It was still there, though, camouflaged or buried: none of us had moved (p.216).

The ontological structure of connections between bodies, exposed and then refolded, mirrors those his search for meaning had previously offered, as in research for his report,

[f]rames, contexts, modes, tones, formats would suggest themselves – pipe up, step forwards, as though volunteering for a task – then [...] fall silent again, slink back into the crowd and disappear (p.73).

¹⁸⁸ Grewe-Volpp, ‘Oil as matter, oil as discourse’, p.149; McCarthy, ‘The *CounterText* Interview’.

¹⁸⁹ ‘The *CounterText* Interview’.

¹⁹⁰ Andrew Gibson, ‘New Inhumanisms: Tom McCarthy and Speculative Realism’, in *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays*, ed. By Dennis Duncan (Great Britain: Gylphi, 2016), pp.227-246 (p.230).

¹⁹¹ Gibson, ‘New Inhumanisms’, p.229; p.230.

In its protagonist's perception and representation of the contemporary, suspended time and narrative combine as the inexplicable is enfolded within meaning. It is, once again, with Berlant's theory of affect that McCarthy's novel aligns. U. is led, in Berlant's terms, by 'a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things'.¹⁹² Joining epistemological with ontological networks of meaning, McCarthy's attention to the temporality of deferral indicates the residual potential of the inexplicable, 'promis[ing] shape and structure somewhere further down the line' (p.73).

'coherence that's only made possible by incoherence': McCarthy's metafiction

That temporalization resumes in *Satin Island* is evidenced in U.'s authoring of the text we read. The numerical system of its formal styling implies both consequence and progression. Yet, framed not as the 'Great Report' but as a document of its writing, the text is itself a site of buffering. Relating not narrative, but narrative's formation, it works against the temporal conventions of its form. U.'s vision of oil's metamorphosis into ink is moreover metaleptic; the text's relation of its authorship is that of McCarthy's own.

Gestated during his time spent 'projecting images of oil spills onto huge white walls and gazing at them for days on end', and directed by his interests and those of the INS, *Satin Island* is inseparable from the voice of its creator, and the relationship is cemented by McCarthy's frequent explanations of his work.¹⁹³ The creative approach that *Satin Island* portrays is, as Weaver contends, 'reflective of how the novel itself was written', as McCarthy's metafiction achieves in form the indexicality towards which its

¹⁹² *Cruel*, p.4.

¹⁹³ McCarthy, 'Acknowledgements', p.221.

narrator strives.¹⁹⁴ Considered through the semiotic theory of C. S. Peirce by which its contemporary understanding is informed, the index defines a modality in which the represented is visible within the sign of its representation.¹⁹⁵ A material interaction between sign and referent indicates a form of representation that is free from mediation, demonstrated, for example, by the sign of a footprint and the foot to which it refers. *Satin Island* interrogates narrative *within* the narrative that it constructs, and thereby offers an indexicality of representation rather than of reality. McCarthy's novel succeeds where its narrator's efforts fail. Through the shared context of the index his text evades the temporality of its form, and in doing so enforces the suspension of its readers.

In an essay that analyses the transmission of literature and the process of its reception, McCarthy directly relates to his reader that his aim

is not to *tell* you something, but to make you *listen*: not to me, nor Beckett and Kafka, but to a set of signals [...] I want to make you listen to them, in the hope not that they'll deliver up some hidden and decisive message, but rather that they'll help attune your ear to the very pitch and frequency of its own activity – in other words, that they'll enable you to listen in on listening itself.¹⁹⁶

For McCarthy, the anthropologist 'is the perfect stand in for the writer', but U. stands in for the reader as well and his alternate mode of meaning-making is repeated in that which McCarthy's text provokes. This reading practice is elucidated by Bennett, who contends in her examination of attention that readers of McCarthy's metafiction

are repeatedly encouraged into a turn to inward attention which imagines their own attention as a kind of blind spot in the subject, as that origin point or rupture in the surface of a sensory organ that makes its function possible.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ 'Restricted Action', p.113.

¹⁹⁵ The index is one of three modalities Peirce's Sign Theory outlines, differing from the icon and the symbol in the relationship to reality it describes.

¹⁹⁶ Tom McCarthy, *Transmission and the Individual Remix: How Literature Works* (London: Random House, 2012), pp.1-2.

¹⁹⁷ *Contemporary Fictions*, p.97.

Reading *Satin Island*, Bennett argues that like the novel's protagonist, the novel's reader becomes engaged within an act of 'hyperattentive non-interpretation' in their perception of connections of which sense cannot be made.¹⁹⁸ An image recurrent within his work, the 'blind spot' is, as Bennett notes, integral to McCarthy's conceptualization of writing. Literature's origin lies for the author, 'within this blind spot off the map and out of time – a spot whose retrieval is both impossible *and* the sole true task of any good writer'.¹⁹⁹

In describing writing in this way, McCarthy channels the sociology of Michel de Certeau, reiterating his assertion that writing 'spells out an absence that is its precondition and its goal [...] and it articulates itself on an exteriority that eludes it'.²⁰⁰ De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, an influence on McCarthy, contrasts the 'pluralist epistemology' of theory with the legibility and distinguishing function of a 'rationalist *technics*', or technology.²⁰¹ Exploring the same relationship that underlies McCarthy's novel, it highlights the interdependency of reason and the 'indeterminable'. De Certeau writes that

The gap or failure of *reason* is precisely the blind spot that makes it accede to *another* dimension, the dimension of *thinking*, which articulates itself on the different as its indeterminable necessity. The symbolic is inseparable from gaps.²⁰²

Reformed by McCarthy, de Certeau's notion of the 'blind spot' as an 'indeterminable necessity' elucidates the inextricability of suspended time to the narrative mode that it disrupts, as in *Satin Island* the 'unthought element of the circumstantial' is reintroduced

¹⁹⁸ *Contemporary Fictions*, p.101.

¹⁹⁹ *Transmission*, p.14, emphasis original. McCarthy arrives at this statement through a reading of Maurice Blanchot, a significant influence on his work, quoting Blanchot's assertion that 'one can only begin to write if one is already writing'.

²⁰⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Arts de faire (California: University of California Press, 1988), p.195.

²⁰¹ *The Practice*, p.199, emphasis original.

²⁰² *The Practice*, p.202, emphasis original.

to ‘calculated time’.²⁰³ Whether discussed in terms of temporality or attention, the ‘blind spot’ signals an exteriority to narrative that at the same time enables its formation. Yet whilst inciting the construction of narrative in its call for interpretation, it nonetheless denies narrative’s completion. Recognizing the significance of what lies beyond epistemology is essential to an ethical and a realistic representation of the world, and it is this that *Satin Island*’s self-reflexivity achieves as it presents ‘meaning of a genuinely deep and intense nature’, whilst withholding the provision of its ‘sense’ (p.170).

Striking through on the back cover of its Jonathan Cape edition, the classifications of ‘treatise’, ‘essay’, ‘confession’, ‘manifesto’ and ‘report’, *Satin Island* accepts the subtitle of ‘A Novel’. Described by some critics as a demonstration of ‘an arbitrary choice’, the novel is, in fact, the only acceptable categorization as it offers the possibility of metastasis.²⁰⁴ McCarthy identifies the form as ‘the space between these other fixed things, the improper space between these fixed proper terms’, disavowing the narrative conclusion of traditional realism in an appreciation instead of literature’s ‘own interruptedness’.²⁰⁵ The effects this has on the temporality of readership are indicated by Mitchum Huehls in his consideration of McCarthy’s first novel. *Remainder*, Huehls argues, works against ‘representational acts that maintain and frequently manipulate the purified divide between subject and object, word and world’.²⁰⁶ He contends that,

As the novel fills up its own time with space, so too is the reader’s time filled up with space, transforming the text into an archaeological dig that the readers must excavate and configure rather than interpret.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ De Certeau, *The Practice*, p.200.

²⁰⁴ Sean Hooks, ‘The Novels of David Mitchell and Tom McCarthy: Depictions of Beings in Time – Origami or Cicatrix?’, *The International Journal of the Arts in Society: Annual Review*, 13.1 (2018), 1-10 (p.6).

²⁰⁵ McCarthy, Corby and Callus, ‘The *CounterText* Interview’; McCarthy, *Transmission*, p.16.

²⁰⁶ Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: twenty-first century fiction in a neoliberal age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.29.

²⁰⁷ *After Critique*, p.156.

Reiterating the ‘hyperattentive non-interpretation’ that Bennett postulates in its prioritizing of excavation and configuration, the heightened attention that Huehls documents operates discretely from the flow of time. The ‘certain kind of immersion’ that he believes *Remainder* to require shifts readers’ attention from the time of the narrative to that of the text, forcing them into a suspension by which, as McCarthy himself explains, they are made to ‘listen in on listening itself’.²⁰⁸

The textual involutions that Huehls evokes are also considered by Zadie Smith in her now much cited essay, ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, in which she positions McCarthy’s ‘avant-garde’ novel against the lyrical realism of Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*.²⁰⁹ Smith reads McCarthy’s writing as exemplar of a move away from the realist mode, arguing, like Huehls, that his novel ‘makes you preternaturally aware of space [...] [it] fills time up with space [...] unlike realism, which [...] fills space with time’.²¹⁰ Smith contends that McCarthy reroutes the ‘receptive pathways’ of his reader by dismantling ‘the things we expect of a novel [...] brick by brick’ and the contrast she identifies between *Netherland* and *Remainder* is made only more emphatic when *Satin Island* is considered.²¹¹ The end of McCarthy’s later novel completes an inversion of O’Neill’s in the description of the Staten Island Ferry that it provides.²¹²

²⁰⁸ *After Critique*, p.156.

²⁰⁹ McCarthy himself is vocal in his questioning of the realist mode, arguing that any system of representation is ‘always-and-irremediably inauthentic’. Tom McCarthy, ‘Get Real, or What Jellyfish Have to Tell Us About Literature’, *Typewriters, Bombs and Jellyfish* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2017), pp.57-76 (p.69).

²¹⁰ Zadie Smith, ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp.71-98 (p.95).

²¹¹ ‘Two Directions’, p.71; p.84

²¹² As Smith’s essay quotes, *Netherland* ends on a vision of New York from the perspective of the Staten Island Ferry. Reversing the direction of his narrator’s gaze, McCarthy applies the heightened colours of O’Neill’s novel to describe Staten Island instead, and he concomitantly refigures what *Netherland*’s narrator describes as the ‘stained [...] business’ of attributing meaning to consider the indeterminacy of the stain. Joseph O’Neill, *Netherland* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), p.247.

The opposition that Smith identifies between these writers is, however, far more permeable than her analysis allows. Whilst for Mark McGurl a reconsideration of Smith's binary requires further categories to be recognized, my reading of *Satin Island* in this chapter suggests that its 'two directions' merge.²¹³ Smith's reading of lyrical realism is complicated by David James in his consideration of how *Netherland* questions the 'viability of its own critical mission', and her reading of the avant-garde can similarly be nuanced by attending to the lyric temporalities that McCarthy's experimentalism foregrounds.²¹⁴ Jonathan Culler determines the 'lyric "now"' to be a 'time of discourse rather than of story', and significant throughout the texts considered in my thesis, it is this that McCarthy's metafiction installs.²¹⁵ *Satin Island's* interrogation of how sense is made destabilizes the linear propulsion by which the novel form is ordinarily defined. The novel's textuality, just like that of 'lyric language' 'makes itself felt as something other than signs of a character and plot'.²¹⁶ Conceptualizing literature as a negotiation of an unseen and 'never graspable event', McCarthy reconceptualizes narrative as a 'set of ripples that overlap, bounce, and get distorted' – deflecting the reader's attention back onto attention, it refracts and stalls the temporal motion of the text itself.²¹⁷

²¹³ McGurl identifies *Satin Island* as a novel of 'reality hunger' that borrows 'its charisma [...] from reality itself'. Mark McGurl, 'The Novel's Forking Path', *Public Books*, 01 April 2015, <<https://www.publicbooks.org/the-novels-forking-path/>> [accessed 31 August 2021].

²¹⁴ David James, 'In Defence of Lyrical Realism', *Diacritics*, 45.4 (2017), 68-91, (p.68).

²¹⁵ *Theory*, p.226.

²¹⁶ Culler, *Theory*, p.119. That this quote is used also by James in his defence of lyrical realism goes some way to indicate, I would suggest, the interrelation, if not the convergence, of the contemporary novel's 'two directions'.

²¹⁷ Craig Hubert, 'Live Theory: An Interview with Tom McCarthy', *Public Books* (2017), <<https://www.publicbooks.org/live-theory-an-interview-with-tom-mccarthy/>> [accessed 31 August 2021].

‘[the] feel of thinking in the absence of thoughts’: ‘lyric mediacy’ in the writing of Ben Lerner

Evidenced by the metafictional strategies of DeLillo and McCarthy, lyric suspension is integral to the writing of Ben Lerner, whose creative practice has as a founding tenet, a resistance to narrative time. Lerner’s representation of suspended time is born from a desire to evade the totalization of literary form, and articulated throughout his critical and poetic theory, it is in self-referentiality that this is primarily achieved.

Lerner’s deferral of form originates in Allen Grossman’s ‘bitter logic’ of poetics and develops through the dialectic tension between ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ that it expounds. In his 1997 collection of essays *The Long Schoolroom*, Grossman expresses an unsolvable paradox – namely that ‘[t]he poet wants to get beyond the world of representation but necessarily depends upon existing representational techniques’.²¹⁸ The poetic impulse can never be captured by a poem, and the purpose of poetry therefore becomes not the articulation of the world but the communication of mimetic incapacity. It is from this contrast between impulse and form, Poetry and poem, that the opposition between ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ arises. Formed within his reading of modernist poet Hart Crane, Grossman equates the actuality of a poem’s form with a fixity of meaning, pairing poetry’s ‘inactual ideal’ with a true sense of possibility. He contends that

Traditional poetry (poetry of insight rather than intensity) views inactual ideal states from the point of view of the achieved structures of the actual text that constitute, insofar as they are successful, stable mediations, interpretable interpretations, and therefore concessions to possibility. Crane by contrast wrote in the impossible ethos or intense position of the inactual ideal state [...] and, inversely, *thematized* possible structures.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Gayle Rogers, ‘An Interview with Ben Lerner’, *Contemporary Literature*, 54.2 (2013), 218-238 (p.225).

²¹⁹ Allen Grossman, *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.103, emphasis original.

The ‘point of view’ that Grossman believes is integral within ‘[t]raditional poetry’ is enacted from a position of conclusion. Comparable to the narratology of Peter Brooks and Mark Currie, the ‘achieved structures of the actual text’ produce an analeptic mode of making meaning. Refusing the fixity of such structures the poems of Crane, in contrast, nurture the intensity, instability and ideality of the virtual, in a suspension of closure that, as this chapter will show, is essential also to Lerner. The self-reflexive *thematization* of ‘possible structures’ that Grossman identifies in Crane’s writing constitutes the ethics of Lerner’s own.

In his 2016 essay *The Hatred of Poetry* Lerner explains that

Grossman speaks to me because, like so many poets, I live in the space between what I am moved to do and what I can do, and confront in that disconnect not only my individual limitations [...] but also the structure of the art as I conceive it.²²⁰

For Lerner, as for Grossman, ‘[p]oetry isn’t hard, it’s impossible’ (p.14). The ‘disconnect’ between intention and representation is integral to the medium, not only in its misrepresentation of the virtual impulse or ideal, but also in its concurrent fixity of meaning. Recalling in his essay the semantic contingency of his childhood, Lerner asks his reader:

Do you remember the feeling that sense was provisional and that two people could build around an utterance a world in which any usage signified? I think that’s poetry. And when I felt I’d finally mastered a word, when I could slide it into a sentence with a satisfying click, that wasn’t poetry anymore – that was something else, something functional within a world, not the liquefaction of its limits (pp.105-106).

For Lerner, the mastery of meaning is the end of poetry, and it is an individualization and a temporalization that the transition confers. Rather than co-constructed by ‘two people’ in a network of interconnection, sense comes to be made by a singular ‘I’ and through the

²²⁰ Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016), p.15. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

sequential mechanics of the sentence. Operating ‘within a world’ rather than creative of it, representation denotes a reduction of semantic possibility in the ‘functional’ narrative of causation that it builds. ‘[T]he ideal Poem’, Lerner contends, is therefore one ‘we cannot write in time’ (p.51).

Taking the cultural ‘hatred of poetry’ as evidence of Grossman’s bitter logic, Lerner’s evocation of ‘the space between’ the virtual and the actual corresponds to the ‘elsewhere’ of DeLillo’s novels, as well as to the ‘blind spot’ of McCarthy. As an exteriority to meaning and to time it proposes the possibility of difference, disrupting preestablished modes of knowledge. Indeed, it is, for Lerner, by measuring ‘the gap between the actual and the virtual’ that the ‘experience [of], if not a genuine poem – no such thing – a place for the genuine, whatever that might mean’ is enabled (pp.14-15).²²¹ Lerner aims not to capture affective authenticity, but to gesture towards its constant, but indeterminate, potential.

Like the ‘gaps [...] that open up’ within McCarthy’s writing, the ‘space between’ creates apertures throughout Lerner’s own.²²² Disrupting narrative time, his works suspend themselves in introversion, and suspend their readers also in the possibilities they evoke. Lerner’s novels, as Daniel Katz comments, ‘act in the service of the poetry [...] which occurs both within and without them’.²²³ His poetic theory is made visible and is, in fact, made possible, within the lyric qualities of his prose.

²²¹ In his evocation of ‘a place for the genuine’ Lerner alludes to Marianne Moore’s poem ‘Poetry’. See Marianne Moore, *New Collected Poems*, ed. by Heather Cass White (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), pp.27-28.

²²² ‘The *CounterText* Interview’.

²²³ Daniel Katz, “‘I did not walk here all the way from prose’: Ben Lerner’s virtual poetics’, *Textual Practice*, 31.2 (2016), 315-337 (p.317).

‘the echo of poetic possibility’: an attention to the virtual in *Leaving the Atocha Station*

Leaving the Atocha Station is immersed within the virtual – defining the consciousness of its narrator and directing his poetic practice, it also encapsulates the dream-like quality of Lerner’s prose. The novel’s examination of an adjacency to experience is made manifest within the self-consciousness of Adam, an American poet on a fellowship in Madrid, whose ‘research’ largely entails drifting detachedly around Spain and amongst its artistic elite. Positioned somewhere between experience and its cognition Adam inhabits a virtual site of suspended time comparable to that of the ‘buffering’ that McCarthy’s novel portrays. Feeling ‘removed from [...] experience’ and at a ‘distance from [him]self’, he takes care to maintain his suspension, not desiring to produce meaning, but revelling in the multiplicity of its potential.²²⁴ Deferring the temporalization and totalization of the actual, Lerner’s autofictional protagonist believes that profundity is destroyed by comprehension, and due to meaning’s symbolic foundations it is through language that this is primarily explored. Due to his lack of fluency in Spanish Adam exists within a network of semantic possibility, as he attempts to understand and communicate a language with which (he insists) he is still unfamiliar. Adam not only understands in ‘a chorus of possibilities’, but also reflects such multiplicity in his own refracted self-perception, entertaining the notion that in others’ imagination of him a sense of mystery is maintained (p.51). Noting, for example, that his ‘limited stock of verbs encouraged general pronouncements’, Adam believes his Spanish, and, indeed, his silence allows those with whom he interacts ‘to imagine an array of responses I was in fact incapable of producing’, as ‘a plurality of possible profound

²²⁴ Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (London: Granta Books, 2013), p.67. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

meanings' are assigned to his 'fragmentary speech' (p.50; p.46). In his construction of meaning and in his misdirection of others', he clings to the interpretative possibilities that a deferral of the actual allows.

The temporal gap that Adam forges between the virtual and the actual corresponds to the 'space for the genuine' that Lerner's poetic theory outlines, and in his reading of poetry his adjacency is repeated as Grossman's bitter logic of poetics is explored. Adam relates that as a reader, poetry

actively repelled my attention, it was opaque and thingly and refused to absorb me; its articles and conjunctions and prepositions failed to dissolve into a feeling and a speed; you could fall into the spaces between words as you tried to link them up; and yet by refusing to absorb me the poem held out the possibility of [...] a profound experience unavailable from within the damaged life, and so the poem became a figure for its outside (p.20).

Adam's reading of poetry testifies to the bitter logic of the medium. As he fails to link words in a construction of sequence, he falls instead 'into the spaces between' and it is there that he experiences 'if not a genuine poem [...] a place for the genuine, whatever that might mean'. Poetry offers the *possibility* of a profound experience by forcing its reader to measure the gap between an affective impulse and its form, and this is evidenced for Adam by the poetry of John Ashbery, which generates a 'chorus of possibilities' in its reader as meaning is unmoored.

With the title of *Leaving the Atocha Station* originating from the poet, Ashbery's influence on Lerner is explicit, and his presence within the novel works to demonstrate the suspension that the text pursues. Ashbery is often considered to be a 'difficult' poet, but as he, and as Lerner each point out, what is characterized as difficulty is better understood as an unwillingness to reduce experience in the process of making it mean. Distinct from painting in the form of visuality it comprises, poetry allows for Ashbery a copresence of the seen and the invisible. It is, he contends,

what's there and also is everything that isn't there [...] the words suggest other words, the thoughts other thoughts, and when one starts to think about it the whole thing expands out of the frame.²²⁵

It is this that Ashbery's most famous poem demonstrates. Written in response to a painting by Parmigianino, the title of which it shares, Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', as Lee Edelman suggests, offers a 'representation of representation as misrepresentation'.²²⁶ In a diversion from traditional ekphrasis, the poem comprises not the description or interpretation of Parmigianino's art, but rather that of its speaker's encounter, documenting his attention to the piece, his distraction from it, and how both are affected by the context in which viewing takes place, and by the medium in which it is retrospectively related. Making his content 'virtually everything', Ashbery's poem overflows the fixity of its form – the 'codification' of language he recurrently underlines.²²⁷ His 'copia' is, as Andrew DuBois suggests, 'a fit, if loose-fitting, form (so to speak) of challenging ways of imposing meaning, for it allows into it, theoretically, all'.²²⁸ It is, rather than experience, 'the experience of experience' that Ashbery chooses to convey.²²⁹

But whilst in many ways characteristic of Ashbery's work, 'Self-Portrait [...]' fails, in Lerner's view, to 'catalyze' in its reader 'the strange experience of presence' that his other major long works achieve.²³⁰ Replacing formal experimentation with a 'more conventional and personal' mode, the poem marks a 'melancholic retreat' in style.²³¹

²²⁵ John Ashbery and A. Poulin Jr., 'The Experience of Experience: A Conversation with John Ashbery', *The Michigan Quarterly Review* 20.3 (1972) 242-255 (p.247).

²²⁶ Lee Edelman, 'The Pose of Imposture: Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32.1 (Spring 1986), 95-114 (p.99).

²²⁷ Andrew DuBois, *Ashbery's Forms of Attention* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p.xiii.

²²⁸ *Ashbery's Forms of Attention*, pp.xv-xvi.

²²⁹ Ashbery and Poulin, 'The Experience of Experience', p.245.

²³⁰ Ben Lerner, 'The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy', *boundary 2*, 37.q (2010), 201-213 (p.210).

²³¹ 'The Future Continuous', p.210.

Written four years later, and expressive of the same concern that poetic form will codify and so reduce experience, Ashbery's 'Litany', in contrast, forces the reader's own 'experience of experience'.²³² Its presentation in two columns, and the instruction that these be read as 'simultaneous but independent monologues', places emphasis on the structure of the poem's content and, as its speaker indicates, it is gaps that are important.²³³ The open form of 'Litany' draws attention to the act of reading, as in the proliferation of *possible* interpretations, inexplicability is made to surface. As John Keeling comments, misunderstanding 'emphasizes the materiality of an art object and its context, and calls attention to the subjectivity of experience', and presenting a textual, rather than narrative temporality, Ashbery's poem thus works as a 'figure for its outside'.²³⁴ Rather than simply problematizing the act of representation by highlighting it as an act of interpretation, it further deflects its reader's attention inward, and upon their own.

Ashbery's poetry aims to represent 'how [time] feels, not what it means', and this is relayed in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, as it is to the experience of reading that Adam becomes drawn.²³⁵ Making accessible 'the texture of time as it passe[s]', the 'flowing sentences' of Ashbery's poems, Adam relates,

always felt as if they were making sense, but when you looked up from the page, it was impossible to say what sense had been made; while they used the language of logical connection – "but," "therefore," "so" – and the language that implied narrative development – "then," "next," "later" – such terms were merely propulsive; there was no actual organizing logic or progression [...] one felt the arc and feel of thinking in the absence of thoughts (p.90).

²³² 'Litany', Lerner argues, 'can be understood as occasioned by the critical attention 'Self-Portrait' received', 'The Future Continuous', p.210, footnote 20.

²³³ John Ashbery, 'Litany', in *As we know: poems* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1981), pp.1-68 (p.2).

²³⁴ John Keeling, 'The Moment Unravels: Reading John Ashbery's "Litany"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 38.2 (1992), 125-151 (pp.125-126).

²³⁵ John Ashbery, 'Saying It to Keep it from Happening', in *Houseboat Days* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), pp.29-30 (p.29).

Ashbery's poems evade 'sense', 'logical connection' and 'narrative development' and in exhibiting no 'actual organizing logic or progression', they install a lyric suspension of time. It is, in Culler's terms, the 'event of the text' that is experienced, and in Bennett's, 'inward attention' that occurs. Adam continues:

The best Ashbery poems, I thought, although not in these words, describe what it's like to read an Ashbery poem [...] and when you read about your reading in the time of your reading, mediacy is experienced immediately [...] by reflecting your reading, Ashbery's poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence. But it is a presence that keeps the virtual possibilities of poetry intact because the true poem remains beyond you (p.91).

Correlating with McCarthy's aim to make his readers 'listen in on listening itself', the immediate mediacy Adam intuitively corresponds to Lerner's own critical engagement with Ashbery, reformulating what he calls the 'lyric mediacy' of the poet's work. Lerner argues that 'Ashbery's poems allow us to attend to our attention, to "experience our experience"', and highlights how readers are made to

progress through long, hypotactic sentences as if antecedents and their context were assumed, as if the sentence were moving towards logical resolution; when we fail to identify those antecedents external to the poem, the poem itself becomes the most available context [...] form *becomes* content as one reads because the poem itself fills the vacuum left by indefinite deictics.²³⁶

Ashbery's poetry diverts the attention of its readers from story to discourse as interpretation itself becomes the subject. '[F]orm *becomes* content', as the poems provide the only context through which meaning can be made. '[L]yric immediacy' transforms, therefore, into 'lyric mediacy' – and in Lerner's novel this is further accentuated by the portrayal of Ashbery's poems primarily through their readership.²³⁷ Lerner represents an interpretation of Ashbery's 'representation of representation as misrepresentation',

²³⁶ 'The Future Continuous', p.209; pp.205-206, emphasis original.

²³⁷ 'The Future Continuous', p.207; p.209.

placing his reader, it seems, at a further remove. However, like the anthropology that McCarthy explores in *Satin Island*, it is entanglement, rather than distance, that ensues.

Whilst initially deployed in irony, the ‘space between’ actual and virtual becomes essential to Adam’s aesthetic practice, in which the gesture towards possible difference becomes increasingly, if unintentionally, sincere. Described as ‘pure potentiality’, Adam’s poems act as ‘screens on which readers could project their own desperate belief in the possibility of poetic experience, whatever that might be, or afford them the opportunity to mourn its impossibility’ (p.39; p.38). Voicing Grossman, Adam’s writing seizes upon the ‘negative power’ of the poem (p.39). He celebrates that a poem is ‘always other than what it explains’ in the interpretative multiplicity that it configures.²³⁸ Indeed, in Lerner’s novel, Grossman’s explication ‘that the poem is like a translation, because translations are always bad translations’ is made literal.²³⁹ In translation, Adam’s poems ‘keep [...] in contact with the virtual’ (p.39). At an event in Madrid, at which he reads in English before being translated into Spanish by his host and friend, Arturo, Adam explains that ‘as everyone must wonder what Arturo or Spanish was incapable of carrying over from the English [...] their failure, their negative power, was assured’ (p.39). ‘[T]he virtual possibilities of poetry’ are, as Adam says of Ashbery, kept ‘intact because the true poem remains beyond’ its reader.

The translation of Adam’s poetry is not only linguistic, but also formal. Taking as its starting point the work of Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca (repeatedly used by Lerner as a signifier of the national identity from which his narrator is excluded), Adam’s writing process is led by intuition, rather than by predetermined logic. Adam relates that he

²³⁸ Grossman, *The Long Schoolroom*, p.13.

²³⁹ *The Long Schoolroom*, p.13.

opened the Lorca more or less at random, transcribed the English recto onto a page of my first notebook, and began to make changes, replacing a word with whatever word I first associated with it and/or scrambling the order of the lines, and then I made whatever changes these changes suggested to me [...] I then braided fragments of the prose I kept in my second notebook with the translations I had thus produced (p.16).

Generated through willing mistranslation and successful for the ‘negative power’ of its suggested, but indeterminable meaning, the work that Adam produces fosters multiplicity both in creation and reception, and it is through this that its virtuality is maintained.²⁴⁰ Described as ‘in some important sense unformed, less poems than a pile of materials out of which poems could be built’, Adam’s writing echoes Finley’s ‘idea for a film’ in DeLillo’s *Point Omega* (p.39). Always ‘awaiting articulation’, his poetry, through both its linguistic and its literary translations suspends its listener or reader within the text, making them adjacent and thus attentive to the experience of reading in the indexicality of representation it performs.

In his reading of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Katz suggests that ‘a poetics – and possibly even ethics – of deferral and virtuality is itself only virtual, and always denied and negated by the actuality of the room in which one sits and writes’.²⁴¹ It is, however, ‘the gap between’ that is important. Adam repeatedly considers the capacity of art to comment on or effect political change. Living in Madrid in 2004 and witness to anti-government protests, and to the aftermath of the 11-M commuter train bombings at Atocha station, he avoids composing the ‘long and research-driven poem [...] about the literary response to the Civil War’ promised within his fellowship application (p.163). Trying hard ‘to imagine [his] poems’ relation to Franco’s mass graves, how [his] poems

²⁴⁰ Adam’s description of his composition as an act of translation recalls Whitman’s ‘conjunctive principle’, indicating the democratic potential of multiplicity. Whitman, who is a significant influence on Lerner, states that ‘No two have exactly the same language, and the great translator and joiner of the whole is the poet’ (quoted by Grossman, p.69).

²⁴¹ “‘I did not walk here [...]’”, p.324.

could be said meaningfully to bear on the deliberate and systematic destruction of a people or a planet [...] or in any sense constitute a significant political intervention’, he fails (p.44). Yet when he imagines ‘the total victory of those other things over poetry [...] a world without [...] the virtual possibilities of the medium’, he intuits ‘an inestimable loss, a loss not of artworks but of art, and therefore infinite, the total triumph of the actual’ (p.44; p.45). Whilst incapable of impacting politics, Adam’s poetry, and art in general offers a way in which the possibility of ‘things in the world to be otherwise’ can be imagined. Gesturing in its ‘negative power’ to an inexplicability beyond the capture of representation, art gifts an ‘experience of a place for the genuine’, as a constellation of possible meanings is uncovered. Outside of the actuality of time but in correspondence with it, the in-between aesthetics that Lerner’s narrative explores is repeated within his novel’s open form. It is, indeed, as Katz intimates, ‘the reading protocols of poetry which provide the most useful key for unlocking Lerner’s prose’.²⁴²

Lerner has identified the lyric ‘emphasis on vocalisation’ as a self-confessed ‘strategy for protecting [...] virtuality’ and demonstrated in his poetry the protection that lyric affords is further achieved through the inclusion of poetry in his prose.²⁴³ In Lerner’s view,

a poem in a novel isn’t an actual poem [...] because it’s been embedded in a fiction [...] there’s a sense in which encountering a poem in a novel is a blueprint for an encounter with a poem [...] it’s a space where a reader can have a kind of second-order aesthetic experience.²⁴⁴

In *Leaving the Atocha Station* Adam’s writing achieves virtuality via metalepsis, as it is recontextualized by its inclusion in Lerner’s own. This is deftly shown in the first example the novel gives of its narrator’s work, which directly incorporates phrases from

²⁴² “‘I did not walk here [...]’”, p.318.

²⁴³ Ben Lerner, ‘Poem Present: Ben Lerner Reading’, University of Chicago online video recording, Youtube, 03 April 2012, < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65Vbn8vl9YE> > [accessed 30 December 2020].

²⁴⁴ Rogers, ‘An Interview with Ben Lerner’, p.229.

previous pages of the novel, playfully transcending the logic of narrative time in its impossible involution. As Lerner clarifies, his protagonist ‘couldn’t have had access to that language’; ‘the “planes” of the narrative and the narrated’ are collapsed.²⁴⁵ Inhabiting the ‘space between’ the actual and the virtual, the formal displacement of Adam’s poetry produces a correspondence between literary planes, and it is this that ensures not only the virtuality of his work, but also the temporal suspension of Lerner’s novel.

Providing excerpts of his protagonist’s writing (both implicitly and explicitly in ventriloquism of his own), Lerner obfuscates the boundaries of the literary mode in which he writes, overrunning the narrative closure of its form. The polyvocality, hybridity, and intermediality of *Leaving the Atocha Station* gifts its readers the ‘ability to dwell’ within ekstasis (p.14). Like its protagonist, the reader is never sure of what it is that has been said, as through use of the conditional, Lerner superimposes multiple possibilities of meaning without ever clarifying what has ‘actually’ occurred. Overlaying the descriptions and back-stories of even the most central of his characters, the obscurity of Lerner’s text, the elusiveness of his language, and his use of repetition disorient the reader, who is left drifting ‘among possible referents’ that, reminiscent of McCarthy’s reconceptualization of narrative, ‘interfere and separate like waves’ (p.14). With meaning deferred, the experience and the purpose of reading changes, as, attentive to the limits of its usual temporalization, the reader is exposed to a ‘plurality of worlds’ (p.14).

Lerner’s writing, like Grossman’s analysis of Crane’s ‘difficulty’ suggests, ‘situates the reader internal’ to the text, suspending them within its ‘timeless presentness’ as interlocuter or ‘exegetical participant’.²⁴⁶ Suspended time is if not a ‘measure’, then an expression of ‘the gap between the actual and the virtual’, and it rescues the acts of

²⁴⁵ Rogers, ‘An Interview with Ben Lerner’, p.228.

²⁴⁶ *The Long Schoolroom*, p.92.

writing and reading from the totalization of the written or the read. The textual involutions of Lerner's fiction work not to enclose or to make his text impenetrable, but to open it up to an interpretative multiplicity as a virtual poetics is constructed through the lyric qualities of prose. *Leaving the Atocha Station* constitutes a suspension from time, as professing the communality of lyric it highlights the 'event of address itself'.²⁴⁷ It 'anticipates' in its readership, as Grossman says of Crane, 'not a meaning but an answer'.²⁴⁸

'the beating of a compound heart': the possible times of 10:04

Published in 2015, Lerner's second novel, *10:04* is concerned explicitly with how time is experienced and represented. The novel's narrator, Ben, is made anxious by the future. He navigates the looming threat of ecological crisis, the decision of whether to donate sperm to and coparent with his best friend, the promise of his romantic relationships, the expectations of the novel he is struggling to write, and his own uncertain health. Yet whilst he is driven by such questions of futurity, Ben's consciousness of time nonetheless delineates the directionality of plot. Throughout *10:04*, suspended time provides relief from the future not merely in its deferral of progression, but in the heterogeneity that it uncovers. Recurrently positioned alongside the actual present he inhabits, Ben experiences and relates myriad virtual presents – projecting possibilities for the future, as well as for the past, as he imagines events that could have taken place. *10:04* extends the negative power that *Leaving the Atocha Station* explores to consider the innumerable possibilities and impossibilities of any given moment, before they are reduced by the actuality of form.

²⁴⁷ Culler, *Theory*, p.187.

²⁴⁸ *The Long Schoolroom*, p.117.

This temporal plurality is, as Alison Gibbons notes, indicated by the novel's title, which cites the moment at which time travel occurs in the 1985 film, *Back to the Future*. Since, as Gibbons relays, 'the Hill Valley clock of *Back to the Future* is frozen and the time itself becomes a heterochronic reference point', the title of Lerner's novel is itself 'atemporal, existing across temporalities [...] [it] gestures toward a conception of time that connects particular moments [...] to a longer durée'.²⁴⁹ Not only gestured, but performed by its intertextuality, the title Lerner chooses pluralizes time, and the content of his novel acts in accordance. The relationship between the actual and the virtual is explored in temporal terms and skilfully indicated by the intermediality of its title, the implications of this are usefully illustrated by another artistic reference that the novel unfolds.

Comparative to both Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* and to McCarthy and Dickinson's *Greenwich Degree Zero*, Christian Marclay's *The Clock* proves significant to Lerner's novel and, more importantly, to its representation of time. Portraying the progression of twenty-four hours via scenes from films and television shows in which time is either captured on screen or stated in dialogue, Marclay's video installation enacts a 'second-order' mimesis. The piece directly stages and destabilizes the aesthetic representation of time, including that that it performs, and it simultaneously shows time itself to be factitious – a mode of representation. In a compelling encounter with the work, in which, having intended to be there at 10:04, and arriving instead at 11:37, his time-consciousness is disjunct, Ben becomes alert to his instinctive narrativization of experience. He muses that,

it was a greater challenge for me to resist the will to integration than to combine the various scenes into coherent and compelling fiction, in part due

²⁴⁹ Alison Gibbons, 'Metamodernism, the Anthropocene, and the Resurgence of Historicity: Ben Lerner's *10:04* and "The Utopian Glimmer of Fiction"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 62.2 (2021), 137-151 (p.141).

to Marclay's use of repetition: at 11:57 a young woman tries to seduce a boy; at 1:19 they reappear, sleeping in separate beds; what has passed between them? It was impossible not to speculate on what had transpired in the interval, in that length of fictional time synchronized with nonfictional duration, the beating of a compound heart.²⁵⁰

Time habitually serves as the scaffolding of experience and it is, as the above passage demonstrates, through consequential connections that sense is made. Yet the narratives constructed by Lerner's protagonist remain inconclusive, and whilst synchronous, 'fictional time', and 'nonfictional duration' are impossible to converge:

I'd heard *The Clock* described as the ultimate collapse of fictional time into real time, a work designed to obliterate the distance between art and life, fantasy and reality. But [...] that distance hadn't been collapsed for me at all; while the duration of a real minute and *The Clock's* minute were mathematically indistinguishable, they were nevertheless minutes from different worlds [...] I was experiencing time [...] not just having experiences through it as a medium (p.54).

Marclay's installation, like Ashbery's poetry, succeeds not in an indexicality of 'real time' but of 'fictional time', resulting in an attention to attention. Ben experiences the 'feel of thinking', as time becomes the object of perception rather than the medium through which meaning is attained. Alongside this deflection of attention however, *The Clock's* lyric mediacy further presents an exteriority in which the possibility of difference is uncovered. Its exposure of 'minutes from different worlds' aligns not only with Bennett's 'inward attention', but also with the incorporeal ethics of Grosz's onto-epistemology. Maintaining in its suspension of time, a 'contact with the virtual', Marclay's installation, like the poetry of Adam, becomes a 'figure for its outside'.

Ben relates how in the multiplicity of possible narratives generated by Marclay's piece an altered perception of reality is produced in which innumerable temporalities converge. He confides that

²⁵⁰ Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Granta, 2015), p.53. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

As I made and unmade a variety of overlapping narratives out of its found footage, I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction (p.54).

Outside both place and time, the utopianism of fiction lies within its virtual possibility, and it is this that Lerner's novel aims to provoke within its reader as it opens up the actuality of its form. The temporal expansion of Lerner's novel affords a feeling of meaning's multiplicity that, comparable to that produced by Adam's lack of fluency in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, is usefully elucidated by the narrative theory of Gary Saul Morson.

Morson's concept of 'sideshadowing', a technique in which 'two or more alternate presents, the actual and the possible' are simultaneously perceived, corresponds to Lerner's virtual poetics.²⁵¹ Characterized by its openness, sideshadowing serves as a marker that things could be otherwise; used 'to create a sense of that "something else."' ²⁵² It is, Morson explains,

a simultaneity not in time but of times: we do not see contradictory actualities, but one possibility that was actualized and, at the same moment, another that could have been but was not [...] A haze of possibilities surrounds each actuality [...] the actual loses some temporal legitimacy. It can no longer be regarded as inevitable, as so firmly ensconced.²⁵³

As a disruption of the actual's 'temporal legitimacy', sideshadowing is also a disruption of narrative time-consciousness. Explaining how, in analeptic narrative 'a field is mistakenly reduced to a point, and, over time, a succession of fields is reduced to a line', Morson contends that '[s]ideshadowing restores the field and thereby recreates the fullness of time as it was'.²⁵⁴ Combining the actual moment with the other forms it could exist as, it 'suggests that to understand any moment is to grasp its field of possibilities',

²⁵¹ Gary Saul Morson, 'Sideshadowing', in *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp.117-172 (p.118).

²⁵² 'Sideshadowing', p.118.

²⁵³ 'Sideshadowing', p.118.

²⁵⁴ 'Sideshadowing', p.120.

and in Lerner's novel it is this mode of understanding that the estrangement from time installs.²⁵⁵ Repeatedly feeling the 'world rearrange itself' around him, Ben's suspension from time alters his perception and attention (p.38; p.40; p.65).

In *10:04* 'a sense of that "something else"' is similarly associated with a delegitimizing of actuality and of narrative. It is in 'falling out of time' that potential difference is uncovered, and recurrent throughout the novel, this is articulated with clarity as, awaiting the landfall of a hurricane Ben is liberated from the narrative of routine (p.230). In similar terms to Morson, Lerner's narrator describes his dissociation from time as a sensation of 'something else', comparable only to

the feel of a childhood snow day when time was emancipated from institutions, when the snow seemed like a technology for defeating time, or like defeated time itself falling from the sky, each glittering ice particle an instant gifted back from your routine (p.18).

As the linear motion of time is halted, the meaning of what is seen becomes contestable. Ben relates how, 'as the eye drew near, what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs, however briefly' (p.19). It is in his suspension from actuality – his exteriority to time – that he attains an affective intuition of the surrounding 'haze of possibilities' that Morson relays.

Both Gibbons and Leonid Bilmes read *10:04* alongside Morson's theory, attesting to the sense of possibility that Lerner portrays. However, in their examinations of fiction's utopianism, both critics also consider Lerner's novel to demonstrate the 'anticipation of retrospection' that the narratology of Mark Currie describes. Arguing that both Morson and Currie elicit a virtual temporality that remains unactualized, Gibbons states that the anticipation of retrospection

resembles sideshadowing because, rather than the future being predestined and channelling back to the present, the anticipated future is imagined and provisional as is the retrospective impression of the present that it creates [...]

²⁵⁵ 'Sideshadowing', p.120.

the anticipated future manifests not as an actual effect in the present but as an experience or, in other words, an affective effect.²⁵⁶

Pairing the narratology of Morson and Currie is, however, problematic. Whilst the anticipation of retrospection introduces virtual possibilities to the actual present, the mechanics of Currie's concept, as the introduction of my thesis has shown, rely upon a distinctly narrative logic. Due to this, moreover, literature is explored by Currie not for its utopian possibility, but instead for its 'depresentification' of the subject. Morson's 'sideshadowing', on the other hand, replaces the logic of narrative with that of narrative fiction. Its reflexivity effects an intensification of the present rather than a distance from it, as 'the fullness of time' is sensed within the multiple possibilities that are housed within a text. As my reading of *10:04* suggests, it is with Morson that Lerner aligns, similarly offering access to the time and affective experience of fiction, as he suspends his novel within an ever-expanding constellation of possibilities. His text works against the nostalgic mode that Currie considers, saying, as both Gibbons and Bilmes suggest, 'something profound about the novel's capacity to represent possibility, to gesture towards it, despite the temporally foreclosed nature of narrative time'.²⁵⁷ Positioned within the 'gap between' the actual and the virtual, *10:04* attests to an affective temporal network in which both difference and relationality are unveiled.

'shuttling between the you and I': the transpersonal stance of suspension

Building upon the aesthetic enquiry of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Lerner's second novel highlights the ethical potential of suspended time not only in its deferral of judgement, but also in the affective relations that it accommodates. The multiplicity of

²⁵⁶ 'Metamodernism', p.144.

²⁵⁷ Leonid Bilmes, "'an actual present alive with multiple futures": narrative, memory and time in Ben Lerner's *10:04*', *Textual Practice*, 34.7 (2020), 1081-1102 (p.1095).

meaning that the suspension of narrative generates is pursued for the interpersonal connections that it makes possible, and this is examined primarily through the optics of Lerner's novel, and its overt commitment to the parallel gaze. Comparable to DeLillo's 'Midnight in Dostoevsky', the parallel gaze is in *10:04* a 'condition' of Ben's reality, but also of his 'most intimate exchanges' (p.8). Relating that he and his best friend, Alex, 'would work out our views as we coconstructed the literal view before us', individual ethics are explicitly linked to a sharing of vision (p.8). In opening narrative, suspended time affords a sideways extension of perception – the inclusion of possible difference, and of another's view.

Lerner's enquiry into time is directed in this way by the epigraph he chooses for his novel, which relates a Hassidic story of a messianic world in which '[e]verything will be as it is now, just a little different'. Whilst attributed to Walter Benjamin, Lerner encounters the story through its retelling by Giorgio Agamben in a text that correlates with *10:04* in its consideration of the present as a time in which heterogenous possibilities are enclosed. Published in Italian in 1990, and first translated into English in 1993, Agamben's *The Coming Community* contests the predominance of actuality, considering the political promise of 'a being of pure potentiality'.²⁵⁸ Postulating a 'coming being' liberated from the demands of signification, his work imagines, as Michael Hardt explains, a being that is 'neither particular nor general, neither individual nor generic', but that professes instead the capacity of 'being *such as it is*'.²⁵⁹ Time as it is lived is freed from the imperatives of meaning. Considered not as 'another thing with respect to the limit', but 'the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being-*within* an

²⁵⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.36.

²⁵⁹ Michael Hardt, 'Translator's Notes', *The Coming Community*, by Giorgio Agamben, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp.107-108 (p.107); Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.1, emphasis original.

outside', the coming 'whatever being' that Agamben hypothesizes connotes an '*ek-stasis*'.²⁶⁰ Exterior to the actual, it refuses the closure that actualization would confer, and is immersed, therefore, within the multiplicity of the virtual.

Agamben, like Lerner, explores estrangement in his reading of the Hassidim's story, conceptualizing 'the tiny displacement that every thing must accomplish in the messianic world' as an 'imperceptible trembling of the finite that makes its limits indeterminate and allows it to blend, to make itself whatever'.²⁶¹ Operating in extension of form, this trembling produces a 'halo' that, aligning with the 'haze' of Morson's theory, also corresponds to the visual effects perceived by *10:04*'s narrator when he is made disjunct from the narrative of routine. In his own adjacency from time, Ben describes 'an unspecifiable radiance', 'charge', or 'aura' around the objects and the people he encounters as in his perception they are liberated from the logic of the quotidian (pp.18-19). Immersed within the lexicon of affect theory, his disjuncture coincides with an extension of self and a revelation of interpersonal relations. '[V]iscerally aware' of connections usually unseen, he is further led by intuition and sensation (p.19). The 'community' that Agamben's 'being of pure potentiality' configures becomes apparent through a shared estrangement and a common focus of attention, as extending beyond the individual, a pre-, or impersonal vision and language removes 'the conventional partitions from social space' (p.17).

The sociability and intimacy that the estrangement from time produces are potential, and they are 'retrospectively erased' by the imagined future's failure to occur (p.24). Enabled, as Ben explains, 'by a future that had never arrived, they could not be remembered from this future that, at and as the present, had obtained' (p.24). Negated by

²⁶⁰ *The Coming Community*, p.68, emphasis original.

²⁶¹ *The Coming Community*, p.56.

the end point that is the arrival of the future, *10:04*'s impersonal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal ethics take place in suspension. They are, like U.'s metaphorical parachute, extant only in and as 'a perpetual state of passage, not arrival – not *at*, but *between*'. As Pieter Vermeulen contends, '[t]he future to which *10:04* studiously turns its back is the one that figures in the narrative logic of the person', and in suspending the temporal progression of the individual, Lerner's novel indicates the possibility of self-difference.²⁶² As Ben imagines advising a friend whose sense of self and racial identity are destabilized when she is told that she and her recently deceased father had not been biologically related:

discovering you are not identical with yourself even in the most disturbing and painful way still contains the glimmer, however refracted, of the world to come, where everything is the same but a little different because the past will be citable in all of its moments, including those that from our present present happened but never occurred (p.109).

Reformulating the vision of the world as 'one [world] among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs', Ben incorporates difference in his perception, and it is through this self-alteration that his intuition of the transpersonal is attained (p.19). Reminiscent of the non-identity that DeLillo's and McCarthy's protagonists pursue, *10:04*'s narrator conceptualizes self-erasure not as negation but plurality. Describing being 'taken in' by the view that he observes, he feels 'a fullness indistinguishable from being emptied, my personality dissolving into a personhood so abstract' (pp.108-109).

As in Lerner's previous novel, it is not only in viewership, but in authorship that the suspension from time occurs and that, therefore, transpersonality is achieved. Named after him, Ben is, like Lerner, an author of autofiction, and in the writing of his never actualized second novel, boundaries of time and of identity again become obscure. This

²⁶² Pieter Vermeulen, 'How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)? Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future', *Political Theory*, 45.5 (2017), 659-681 (p.671).

is emphatically underlined within an excerpt of Ben's writing, as when his protagonist (reflexively named 'the author'), views a gas lamp, temporalities interleave. The author relates that

[i]t was as if the little flame in the gas lamp he paused before were burning at once in the present and in various pasts, in 2012 but also in 1912 or 1883, as if it were one flame flickering simultaneously in each of those times, connecting them. He felt that anyone who had ever paused before the lamp as he was pausing was briefly coeval with him, that they were all watching the same turbulent point in their respective present tenses (p.67).²⁶³

Envisioning his own narrator viewing the same gas lamp, the coequality that the author conceptualizes extends beyond him to the text he writes, as well as to that in which he is written. In intricate metalepsis, the author imagines

that the gaslight cut across worlds and not just years, that the author and the narrator, while they couldn't face each other, could intuit each other's presence by facing the same light (p.67).

Communicating with his own narrator, 'the author' repeats the relationship he unwittingly shares with 'Ben', and thus mirrors too that between 'Ben' and Lerner, and this Escher-like merging of identities extends to involve the readers they all share. Desiring to be 'a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid', Ben imagines the audience of his work as 'a second person plural on the perennial verge of existence' (p.157). As Lerner's poetic theory implies, and as his novel's sideshadowing facilitates, it is through the virtuality of the text – the 'utopian glimmer of fiction' – that a transpersonal connection is achieved.

²⁶³ Noting that '[t]his passage records a transhistorical experience of collectivity [...] enabled by public infrastructure', Ben De Bruyn reads it as demonstrative also of a more sinister collectivity. Applying an eco-critical framework clearly invited by Lerner's discussion of extreme weather events, global warming, and extinction, De Bruyn suggests that the shared vision of the gaslight 'also forces us to pause and consider that we are not just contemporaries because of shared public works but also because of their enduring, climate-changing effects'. Ben De Bruyn, 'Realism 4°. Objects, weather and infrastructure in Ben Lerner's 10:04', *Textual Practice*, 31.5 (2017), 951-971 (p.96).

‘the extinguishing of continuity in timeless presentness’: the poetics and ethics of fiction

Morson asserts that ‘conventional narratives destroy the openness of time’ as ‘[t]he aesthetic ideal of everything fitting into a coherent structure visible at a glance results in a kind of time that gathers to a point. In such narratives, everything tends to the ending and nothing is truly contingent’.²⁶⁴ Driven by the sense of an ending, readers of novels, it thus follows ‘are trained to seek significance [...] The fact that the work is known to be an artifact, an aesthetic structure planned in advance, guarantees significance’.²⁶⁵ Providing not a singular chronology of events but a multiplicity of narrative possibilities, the sideshadowing of Lerner’s text offers a narrative mode in which time is made multiple, disrupting the analepsis by which representation is intrinsically informed. Making ‘a space for the possibility of address more than communicating any particular thing’, it rescues ‘the openness of time’ from the directedness of narrative, and from the reader’s inevitable search for significance.²⁶⁶

It is, of course, in readership that the effects of Lerner’s writing style are felt. His novel’s use of metafiction and intertextuality, as well as its inclusion of photographs, and diverse literary forms – both extra- and meta-textual – calls for a different engagement with the text. Polyphony disperses the identity of the author and displaces reading’s traditional interpretative purpose, as ‘the correspondence between text and world’ proves ‘less important than [...] what possibilities of feeling [are] opened up in the present tense of reading’ (p.171). It is not thinking but the ‘feel of thinking’ that *10:04* invites.

²⁶⁴ ‘Sideshadowing’, p.158.

²⁶⁵ ‘Sideshadowing’, p.159.

²⁶⁶ Ben Lerner, ‘Ben Lerner & Ariana Reines’, *Bomb Magazine*, 129, 01 October 2014, <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/ben-lerner-ariana-reines/>> [accessed 12 October 2021].

The affective nature of this reading practice is evidenced by Bennett's study of contemporary attention, which concludes in examination of Lerner's work. Bennett identifies a mode of reading in which, rather than be displaced by interpretation, sensory intuition remains key, using Rita Felski's notion of 'enchantment' to distinguish the 'inward attention of contemporary writing' from the postmodern metafiction that it succeeds.²⁶⁷ Constructing 'experiences in which we are "immersed but not submerged", with our awareness still keeping the affective experience itself intact', postmodern irony, Bennett argues, cedes to sincerity in *10:04*.²⁶⁸ Like the 'bodily experience of affectivity' that for Hansen, Gordon's work impels, Lerner's metaphors reassert, for Bennett, 'the embodied physicality of his readers' reading and therefore of their attention' as '[s]uddenly, and very weirdly, some of the self-forgetting attention that had been absorbed by reading is deflected back, partially, onto the body itself'.²⁶⁹

Intricately linked in the writing of DeLillo and McCarthy, the three strands of Bennett's analysis of attention – its temporal, social and literary implications – converge in Lerner's novel. Productive of a readership that is both reflective and affective, the lyric mediacy of *10:04* redirects the transpersonal ethics that its content explores. Lerner's novel instantiates in form the 'fantasy of coeval readership' that through the democratic identity of Walt Whitman, its protagonist envisions (p.93). Yet whilst Whitman's 'poetic principle of sociability' is, according to Grossman, 'based in an abstraction from the representational function of art', Lerner's is grounded within it, and it is thus that sociability succeeds (p.77). Written not for, but *to* 'a second person plural on the perennial verge of existence', *10:04* indicates the transpersonal ethics that literature's own suspension can make possible (p.157). As 'a work of collage or an act of plagiarism'

²⁶⁷ *Contemporary Fictions*, p.143.

²⁶⁸ *Contemporary Fictions*, p.143.

²⁶⁹ Hansen, 'The Time of Affect', p.590; *Contemporary Fictions*, p.152.

it presents a polyvocal narrative that, like Agamben's halo, extends beyond its form (p.113). '[P]oetry's power to circulate among bodies and temporalities, to transcend the contingencies of its authorship' is achieved within the suspended time of the novel, and through the lyric mediacy of its open prose (p.113). Exposed to a superimposition of multiple temporal planes, and increasingly attentive to attention, Lerner's reader too becomes suspended – 'immersed but not submerged' within another possible world – a literary time-outside-of-time where '[e]verything [...] [is] just a little different'.

Conclusion: listening to 'that silence in which all voices echo'

If as Bennett's reading of Ricœur proposes, there is 'a connection between time as succession, the voice, and attention', then the representation of suspended time in contemporary literature not only makes manifest an 'inward attention', but also places emphasis upon the act of listening. Suspended time not only exposes the habitual modes of attention, or the temporalization that consciousness involves. It also, in the exteriority that it signals, allows the 'openness' of affect to be retrieved. In exposing 'that silence in which all voices echo', suspended time makes audible a silence that "'roars" with the active possibility of other life', and throughout the texts that this chapter has considered it is as static that such roaring can be heard.²⁷⁰

Linguistically joining a lack of motion with the sound of 'interference', static binds suspended time to a communication of the inexplicable.²⁷¹ Most explicit in the writing of McCarthy, where it expresses the 'sound of thought itself', static is captured

²⁷⁰ Michael Jones, 'The other side of silence: realism, ecology and the whole life in Don DeLillo's late fiction', *Textual Practice*, 32.8 (2018), 1345-1363 (p.1354).

²⁷¹ 'static n. and adj.', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2021) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/189285?rskey=ZaJ9h9&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 04 May 2021] Static is defined by the OED both as an 'equilibrium' of weight or forces and as an electrical disturbance 'producing interference with the reception of telecommunications'.

by DeLillo in the ‘nonencounters’ of *Point Omega* and the radio-like intonations of *The Body Artist*’s Mr. Tuttle.²⁷² In the writing of Lerner, it appears when possible worlds converge, and is conjunctive too with *10:04*’s plea not to ‘dismiss what misapprehension can establish’ (p.192). Whether framed as mystery or misapprehension, it marks what lies beyond perception and cognition, and in doing so it makes possible a newly affective mode of attention. Affect is, as Brian Massumi declares, a ‘state [that] is static – temporal and narrative noise’ (p.26).

Explaining that ‘[f]ormed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect’, Massumi’s theory implies that narrative fixity, conclusion and causation impede the extension and ‘openness’ upon which the autonomy of affect depends.²⁷³ Suspended time, in contrast, refuses affect’s actualization, maintaining the necessary conditions for its autonomy, and as this chapter has shown, it does so not only within contemporary writing but also in the reading practice that it impels. Whether explicated as ‘a stance as suspension’, ‘hyperattentive non-interpretation’, or ‘the feel of thinking in the absence of thought’, the texts this chapter has considered both demonstrate and instantiate a mode of reading free from the ‘capture and closure’ that significance or interpretation would enforce. In his consideration of DeLillo’s essay, ‘In the ruins of the future’, Marco Abel suggests that

To be moved, to become affected – not so much in terms of feeling as in terms of thinking otherwise and being provoked to move elsewhere – constitutes the ethical responsibility of the writer, director, critic, teacher, and anyone

²⁷² McCarthy, C, p.63; In *Point Omega*, the meetings of Finley and Jessie carry ‘static [...] a random agitation in the air’ (p.71), whilst Abeer Abdel Raouf Fahim notes how in *The Body Artist*, Mr. Tuttle’s ‘unusual use of language and his apparent real time communication with Rey, resonate with the transmissions of wireless communication’. See Fahim, ‘Redeeming the Betrayed Body: Technology and Embodiment in the Fiction of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo’ (unpublished thesis, University of Durham, 2011), p.147.

²⁷³ *Parables*, p.35, emphasis original.

else who engages images. This movement or moving processes elliptically, suspensefully.²⁷⁴

It is the adjacency of ‘elsewhere’ that the fiction of DeLillo, McCarthy, and Lerner works to establish. Drawing attention to attention – to the ways in which meaning is made – these writers portray the possibility of both feeling and ‘thinking otherwise’, and so enable characters, texts, and readers ‘to become affected’.²⁷⁵

The texts this chapter has discussed correspond, in this way, to what Huehls terms the ‘post-theory theory novel’, using metafiction not in irony, but to establish a new realist mode. Huehls argues that

rather than emphasizing the word’s inevitable mediation of the world – a mediation that in theory novels indicates our insuperable alienation from the real – post-theory theory novels incorporate the word into the world, using language to build new, idiosyncratic notions of the real. Consistently declining theory’s invitation to turn their conditions of possibility against themselves, these texts use theory’s concepts to build, rather than undermine, the world.²⁷⁶

Arguing that scholarship of contemporary writing’s realist turn has created ‘a false sense of experimentalism’s decline’, Huehls lays bare a trend of literature in which metafictional devices operate in sincerity.²⁷⁷ DeLillo’s, McCarthy’s, and Lerner’s engagements with theory align with this analysis, as rather than lamenting the gap between word and world, it is through a reflexive consideration of the ‘limits of their own language’ that ‘new notions of the real’ can be constructed.²⁷⁸ Explicitly staging the theory that they use, each writer changes the reader’s and the critic’s relation to the novel,

²⁷⁴ ‘Literature, Images’, p.1245.

²⁷⁵ This reading of reflexivity in correspondence with affect is resonant with Sianne Ngai’s work on tone in her 2005 text, *Ugly Feelings*. Ngai uses Silvan Tomkins’ psychological examination of affect alongside the philosophy of Massumi to explore, within the field of aesthetics, the distancing effects of its resonance and feedback.

²⁷⁶ Mitchum Huehls, ‘The Post-Theory Theory Novel’, *Contemporary Literature*, 56.2 (2015), 280-310 (p.288).

²⁷⁷ ‘The Post-Theory Theory Novel’, p.308.

²⁷⁸ ‘The Post-Theory Theory Novel’, p.288.

diverting the usual methods of interpretation. As in lyric, the time of narrative yields to the time of the text and implicates too that of its reading. It is, after all, not only the ‘writer’ but also the ‘critic’ who ‘engages images’, and who must, therefore, adopt an ethical stance.

Culler contends that in the reading of lyric ‘attention should be directed to experiencing the poem itself as an event’.²⁷⁹ Resistant ‘to making interpretation the be-all and end-all of literary study’, his *Theory of the Lyric* evokes a mode of reading that is attentive to itself.²⁸⁰ In suspending text and reader within a shared ekstasis, lyric initiates a ‘stance *as* suspension’ and this corresponds in its deflection of attention to the novels that this chapter has explored. Revelling in the possibility of ‘things in the world to be otherwise’, it is in the refusal to ascribe meaning, and thus the refusal to temporalize, that the ethics of twenty-first century literature can be found. Transposing lyric qualities of address, temporality, and intertextuality, contemporary writers displace their novels from the narrative fixity of their form. They make the text the ‘event’ of experience rather than its medium, and placing literature outside of or adjacent to time, they incite the *affective* attention of its readers. In its representation of suspended time and in its own suspension, contemporary writing desires, as Lerner’s *Mean Free Path* confirms, to ‘open’ its readers ‘up | To interference’.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ ‘Extending’, pp.9-10.

²⁸⁰ ‘Extending’, p.11.

²⁸¹ Ben Lerner, *Mean Free Path* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2012), p.43.

Chapter 2:

‘consequence, suspense, morality, mortality’: Times of Meaning and of Feeling in the Writing of Ali Smith

Introduction: ‘Time means’

Whilst she questions academic interest in her biography as a means of analysing her texts, Ali Smith is nonetheless forthcoming about the concerns that inform her writing, and in fiction, criticism and interviews, her preoccupation with time is made explicit. Through narrative enquiry and through formal manipulation, Smith’s fiction repeatedly reveals to both character and reader the inseparability between time and consciousness. Though inherently subjective, time is, for Smith, simultaneously communal – a paradox which defines contemporary experience and which she contends defines the novel form as well, as it serves as a site of convergence. For Smith, ‘the novel itself is a creature of time’ due to its accommodation of heterogeneity: ‘[i]t’s about time and the ways in which we live — past, present and future, all at once’.¹

It is unsurprising, therefore, that scholarship on Smith’s work repeatedly examines the portrayal of temporality in analyses that consistently attend to the multiplicity of time. Inextricable from a subject’s perception and thus imbued with individual memory, imagination, and belief, time is also in Smith’s fiction constructed exterior to the self, formed in relation to an ‘other’ temporality. The interplay is, for Smith, always one of meaning-making, and it involves as such, a paradoxical self-distance. As in the philosophy of Kermode, Ricœur, and Osborne, and the narratology of Brooks and Currie,

¹ Ali Smith, ‘Ali Smith on the circular movement of time – in nature, life and art’, *Writers and Company, CBC Radio*, 04 March 2018, <<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/writersandcompany/ali-smith-on-the-circular-movement-of-time-in-nature-life-and-art-1.4559007>> [accessed 05 September 2020].

meaning-making is explored by Smith in terms of temporal ekstasis. Yet, the representation of this ekstasis as a virtual site of conclusion is complicated in Smith's writing because narrative subject and reader, rather than being made anachronistic to the present, are cognitively displaced from time altogether. Comparable to the 'mode of adjacency' that DeLillo, McCarthy, and Lerner each promote, Smith shows interpretation to succeed not through critique, but through what the theory of Rita Felski terms 'implication and entanglement' instead.²

Whilst recognizing narrative temporalization to be integral to human consciousness, Smith's fiction refuses its singularity. Her representation of suspended time demonstrates the heterogenic experience and polyphonic subjectivity that scholarship of her work coheres in finding, and it exemplifies moreover the affective turn that critical thought of the twenty-first century ascribes. This is affirmed in the introduction that Monica Germanà and Emily Horton provide to a collection of critical essays on Smith's work, in which they outline how contributors 'call attention to postmodern motifs, structures and influences', whilst also underlining the modernist influences that Smith upholds.³ The contributors, they explain,

tend to challenge Smith's postmodern designation, highlighting her concern with ethics and notions of authenticity and materiality as extending her work beyond the dominant scepticism in the postmodern era, and positioning it in some ways as an extension of Modernism.⁴

Whilst their designation of literary representations of time and subjectivity as strictly postmodern requires explication, Germanà and Horton's overview indicates the affective ethics that are central to Smith's writing. Finding, in her earlier work, narratives that revel

² Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.159.

³ Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, 'Introduction', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Monica Germanà and Emily Horton (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.1-8 (p.6).

⁴ 'Introduction', p.6.

in the unsaid, ‘always resisting “easy” closures’, they read in Smith’s later work a shift in focus which nonetheless retains such multiplicity.⁵ They argue that in Smith’s writing

realist and non-realist narrative conventions are combined to produce a larger nonconformist vision to make apparent the ultimately multiple and often mysterious dimensions of desire, and the nature of identity not as fixed but fluid and unstable.⁶

Smith’s portrayal of heterogeneity implicates the forms and narratives of her fiction; merging realist and non-realist modes to establish story-worlds in which the mutability of identity is integral. Yet in noting the ‘larger nonconformist vision’ that this produces, Germanà and Horton further signal the link in Smith’s writing between heterogeneity and affective perception.

Time and vision are strongly associated in the narratives Smith constructs. Perception is, as Marina Warner indicates, always imbued with the temporal multiplicity of consciousness, as ‘Smith’s imagination has inscape rather than landscape, the interior scene flowing from her characters’ perceptions outwards onto their surroundings’.⁷ Explored through free indirect discourse and interior monologue, Smith’s portrayals of perception work alongside her formal manipulations to deny narrative closure, at once representing and directing the temporal disjuncture of interpretation. It is, in this way, through an integrity between time and vision that Smith represents suspended time as an affective, rather than as a solely critical, becoming. Employed as an external presence of difference that is encountered temporarily by characters within each narrative rather than inhabited indefinitely (an experience portrayed within the autobiographical grief literature that the final chapter of this thesis will explore), ekstasis creates in Smith’s fiction a renewal of perception that accommodates and embraces what Germanà and

⁵ ‘Introduction’, p.2.

⁶ ‘Introduction’, p.4.

⁷ Marina Warner, ‘Foreword’, in *Ali Smith*, ed. by Germanà and Horton, pp.vii-ix (p. viii).

Horton rightly call ‘the “other” side of human existence’.⁸ Smith’s attention remains on the renewed and *affected* vision that suspended time generates, rather than on the temporal affect immanent within suspended time itself.

In a formal hybridity which bridges fiction and literary theory, Smith’s 2012 text, *Artful*, is useful in a reading of her work. Embedding critical analysis into a narrative of loss in the liminal structure it adopts, the text comprises two voices, one present and one absent, as the narrator, imagining the return of their recently deceased partner, reads the notes for the talks they were due to give at a university. The last of these talks, ‘On offer and on reflection’, ends unfinished, and so outruns the temporality of its reader:

Here’s to the place where reality and the imagination meet, whose exchange,
whose dialogue, allows us not just to imagine an unreal different world but
also a real different world – to match reality with possibili
That’s as far as you got. That was it over.
I’d read all of you now.⁹

Uniting authorship and readership, imagination and reality, presence and absence, representation and loss, this passage is positioned within temporal suspension, succeeded immediately in the narrative by the narrator’s waking up at ‘around eleven’, to find a video of *Oliver Twist* on freeze-frame (p.188). The hour of the narrator’s awakening repeats the two lined symbol of the pause, and it is made inextricable from loss in the scene depicted on the screen – Oliver ‘locked in a roomful of coffins’, with the barred window about to give way – a liminal space that gestures toward connection (p.188).

In the binaries that it makes redundant, this passage indicates the dominant modes through which Smith draws a connection between suspended time and the cognitive space: physical absence, the atemporal other, and representation. The three modes inform the structure of this chapter. Discussing social ethics in *Hotel World*, and historical truth

⁸ Germanà and Horton, ‘Introduction’, p.2.

⁹ Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Penguin, 2012), p.188. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

in *There but for the*, my exploration of Smith's writing begins by examining how suspended time is aligned with a presencing of absence. In both novels, I argue, absence establishes an affective ethics, and moreover directs an affective aesthetics, as Smith formally disrupts the time of narrative to suspend her readers too within the space of fiction. This chapter then progresses to explore how, in *The Accidental*, the narrative logic of identity is rewritten through a temporal suspension that is embodied in an 'other'. Examining the relationship between vision and time-consciousness, the novel shows temporal disjuncture to renew perception, giving a clarity that is affective rather than critical, and this too is passed onto the reader, whose habitual modes of making meaning Smith eludes. Finally, this chapter discusses Smith's recently published 'Seasons' tetralogy, considering how by embedding visual art within her narratives, she demonstrates the temporal ekstasis of interpretation. Offering an affective mode of making meaning, Smith, I suggest, affirms literature's own potential to broaden the perception and cognition of those with whom its textual time is shared.

As my exploration of her writing aims to show, it is by suspending time that Smith opens narrative to a temporal multiplicity that celebrates and accommodates difference. Developing an ethical consciousness of time that is directed not only inwards upon the novel, but also outwards upon the world, she illuminates the innumerable temporalities with which author, text, and reader are intertwined.

'the thin lines between here and gone': time and absence in *Hotel World* and *There but for the*

Asserting that '[w]e live in a culture where we are so fixated on surfaces', Smith has posited that '[t]he fastness that we now think life is about [...] cover[s] this great

absence. And maybe so-called extrasensory perceptions are the echo of what's there'.¹⁰ In doing so, Smith makes a connection between absence and the 'so-called extrasensory perceptions' of affect, and this is evident in her fiction in its representation of suspended time and most explicit in the two novels that this section explores.¹¹ In *Hotel World* and *There but for the* suspended time assumes spatial dimensions, and it is thus that it is physically encountered. Reified as absence it incites a de-narrativization of time-consciousness through which the meaning of an absence of meaning is revealed.

First published in 2001, *Hotel World* comprises the narratives of five female subjects. Framed by the voices of the recently deceased Sara Wilby, who fell to her death in the dumb waiter of the *Global Hotel*, and her sister Clare who mourns her, the novel further collates the narratives of three women from diverse social backgrounds, all of whom are connected by the commercialized public space of the hotel. These comprise Else, a homeless woman who bases herself outside the hotel, Lise, the hotel's receptionist, and Penny, a guest and reviewer who stays in one of its rooms. These five narratives are succeeded by a concluding section, in which a third-person narrative relates the quiet convergence of the ghosts of the past who reside unseen within the present. Blurring the boundaries that separate life and death, absence and presence, as well as deeply stratified economic backgrounds, Smith's novel is most often read in terms of the social critiques that it performs in relation to capitalism, class, and gender. Yet such readings remain inseparable from the temporal engagement of the novel, and also from its portrayal of ekstasis.

In her reading of Smith's short stories, Horton shows how, in portrayal of modern

¹⁰ Quoted by Emily Horton, 'Contemporary Space and Affective Ethics in Ali Smith's Short Stories', in *Ali Smith*, ed. by Germanà and Horton, pp.9-22 (p.18).

¹¹ The term 'absence' is used here to signify not the opposite of presence, but an 'other' to it. Whilst critics have substituted alternate terms, my analysis, like Smith's own, will operate in acknowledgement and exploration of the binary conceptualisation.

urban spaces, Smith challenges ‘the received assessment of spatial fixity’, arguing that in the connections that such an obfuscation of boundaries reveals, ‘affect’s importance as a mode of reading’ is made clear.¹² Reading is, however, in every way a temporal practice, and in contrasting Smith’s portrayal with Marc Augé’s analysis of the ‘non-places’ of contemporary culture (spaces that are passed through rather than occupied), Horton further indicates the temporal implications of Smith’s ‘affective ethics’. Attuned to the temporality of Augé’s ‘non-places’, which she defines as transitory spaces “‘measured in units of time’ rather than space’, Horton contrasts Smith’s spatial ethics of possibility and connection to Augé’s pessimistic ‘rootlessness’ of urbanity, but she does not examine the temporal difference that this implies.¹³ Just as transient space is rewritten through the affect of Smith’s urbanity, so is transient time, as rather than portraying the ‘emptying of individuality’ that Augé’s ‘perpetual present’ enforces, Smith examines the self-effacement of affective connection that the disjunction from causality involves.¹⁴

At once specific and extraneous to the geography of its location, the architectural site of the chain hotel in *Hotel World* denotes a liminality. Blurring the boundaries between local and global, it moreover exists, for its guests, outside of the spaces that home and work define. The hotel marks a suspended temporality, accommodating various durations of temporal disjuncture in its break from normative routine. Such temporal suspension is, within the novel, inseparable from its plurality. Shared and inflected by the experiences that others have of it, the hotel archives innumerable instances of time. Encountered spatially, suspended time reveals the world to be, in Horton’s terms, ‘integrated, a network of multiple, often invisible, interwoven relations made accessible

¹² ‘Contemporary Space’, p.15.

¹³ ‘Contemporary Space’, p.10.

¹⁴ Marc Augé, ‘From Places to Non-Places’, in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995) pp.75-115, (p.87; p.105).

through affect'.¹⁵ As a site that operates on a system of exchange, it nonetheless disrupts the system's temporal logic, and in this, and in the interactions with inexplicability that it stages, the location of Smith's novel demonstrates the temporal exteriority of the gift that, throughout his theory, Jacques Derrida considers and explains.

Based on a seminar series of 1977-78, Derrida's *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, examines the phenomenon of the gift and its interruption of economy, which, relying on the reciprocity of giving and taking, constitutes a cycle of return. For Derrida, the gift is impossible in that it can never be present or known *as gift*, without its categorization as such placing it within the 'temporal circle' of exchange. For the gift to exist, it cannot be temporalized, and, as such, it must be unrecognized; forgotten by donor and donee alike, in order that the impossibility of return can be assured. The gift, then, 'cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift' as '[t]he temporalization of time [...] always sets in motion the process of [its] destruction'.¹⁶ Operating in 'a time without time', the temporality of the gift is that of suspension, or 'effraction'; its paradoxical relation to time is both destructive and creative:

the overrunning of the circle by the gift, if there is any, does not lead to a simple, ineffable exteriority that would be transcendent and without relation. It is this exteriority that sets the circle going, it is this exteriority that puts the economy in motion. It is this exteriority that *engages* the circle and makes it turn.¹⁷

The gift's disjuncture from the economy of time is paradoxically formative of temporality. Whilst explored by Derrida primarily within the fields of monetary and social exchange, the temporal (im)possibility is also one of narrative. Indeed, the gift both 'requires and at the same time excludes the possibility of narrative', and it is in this way elucidative of

¹⁵ 'Contemporary Space', p.19.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.14.

¹⁷ *Given Time*, p.30, emphasis original.

the contradictions that the representation of suspended time entails within Smith's fiction.¹⁸

In *Hotel World* the portrayal of suspended time as a site in which absence and narrative converge and converse is established through the contrasting temporal perspectives of the characters who encounter it. The novel's interrogation of narrative causality and its resistance to the unknown is most evident in the characterization of Penny, who is, as her name suggests, the subject most invested in the cycle of monetary return. The time-consciousness that Penny exhibits is one that finds comfort in its surface existence. Writing a review of the *Global Hotel* which conflicts with her own perception of it and constructing stories of her stay to amuse guests at imagined dinner parties, Penny perceives even her own identity in fictional terms.

It is in Penny's section of the novel that the 'spine' of the empty lift-shaft is unveiled, as, having finally established a coin small enough to unscrew the gulf's hasty covering, she encounters the absence that lies at the centre of the hotel space. The free indirect discourse of the narrative relates her exposure to 'Nothing', disclosing how '[t]he nothing that ran the length of this hotel like a spine had appalled her'.¹⁹ Causing a reaction of horror in Penny, the vision of 'nothing' in fact signifies throughout Smith's novel a potential for affective connection, and this is underlined as Penny joins Else on a walk around the streets. Looking into the lit windows of strangers' houses, Penny's narrative understanding of time becomes contested, as she encounters the possibility of connection:

If they'd switched their lights off [...] [w]ould they have seen anyone there at all? [...] Penny was repelled and energized by it, the knowledge that she could be brought together with someone else by the simple flick of a switch from light to dark (p.163).

¹⁸ *Given Time*, p.103.

¹⁹ Smith, *Hotel World* (St Ives: Penguin Books, 2002), p.145. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

At once ‘repelled and energized’, Penny encounters the self-negation of affect in its accommodation of another, and her confliction is repeated in economic terms as she writes Else a cheque before she leaves her, proceeding to cancel it when back in her hotel room alone. Reconfiguring the ‘Counterfeit Money’ of the Baudelaire text that Derrida’s *Given Time* takes as its subject, the void cheque that Penny *gives* replaces her within the economy of narrative that the novel’s representation of suspended time persistently moves against.²⁰

The moment of Penny’s decision is, therefore, related as a refusal of the interpersonal time that suspended time reveals, as in an instant of disjunction, she remembers the kindness of Else, only to dismiss it. The novel relates that

Penny paused. Something made her freeze as surely as if someone somewhere had aimed a remote control at her and pressed the button with the word *pause* on it. In the frozen moment she remembered (p.177, emphasis original).

Penny’s time-consciousness resumes its singular narrative focus, returning her to the reassuring illusion of causal totality as she regains control, relieved to find that ‘something inside her which had been forced open had sealed up again’ (p.178). Yet whilst reassuring, in the affective temporality that *Hotel World* enforces, such dependence on narrative and refusal of the other ultimately makes Penny a grossly ineffective temporal marker. If a clock is close to her body, she explains,

if it’s a digital one its numbers go completely mad, flashing and speeding up [...] Ordinary watches, the wind-up kind, even watches that already behave completely normally on other people’s arms, won’t work on mine, I had one that went so fast that it looked like I was passing whole hours while other people’s watches had gone for ten or fifteen minutes (p.146).

Penny is incapable of incorporating the other into her own temporal perspective and thus

²⁰ That Smith is consciously playing with Derrida’s analysis of Baudelaire’s text is also indicated in the perambulatory setting of this encounter, and in Penny’s asking Else for a cigarette – Baudelaire’s story begins with its two male protagonists leaving a tobacco shop, and the symbolism of smoke is something Derrida makes much of.

of recording time. Demonstrated by her encounter with Lise, this is reinforced by the destruction of the hotel clock she lends to Clare, which is dismantled when dropped down the empty shaft where the dumb waiter once operated. Other characters, however, exhibit a sharing of temporality, an interpersonal time that is similarly reified in the presentation of clocks and watches.

Set ‘some time in the future’, the ‘future conditional’ section of the novel that takes Lise as its focus, presents the disjuncture from normative time that illness entails (p.81). The implications this has upon the relationship between time and narrative is explicitly interrogated in Lise’s estrangement from language, as filling out a form required by her employers, she struggles to find words that will categorize her experience and becomes disoriented as she finds that ‘[e]verything [...] other than this bed she was lying in was into a different tense now’ (p.88). Bed-ridden, Lise marks the progression of the day only through her interaction with her mother, Deirdre, whose visits always coincide with ‘four o’clock’. She considers that,

the point is, the point is, Deirdre would come. She was coming. Even in the timeless zone of the average day of an unwell person invisible to the rest of the fast-moving world there was Deirdre at four o’clock (p.94).

This marking of the time through another takes place within temporal suspension – an in-between state between absence and narrative that Smith draws attention to in the free indirect discourse she employs. Musing on Lise’s condition, the text contemplates the state of being ‘[u]nwell: the opposite of well’, which, it argues, ‘ought to be a place where things levelled out, a place of space, of no apparent narrative. Nothing could be possible there. Nothing could happen there, for a while’ (p.84). Lise’s experience contradicts such expectations:

Instead Lise, lying unmoving in bed, knew; it was as if she had been falling in the same monotonous nothing way for weeks [...] in a place where a second of time was stretched so long and thin that you could see veins in it; and all these seconds, all this time, she (Lise) had seemed to be hardly moving,

though in reality the sides of the tunnel were flying past her at thousands, may be millions of miles an hour (p.84).

The intertext of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, which Lise explicitly references in the paragraph, and the linguistic disjuncture of metaphor, signalled by 'as if', both work in this passage to highlight Lise's relationship to narrative and her removal from it, as its temporalization of experience is contested. Made conscious of her relation to time through her illness Lise considers her existence, not within a spatialized 'nothing', but within 'instead', an imagined site between absence and continuity in which connections made are no longer defined by a linear conception of cause and effect. Language becomes disassociated from the time of narrative, as in a state of forgetting Lise concedes to the narrator's control and signifiers of presence switch the temporal referents to which they conventionally belong; 'That is then. This was now' (p.119).

Lise's mother conceptualizes her illness as a gift of increased perception, aligning it to moments of literary epiphany in her description of it as a 'mystic state', both 'visionary and poetic' (p.92). But whilst Lise's suspension from time and language does constitute a new-found awareness of rhythm, Lise finds such rhythm 'maddening' (p.94). Indeed, Lise's ultimate exclusion from the perception that her illness potentializes is underlined in the intertext invoked by Deirdre's formulations, which recall Virginia Woolf's 'On Being Ill'. Woolf, considering the 'tremendous [...] spiritual change' that illness brings, portrays it as a state in which vision is transformed.²¹ Explaining that the ill 'cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright' and so become 'irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up – to look, for example, at the sky', Woolf states that '[t]he first impression of that extraordinary spectacle is strangely overcoming'.²² Offered, in Smith's novel, not the

²¹ Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', *The New Criterion*, 4.1 (1926), 32-45 (p.32).

²² 'On Being Ill', p.37.

‘extraordinary spectacle’ of the sky, but the mundane vision of the light-fitting, Lise, in contrast to Woolf, finds it ‘tiring just to lie in bed and stare upwards’ (p.94). As in Penny’s encounter with ‘nothing’, the potential renewal of perception that suspended time offers remains incomplete. Unable to form time through narrative, Lise loses agency, becoming subject of and to the heterochronic knowledge that is accomplished by the novel itself.

In *Hotel World*, the only two clocks that record time effectively are those that, used by one character, are given by another. After successive attempts to gauge the time of her sister’s fall, Clare finally succeeds by using Lise’s watch to time the descent of her trainer, and comparatively, Sara’s watch, broken whilst she was living, records time after her death, on the wrist of the stranger she fell in love with. Both acts of temporalization, extending beyond the individual, take place within a spatial site in which time is suspended.

Clare’s timing of her sister’s (or of her sister’s trainer’s) fall is tellingly achieved outside of the narrative, and recording a specific duration, simultaneously records her own disjunction from time. Returning Lise’s watch, she relates that ‘it was half one I’d been up there for ages it hadn’t felt like any time at all’ (p.206). The interpersonal connection of suspended time is essential to time’s formation, and this is reiterated in Lise’s offer to give Clare ‘some of her sleep hours’ (p.207). Considering the gift of time as a disruption of the narrative of mourning projected by others upon her, Clare finds relief in the affective possibility that her temporal disjuncture grants. She relates that ‘I had forgotten what it was I was supposed to be feeling as if like someone sent me a minute of relief a minute of something else through the post saw-this-minute-&-thought-of-you’ (p.207).

As linear time is re-established Clare’s time-consciousness, in contrast to those of Penny and Lise, incorporates the other in its perspective. Watching TV in case Sara is

‘missing it’ and looking hard at things so that she ‘will know [...] what they look like’, Clare’s sensory experience accommodates the absent (p.208; p.209). Indeed, absence itself attains a spatial permanence in her perspective, as considering her encounter with the lift-shaft, she imagines that

even if they did fill it up with concrete in a way even so it would still be the same hole just filled with concrete that’s all & even if they knocked down the whole of the hotel & that lift shaft was taken apart & wasn’t there any more it would still somehow be there though you couldn’t see it (p.200).

Sara’s watch, on the other hand, keeps time for a girl who is herself ‘surrounded by watches in cabinets, watches in cases, watches all up and down the walls [...] and all of them stopped, with their hands pointing to different, possible, times of the day’ (p.18). The measuring of time is here too dependent on another, evoking the time of the gift in both the unknowingness of its giving and in the impossibility of its return. Though Sara, as donor, fully anticipates a monetary transaction in handing over her watch to be repaired, and the girl in the watch shop, as donee, desires a subsequent social exchange at the novel’s close, neither will take place. The closure of the circle is anticipated but forever delayed, and time is thus suspended and given as gift in one and the same action; an affective connection both disrupts and makes possible the text’s narrative temporalization.

‘the tension at the heart of time’: writing narrative absence

Derrida asserts in *Given Time* that ‘only a “life” can give, but a life in which this economy of death presents itself and lets itself be exceeded. Neither death nor immortal life can ever give anything, only a singular surviving can give’.²³ Quoting this in her writing on Smith, Alice Bennett similarly reads Sara’s spectral survival in ‘a suspended

²³ *Given Time*, p.102.

moment of on living – living on’ as a successful gift in its preclusion of return.²⁴ The time of the gift is the gift of time, and it is one that informs the narrative structure of Smith’s novel. *Hotel World*, Bennett argues,

suggests that it is impossible to make ends meet [...] the end of life will not coincide with the end of a plotted narrative of a life, and this is where the afterlife comes in, with its plot that continues after death [...] The final section of *Hotel World* enacts a successful gift that does not leave this remainder of change or debt.²⁵

As a ghost, Sara exceeds the temporal framework that constitutes narrative presence – outside of time, she ‘tears time apart’ whilst paradoxically motivating its progression, and this is repeated in the final section of the novel, as the ghosts of the past converge without reference or contribution to its plot. With its own ‘plotted narrative’ haunted by the temporal multiplicity it contains, Smith’s novel, like the hotel site, exists within ekstasis – outside of time and thus connective of it. Indeed, as Derrida notes in *Specters of Marx*, haunting is, rather than an invasion of the present by the past, an event disjunct from time altogether. ‘A spectral moment’ is, for Derrida,

a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: “now”, future present) [...] Furtive and untimely, the apparition of the specter does not belong to that time, it does not give time, not that one.²⁶

The non-time of the spectral moment is, moreover, of ethical concern. The question posed by the ghost is one of justice, and as a living or ‘being-with’ ghosts denotes a meeting of temporalities – a ‘non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present’ – the question is

²⁴ Alice Bennett, ‘Anticipated Returns: Purgatory, Exchange and Narrative after Life’, *Oxford Literary Review*, 33.1 (2009), 33-48, (p.42).

²⁵ ‘Anticipated Returns’, p.44. Bennett discusses Smith’s portrayal of the afterlife in contrast to Muriel Spark’s *Memento Mori*, arguing that, in her direct rewriting of the refrain of Spark’s novel, ‘remember you must die’ (which provides an epigraph to *Hotel World*), Smith breaks the cycle of exchange that informs the traditional conception of Heaven and Hell, as well as that of narrative closure.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.xix.

one that is temporal at root.²⁷ Demanding a responsibility for spectres past and future – ‘those who *are not there* [...] those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*’ – the ghost, in Derridean thought, constitutes a ‘politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations’ that ‘unhinges’ the time of the present in an ethical incorporation of other times and of the times of others.²⁸ The suspended time of the spectre opens up the present to its outside, and therefore to a temporal multiplicity.

Whilst moving away from the temporality of Derrida’s ‘hauntology’ in its examination of the spectral moment in spatial terms, contemporary theory of the spectral uncovers a similar ethics. Contending that ‘[w]hether the everyday is haunted by what is outside of it or by what used to be part of it, it is insistently represented as a haunted/haunting structure, where what you see is never quite what you get’, the critical theory of María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren elicits the presence of ghosts within contemporary culture as a signification of the unseen and unknowable.²⁹ Indeed, for del Pilar Blanco, Derrida’s ethics of alterity is re-encapsulated in the spectre’s revelation of the ‘*incompleteness of experience*’ – a crisis of perception and an acknowledgement of doubt and ‘open-endedness’ that is, I would suggest, elucidative of the refusal of narrative closure that the spectral presences of Smith’s fiction ensure.³⁰ Smith’s exploration of the gift and its relation to narrative extends beyond mourning to the consciousness of time in general. Disrupting the linearity of sense-making whilst acknowledging its fundamentality within human understanding, Smith binds affect and contingency to

²⁷ *Specters of Marx*, p.xviii.

²⁸ *Specters of Marx*, p.xviii, emphasis original.

²⁹ María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, ‘Introduction’, in *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, ed. by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010), pp.ix-xxiv, (p.xiii).

³⁰ María del Pilar Blanco, *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape and the Hemispheric Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p.25, emphasis original.

causality throughout her characters' diverse interactions with absence. Reminiscent of the 'blind-spot' that McCarthy conceptualizes, the contradictory power of time's exteriority extends beyond the story-world that *Hotel World* constructs. Smith's fiction too operates as gift – disruptive and regenerative of its reader's consciousness of time as they inhabit the unique space of fiction.

Underlining the nostalgic mode of sense-making that reading involves, Mark Currie describes narrative as a tensing of time: it is, he states, 'the discourse that reconverts the untensed relations of events back into the tensed sequence of human experience'.³¹ As Currie elsewhere explores, this process is complicated and questioned by Smith's fiction and made nowhere more explicit than in *Hotel World*. Considering the novel's merging of content and form, Currie elucidates the temporal implications of linguistic representation, arguing that *Hotel World's*

topic, stated in grammatical terms, is the tension at the heart of time between the perfective and the imperfective, or time seen from the outside and time lived from the inside, an enquiry that can only be conducted in a world in which time is made visible in the form of writing.³²

Currie reads the tension between life and writing as one of 'completion and incompleteness', with the conclusion on which fiction depends unattainable within lived experience.³³ However in Smith's fiction, it is writing's own suspension of and from narrative temporality that makes the tension 'visible'. This is, indeed, underlined in the analysis that *Hotel World* enacts upon the free indirect discourse of its own narration in

³¹ Mark Currie, 'The Expansion of Tense', *Narrative*, 17.3 (2009), 353-367 (p.365).

³² Mark Currie, 'The Philosophy of Grammar', in *Ali Smith*, ed. by Germanà and Horton, pp.48-60, (p.60).

³³ 'The Philosophy of Grammar', p.58. Such analysis compares to that of Emma E. Smith, who reads Smith's signalling of narrative absence as a signification of future resolution, arguing in her reading of Clare's mourning and, more specifically, of the repetition of clauses beginning '& since', that closure is implied beyond the time of the narrative related. See Emma E. Smith, "'A Democracy of Voice"? Narrating Community in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 4.2 (2010), 81-99.

the ‘future conditional’ section that takes Lise as its subject. Commenting that ‘the shapes of lives in time tend to be translated into common linear sequence which itself translates into easily recognizable significance, or meaning’, the narrative voice of the novel ironizes and undermines Lise’s narrative conception of time (p.103). Elsewhere narrating events that Lise herself cannot recall, and projecting into a future that portrays Lise at full health, the section, as Emma E. Smith notes,

flags up the presence of an authorial narrator behind the text with the power not only to stop and reverse narrative time and to narrate what the focalizing character has ‘unremembered,’ but also to extrapolate beyond the time of the (present) narrative, and even entirely beyond the temporal scope of the novel.³⁴

Whilst, as Currie states, Smith’s writing enquires into ‘the tension at the heart of time’, it resists the ‘completion’ of conclusion. The temporal plurality of representation, in its own disjuncture from linear chronology, parallels in form the renewal of time-consciousness that takes place within narrative, as like the characters Smith depicts, the reader’s nostalgic mode of meaning-making becomes challenged. Smith disrupts ‘the process of retrospective sense-making’ that Currie finds ‘at the heart of the reading process’.³⁵ Her novels, as already indicated, each suspend their readers, accommodating those readers within their form.

‘the space that wrecks our abode’: temporal absence in *There but for the*

Published almost a decade after *Hotel World*, *There but for the* similarly brings together a multitude of narrative subjects in both the spatial setting of its content and the structure of its form. Directed by the physical absence of Miles Garth after he leaves a dinner party of an unknown couple to lock himself in the guest room of their house, the

³⁴ “‘A Democracy of Voice’?”, p.91.

³⁵ ‘The Expansion of Tense’, p.362.

novel's titled sections comprise the narratives of Anna, who met Miles as a teenager, having won a trip through a writing contest in which a future world had to be imagined; Mark, who invited Miles to the dinner party after encountering him at a performance of *King Lear*; May, an elderly woman in hospital, whom Miles visits every year on the date of her daughter's death; and Brooke, the ten-year-old daughter of another couple at the dinner party, who compiles a history of Miles, being the only one to have physical contact with him after his reclusion. Disrupting time in the London borough in which time is measured, Miles' absence delineates the plotted narratives of those around him, and as in *Hotel World*, it is through suspended time's spatialization as absence that the encounter between different modes of knowledge is achieved.

As a space of intended hospitality, the guest room in *There but for the* works in similar ways to the hotel in the temporality that it implies, but with its occupation enforced rather than invited or paid for, the temporal disjuncture that this space signifies again strikes a different tone. The interaction it produces between individual and collective moves, in this novel, from the local to the historical, as Smith exploits the temporal significance conferred by the topography of Greenwich, and the specific site of the prime meridian. The temporal hybridity that absence offers in Smith's novel is indicated, in similar ways to Horton, by Patrick O'Donnell's reading of space. Considering *Hotel World* alongside *The Accidental*, O'Donnell aligns hybridity with affect, offering Julia Kristeva's theory of the stranger as the foundation for his analysis. O'Donnell proceeds from Kristeva's assertion that

the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, a time in which understanding and affinity founder [...] The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners,

amenable to bonds and communities.³⁶

O'Donnell examines the spaces of holiday home and hotel in terms of the interpersonal connections that they make possible. But whilst he reads affect in predominantly spatial terms, he also, as Smith's presentation of space demands, explores a temporal liminality, defining the 'hybrid spaces' he identifies as 'conflated regions where past, present and future are conjoined'.³⁷ Indeed, if sites of hybridity can be said to signify 'the space that wrecks our abode', then they signify also 'a time in which understanding and affinity founder'. This 'time' is paradoxically that of its suspension, a space in which narrative understanding is challenged and forced to recognize not only the hybridity that O'Donnell analyses, but the spatial and temporal significance of the unknown. Whilst O'Donnell does not consider *There but for the*, the hybridity he identifies clearly extends to Smith's later novel, and it is to this novel that theories of the foreigner are, in fact, most aptly applied.

In *There but for the*, the affective meaning that the visibility of 'nothing' offers in *Hotel World* extends the 'giving time' of the gift to the 'making time' of hospitality, explored by Derrida in a series of seminars given in 1996. Discussing the laws of hospitality in relation to subjectivity and the name, Derrida underlines an affinity between the foreigner and the question, conveying the guest's potential liberation of the host, as a substitution of roles 'make[s] everyone into everyone else's hostage'.³⁸ Derrida states:

³⁶ Patrick O'Donnell, "'The Space That Wrecks Our Abode": The Stranger in Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and *The Accidental*', in *Ali Smith*, ed. by Germanà and Horton, pp.89-100 (p.89).

³⁷ "'The Space That [...]'", p.91.

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.124. Derrida distinguishes 'absolute hospitality', in which an absolute other, without name or social status, is welcomed as guest, from lawful, or conditional hospitality in which such information is desired, or deemed to be necessary, and a pact of exchange thus formed (see pp.25-29).

It is *as if* (and an *as if* always lays down the law here) [...] the stranger could save the master and liberate the power of his host; it's *as if* the master, *qua* master, were prisoner of his place and his power, of his ipseity, of his subjectivity (his subjectivity is hostage).³⁹

The potential for such liberation is explored within *There but for the* in the characterization of the 'mistress' and host of the house Miles, as foreigner, inhabits. Jen Lee (whose name, in conjunction with her husband's, forms the word 'generically') is haunted by Miles, and the possible inversion of their roles becomes clear in the article she writes for a local paper, which in its compilation of literary forms, the novel presents as excerpt. In the piece Jen writes the potential reversal of roles that Derrida outlines is made clear as the subject of the word 'strange' shifts, in its repeated use, from other to self, as Jen asserts that '[i]t is strange having a stranger in the house with you all the time. It makes you strangely self-aware, strange to yourself'.⁴⁰ Adding that '[e]very new day I wake full of the possibilities of change', Jen's article signals the ethical possibilities of hospitality (p.107). However, whilst Derrida notes 'the reciprocity and equality of "for" in exchange', this passage, perhaps tellingly, takes place in the chapter titled 'but'.⁴¹ This does not dismiss the possibility of an ethical encounter, but displaces it within suspended time – 'but', in Miles' definition of the word, is a conjunction that makes 'connection' through disjuncture; it 'always takes you off to the side' (p.195; p.175). In Jen's case connection is, of course, denied, signalled in her conscious self-presentation, and underlined in her capitalist exploitation of the stranger that she hosts. At the end of the novel, she ultimately demands return, producing merchandise to sell to Miles' supporters whilst re-veiling absence; hiding the fact that Miles is, in fact, no longer resident in her home.

³⁹ *Of Hospitality*, p.123, emphasis original.

⁴⁰ Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), p.106. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁴¹ *Of Hospitality*, p.21.

In Smith's novel, 'nothing' is a physical site of temporal absence made visible not only by Miles' occupation of the Lees' guest room, but also by the meridian line of Greenwich Observatory. Representing 0.000°, where, in the measurement of longitude and latitude, a degree is itself a spatializing of time, denoting sixty seconds, the prime meridian and Greenwich more generally repeatedly incite a time-consciousness in which the relationship between visual absence and temporal presence is considered. As Ben Davies suggests in his reading of Smith's novel, *Greenwich*, 'and therefore, metonymically, time – unites all the major strands that make up the narrative'.⁴² Yet the time that *Greenwich* represents is one of suspension. *Greenwich* is, Smith's novel informs us, a place 'about the visible-invisible borders, the thin lines between here and gone, then and now, here and there, random and meant, big and small' (p.112). The site's disjuncture from time enables the recollection, imagination, and representation of virtual temporalities within the actuality of the present.

The temporal incorporation of the other, or the absent produces an affective perception, and this is directed not only upon the narrativization of individual memory, but also on that of collective history. Woven throughout the novel in its consideration of the past, the disruption of history's narrative temporalization is made emphatic through the explicit contrast between the authorship of Anna and Miles in adulthood, with that of Brooke, '[t]he history child' (p.56). Relating her role at a refugee centre, which 'she and her colleagues only half-laughingly called the Centre for Temporary Permanence (or, interchangeably, the Centre for Permanent Temporariness)', Anna underlines the dangers of narrative temporalization, highlighting its incompatibility with the complex personal histories she encounters as she tries 'to fit these true stories, their whole life stories in

⁴² Ben Davies, 'The Complexities of Dwelling in Ali Smith's *There but for the*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58.5 (2017), 509-520, (p.516).

some cases, on to just two thirds of one side of [...] A4' (p.6; p.54). This departure of narrative from truth is repeated in Miles' job as 'an ethical consultant' (p.128). Suggesting ways in which firms can improve their social or environmental impact, or 'present themselves' as doing so, the hypocritical contrast between image and reality that Miles works to create is enabled by narrative, the sinister nature of the 'rebrandings' he suggests underlined in his self-description as 'an ethic cleanser' (p.129).

Such enforcement of narrative contrasts greatly with the temporalization of the novel's youngest character, who, as the subject most strongly affiliated with Greenwich, exhibits the increased perception that the site's own disjuncture from time signifies. Firmly associating herself with '[n]othing o'clock', Brooke is 'invisible' to Greenwich's temporal border, celebrating her capability to step across, pendulum-like, unnoticed 'again, and again, back and fore' (p.280; p.308). Smith's child protagonist is named after Louise Brooks, 'a star of silent film [...] who was associated with playing roles full of free will, girls with an ability to survive', and, indicating her independence, Brooke's namesake also signals a merging of photographic and cinematic time (p.155). Commenting on the film star, Smith has commended, '[h]er still images [...] full of movement. Her moving images preserv[ing] [...] the energy of stasis'.⁴³ Brooke is at once connected with a fluid progression of time, and with its suspension; its incorporation of the absent or unknown.

For Brooke, history is defined by absence in two ways; documenting the 'people and places that disappear, or are beheaded', history is 'the unseen things as well' (p.290). She explains:

⁴³ Ali Smith, 'Ali Smith on Louise Brooks: "The Revelation of Movement"', *Silent London* (2016), <<https://silentlondon.co.uk/2016/11/15/ali-smith-on-louise-brooks-the-revelation-of-movement/>> [accessed 05 September 2021].

The fact is, every tree that ever lived or lives has a history just like that tree has. It is important to know the stories and histories of things, even if all we know is that we don't know (p.295).

The history compiled by Brooke herself binds affect and absence in its representation, figuratively indicated through the instrument with which it is recorded. Taken from an empty church which, in its 'painted wooden unicorn', 'picture of General Wolfe', 'historic photocopy' of a Viking axe, and eighteenth-century console, itself binds real, represented, and imagined in the historical palimpsest of its architecture, the pencil Brooke uses to record the history of Miles suggests an affinity between affect and suspended time (p.326). In a book left for people to write messages in, Brooke finds 'the pencil lying longways down the middle of the pages. It is a red one and it says on it Longitude 0°00' (p.328). The book, it is related,

Today [...] says *Please help dads friend Tim rest safely in heaven because my family and I miss him much Thanks God Amen. God, please pray for my mum and close friends, for them to stay healthy and happy* (p.328, emphasis original).

Indicating a connection between self and other, the temporal suspension that the pencil's engraving invokes further symbolizes a temporal multiplicity, the presence of the past conveyed in its own regeneration, having been recycled from CD cases in 2007.

It is this pencil that Brooke uses to compile her history, which, whilst enacting a temporalization led by a nostalgic perspective, nevertheless incorporates absence in the meaning-making it portrays. '[C]ounting the blank pages in the History Moleskine', Brooke constructs a narrative of linear causality, determining that,

The The [sic] fact is notes will go after the note about being vegetarian, which came first in real time, and then there will be the note about Mrs Young, and then the The fact is notes [...] And then the piece will come which she will write down for historic records about visiting Mr Garth on Wednesday [...] and then the fact that Mr Garth has left the room will need to be written down *here*. And that will be the end of this history, at least the bit that has Mr Garth actually in it (pp.334-335, emphasis original).

As an act of compilation rather than unilateral representation, Brooke's history is

polyphonic; hospitable in the time that it records. Indeed, if, as Anne Dufourmantelle notes within Derrida's text, ‘“making time” is equivalent in Hebrew to “inviting,”’ then Brooke's historical record can be read as a similar linguistic demonstration that ‘*in order to produce time there have to be two of you, or rather there has to be some otherness, a breaking in on the original other*’.⁴⁴ Within its collage form Brooke's narrative incorporates the other and otherness; its gaps denoting not simply a future writing of the past but evincing her awareness of the invisible and unknown. Moreover, acknowledging that the past may be ‘present in the present’ and thus changeable by it, Brooke significantly refuses narrative closure, leaving ‘some pages blank at the end in case there is anything else that happens, in case the history isn't over’ (p.335). This recognition of incompleteness is repeated by Smith's novel in the blank pages that follow the conclusion of its narrative, and also in the cyclicity of its form.

Using the affinity Heidegger establishes between dwelling, thinking, and being, Davies posits *There but for the* as a ‘space for thought’.⁴⁵ He considers Smith's novel as a ‘spatiotemporal dwelling’, indicating how, in its disruption of the reading process by different narrative modes, grammatical divergences and formal breaks, ‘the text itself [...] invites the reader to *stay-within-it* temporally, even if only temporarily’.⁴⁶ Comprised of its characters' memories of recent and historic past, and collating different literary forms, Smith's novel detemporalizes narrative, as rather than move ‘simply across the text in linear fashion’, ‘[t]he reader moves between, in and out’ of its interlinking layers.⁴⁷ This

⁴⁴ *Of Hospitality*, p.76, emphasis original. There are, interestingly, many references to Jewish identity within the dinner party scene Smith's novel portrays, including, most significantly, debate over whether Mark, the guest who invites Miles, is himself Jewish; a correlation that seems too compelling within Smith's exploration of time to be merely accidental.

⁴⁵ ‘The Complexities of Dwelling’, p. 512.

⁴⁶ ‘The Complexities of Dwelling’, p.516, emphasis original.

⁴⁷ ‘The Complexities of Dwelling’, p.515.

is, indeed, a structural technique that rebounds throughout Smith's fiction. The multiple narrative subjects of her novels are integrated by the free indirect discourse of their narration, allowing her to both follow and to complicate the causal linearity to which fiction is conventionally bound. Suspending the readership of her texts in a collage-like simultaneity of multiple perspectives and temporalities, Smith not only represents, but demonstrates, the heterogeneity of subjectivity and of time.

Whilst the loss of Sara remains at the heart of *Hotel World*'s narrative, her voice is present only for the reader, and whilst, in *There but for the*, Brooke is careful with history, the reader has knowledge she, as a temporally bound narrative subject, cannot gain access to. Witness to the unknown, uncanny, and 'unremembered', the disjuncture from narrative time entailed by reading establishes an act of temporalization that is informed by absence as much as it is by continuity. Positioned within the 'space for thought' Smith's reader occupies a site equivalent to 'instead', or 'but'; a dislocation that 'takes you off to the side' to reveal '[t]he way things connect' (*Tbft*, p.175; p.196).

'the beginning of things': time and vision in *The Accidental*

Indicated in Smith's treatment of absence in *Hotel World* and *There but for the*, the implications that suspended time has for meaning are most explicit in her 2005 novel, *The Accidental*, in which, as Currie comments, the 'associative connection between time and vision' is foregrounded.⁴⁸ Arranged into 'beginning', 'middle', and 'end', with each section further divided by the character it explores, the novel is structured in terms of both narrative time and subject – classifications that it aims to disassemble. Interrogating the relationship between time and consciousness, the text's content presents the thoughts of the family at its centre as each of its members contends with, constructs, or attempts to

⁴⁸ 'The Philosophy of Grammar', p. 51.

maintain their identity during a holiday in Norfolk. Comprising twelve-year old Astrid, her older brother Magnus, her stepfather Michael, and her mother Eve, the Smart family's narratives reveal the changing conceptions of time and self that the novel's fifth character induces as she invades the already fragile domestic space. Amber, as will be explored, assumes the spectral role common within Smith's writing, and embodying time's suspension, she forces the ekstasis of those around her. Opening individual temporality to a meaning-making that is affective rather than critical, she enables the connection not of cause and effect, but of self and other, present and absent, and the multiple temporalities that each include. No longer dependent on narrative closure, '[t]ime means' in *The Accidental* through its suspension, as through an encounter with the atemporal other an affective 'renewal of vision' is produced (*A*, p.19; p.38).

Never direct, but always directed, vision in the four 'beginning' sections of *The Accidental* is always mediated. Whether defined by technology, media, or aesthetic representation, the modes of perception that every member of the Smart family exhibits and through which they interact with and understand events, place them at a virtual distance from the world they physically inhabit. It is the temporality of such mediation that is consistently underlined, as each of the Smarts perceives and cognizes their own presence in the present through the instinctive use of a contrary temporal frame.

The Accidental's explicit and repeated association between time and visual perception is most forcefully articulated in the narration of Astrid, whose consideration of the multiple interpretations of a day's beginning destabilizes unitary time in recognition of the intrinsic subjectivity of its construction. Astrid considers how the time of 'the beginning' changes depending on whether it is determined through nature, the day 'not supposed to have begun until the dawn'; the temporality of the clock, as it turns 'a fraction of a second past twelve'; or individual perception, the beginning having 'something to do

with being able to see'.⁴⁹ Binding time and the ability to see, the three modes of time-consciousness that Astrid considers are superimposed in her own perception, as in her recording of dawns she transposes natural time with that of technology in an act of representation that is simultaneous with her sight. Understanding vision as in many ways integral to presence, the digital mediation of Astrid's sight serves to distance her from experience. However, in the interior monologue that Smith offers, vision is concomitant with understanding almost to the point of synonymity, and it is, therefore, too simple to consider Astrid's perception as mediated solely by technology.

Astrid's dependence on her camera as a mode of both vision and comprehension constructs a perception that is saturated by her own complex consciousness of time. As Currie suggests, her 'interest in digital video', is both 'the object and means of her reflection, as well as a pervasive influence on her awareness of the world in general'.⁵⁰ Her perception of the present is mediated by her own anticipation of it as the object of reflection, a consciousness that is reified in her recording of her surroundings 'as evidence for people who need to know in the future how latches like this one worked' (p.15). However, whilst Currie considers Astrid's perspective as demonstrative of the 'anticipative recollection' of contemporary time-consciousness, her attempts to affirm her presence are not only futural; they are also directed to the past. Astrid Smart is also Astrid Berenski, and unable to remember her father first-hand, she desperately seeks to maintain his presence. With her mother consistently vague, Astrid clings to the letters written by her father to Eve, which, romanticizing her as a '*perpetual beautiful summer*', imagine a filmic vision (p.124, emphasis original). Adam proclaims that

*[i]f I had a film camera behind my eyes what I would do is film all the dawns
of all the mornings of my life then give the finished film to you all spliced*

⁴⁹ Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), p.7; p.7; p.8. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁵⁰ *About Time*, p.114.

together (p.124, emphasis original).

The past imagined perception of Adam is directly productive of that which Astrid enacts within the present. In her project to record and splice together dawns, Astrid moves the film camera from behind to in front of the eyes, mediating present with past in her efforts to narrate her own legitimacy by placing herself at the end of a narrative causation. The present is, for Astrid, thus experienced at both a visual and a temporal distance, as, whether applied to past or present-as-past, she enacts an ‘inherently nostalgic mode’ of meaning-making.

The anachronic vision consciously performed by Astrid is repeated in each of the subsequent perspectives that Smith’s narrative explores. Whilst Astrid’s division of her identity into old and new revolves around the temporal point of the millennium, Magnus’ hinges on a traumatic event – the suicide of his classmate.⁵¹ Having manipulated a photograph of Catherine Masson’s head onto the body of a woman from a pornographic image, which was then sent around the school, Magnus has played a role in the events which led to her death, and his guilt results in a literal and temporal impediment of vision. Magnus’ experience of the present is characterized by his repetition of the past, as he imposes a reflective narrative of events in efforts to explain them, stating over and over a causal linearity; ‘First they. They then. Then they. Then she.’ (p.38). Linguistically mirroring her character’s linking of cause and effect in her use of repetition, Smith draws attention to the traumatic loop that Magnus’ consciousness of time reflects. This is directly connected, through visual perception, to a self-enforced mediation of presence that is made manifest both in Magnus’ conceptualization of identity, and in his

⁵¹ Astrid’s perception of the millennium as a moment of temporal significance recalls Frank Kermode’s analysis of *kairos* and its perception in relation to *chronos*, reflected upon in the epilogue of *The Sense of an Ending*. The association such moments of temporal significance have with apocalypse is further evident in Astrid’s subsequent imagining of herself as an asteroid that will obliterate the world.

embodiment.

In his construction of identity, Magnus divides himself into past and present, contrasting the elusive innocence of the remembered 'Hologram Boy' who exists 'back then, before', with the unwanted knowledge the 'real Magnus' has accumulated in the present (p.38). The difference between the two temporal selves that are related is one of visibility. The gravity of the event he has played a part in causing makes Magnus perceive himself as physically enormous, his 'monstrous proportions' directly opposing those of the past identity he looks down at, 'clambering about on his own giant foot, as if the foot is a mountain' (p.38). Magnus cognizes the present in its opposition to the past, considering 'Hologram Boy' fortunate for both his absence, 'only seem[ing] to be dimensional. He is a three-dimensional reproduction of something not really there', and his size, 'so small' that he 'could slip away through a crack in a wood floor' (p.38). The 'real Magnus' is in contrast 'unavoidable', yet, at the same time as his physical presence renders him grossly visible to the world, the world is distanced from him, 'reel[ing] away by itself as if he is watching down the telescope an old-fashioned film' (p.39).

Magnus' vision is impaired by his memory, the effects of consciousness made physically manifest as he relates that '[t]he remembering is like the darkening. The darkening is now happening more' (p.40). As with Astrid's vision, this mediation of the present is indicative of a failure in critical perception, as Magnus too temporalizes history by placing himself at the conclusion of a narrative, denying the possibility of progression.

It is caused by causal effects. He has caused it. He has changed the way the world is. They played about with her head until they were happy. They shifted it about on the neck. Then they delivered it. Then she killed herself (p.41).

The ekstasis of critical perception is, as the narratology of Currie suggests, generative of 'depresentification' rather than of connection or meaning. Denying the possibility of the future, Magnus, like Astrid is disjunct from temporality, not in suspension, but anachrony;

the visual perception each character exhibits attached to an alternate virtual time.

Such conceptions of time are repeated in the consciousnesses of both Michael and Eve, as they attempt to mediate the present either through a repetition or a rewriting of the past. Michael, reluctant to face his impotency within marriage and career, pursues recurrent affairs with his students, projecting onto those he sleeps with a predefined role they prove increasingly resistant to assuming. Eve, on the other hand, appropriates voices from history in her authorship, resurrecting the dead and providing them with fictional narratives as if they lived. In the perspectives that each member of the Smart family makes manifest, the narrative temporalization outlined in the theory of Kermode and Ricœur is evident. Indeed, not limiting its application to an understanding of history, Ricœur reformulates his theory of ‘emplotment’ within his subsequent exploration of identity. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur argues that individual identity is retroactively understood through a process of emplotment, as the ‘temporal totality’ of character is comprehended and sustained by establishing the ‘history of a life’.⁵² The formation of such a history transforms the disruption of unforeseen events by underlining their necessity in advancing story, ‘invert[ing] the effect of contingency’ through its translation into the causality of narrative.⁵³ Yet whilst exerting the retroactive perception that underlies this temporalization of self, progression is impossible for the characters of Smith’s novel, whose respective perceptions of identity are reduced to anachronism instead. Highlighted in the repeated impairment of vision with which it is aligned, the temporal mediation enacted by each character impedes, rather than aids, perspective.

The obfuscation of anachronism is, moreover, made emphatic by the novel’s fifth character, who, embodying time’s suspension, introduces to others’ perception of time an

⁵² ‘The Self and Narrative Identity’, in *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp.140-168 (p.147).

⁵³ ‘The Self and Narrative Identity’, p.142.

‘effect of contingency’ that will not be transformed. Just as Astrid stares at the sun in fascination at the inversion of colours its glare produces, so Amber is portrayed as an intrusion of light, her arrival in the ‘unnaturally dark’ holiday rental subverting the temporal mediations of the perspectives already explored (p.80). It is, as will be examined, through Amber that the nostalgia of meaning-making is challenged, and that a newly affective perception is made possible.

‘how to not exist’: the spectrality of the stranger

Evasive of uniform representation, the identity of Amber is difficult to pin down, and within scholarship, her identity is much debated. Yet whether read as spectre, angel, imagined presence, or embodiment of representation, an indication of Amber’s exteriority to time is recurrent in analyses of the novel. Interlinked with the identity of Alhambra it is, as Currie states, through Amber’s ‘double ontological frame’ that *The Accidental’s* ‘knowledge of time is produced’.⁵⁴ In her embodiment of suspended time Amber’s temporal multiplicity is made possible, and this is demonstrated not only in her representation of innumerable temporalities, which makes coeval times past and present, real and imagined, but also in her refusal of readership, which exposes to each character of the novel the limitations of the nostalgic meaning-making they impose.

Unconnected to the family and with no reason for her arrival, Amber acts as a highly disruptive presence within the novel in her invasion of the domestic space. Yet it is her disruption of time that proves most significant in the revelatory role she plays. As Bennett notes, ‘Smith’s hallmark domestic scenes of family life interrupted by intruders from outside can be regarded as a metaphor for an interrupted and distracted

⁵⁴ *About Time*, p.124.

temporality'.⁵⁵ Amber, as her name suggests, falls either outside of or in between temporal states, denying causality in her resistance to linear narrative. Symbolized in the watch she wears, 'that always says seven o'clock no matter what time it actually is', her embodiment of time's suspension is made emphatic through her spectrality, and her association with specific forms of technology, both of which contribute to her contradictory manifestation and evasion of representation (p.143). Amber's position outside of time gives her an increased awareness or prioritized perception, and it is temporality itself that is the object of her gaze.

Considering temporality not only through its Aristotelian division into *chronos* and *kairos*, but also through its religious understanding, Kermode examines how the initially dual distinction of time within Christian thought, between the eternal time of God and the mortal time of man, was broadened to incorporate the 'betwixt-and-between position of angels'.⁵⁶ Termed as *aevum*, this intemporal position, Kermode continues to explain, was humanized to express moments of 'the soul's attentiveness', or 'temporal integration', and in unison with his analysis of the 'fictions of concord' through which the significance of *kairos* is established, the ekstasis essential to critical understanding is once more underlined. '[P]articipating in both the temporal and the eternal', Kermode contends that *aevum* 'does not abolish time or spatialize it; it co-exists with time, and is a mode in which things can be perpetual without being eternal'.⁵⁷ He posits *aevum* as a form of both temporal suspension and, in its cyclicity, of permanence as well. In Magnus' conceptualization of her, 'Amber is an angel', and the intemporality of her peripheral existence can be read through Kermode's explication of *aevum*. Disruptive of time but not wholly destructive of it, Amber remains tangential to time's progression, and

⁵⁵ *Contemporary Fictions*, p.85.

⁵⁶ *The Sense of an Ending*, p.71.

⁵⁷ *The Sense of an Ending*, p.72.

her presence is, as will be examined, moreover made perpetual in Eve's assumption of her role – demonstrative of the cyclical repetition Kermodé explores.⁵⁸

The 'temporal integration' with which *aevum* is aligned is visible in the temporal multiplicity that Amber's exteriority from time enables, as real and imagined possibilities converge. This is clearly evinced in her affinity with, if not her existence as, the atemporal presence of Alhambra, whose first-person narration, framing the central plot, significantly evades the chronology to which its structure gestures. Noted by Stephen M. Levin to be a 'figure for narration', and by Currie, as a 'metaleptic other' to the character of Amber, Alhambra operates within the novel more as narrative method than as narrative subject.⁵⁹ She personifies the convergent temporalities inherent within, and accessible through, the intemporal act of representation. Named after the picture-house in which she is conceived, Alhambra claims the history of film as her own. Merging her own fictional identity with those of cinema's past, she underlines representation's own temporal exteriority, and in further superimposing historical events into her biography she shows any relation of the past to be an act of mimesis. Such representative multiplicity is cemented, moreover, in her additional hyponymy with the famous palace in Granada, a site whose architecture forms a spatial palimpsest that portrays the collective authorship of its history.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ That Amber's watch is stopped at seven o'clock is also significant in suggesting her to be a divine presence, as seven is considered a divine number in both Islamic and Christian religions (linking to the combined architecture of the Alhambra Palace with which she is also associated). In the Quran, there are seven hells and heavens, seven chapters in the first book, but the number also resounds throughout the text as representative of a number at a cosmic scale, or an infinity. In the Bible, the Book of Genesis denotes the seventh day as a Holy day, the day God rested after the Creation of Earth.

⁵⁹ Stephen M. Levin, 'Narrating Reminders: Spectral Presences in Ali Smith's Fictions', in *Ali Smith*, ed. by Germanà and Horton, pp.35-47 (p.41); Currie, *About Time*, p.119.

⁶⁰ The Alhambra Palace in Granada is a spatial site of temporal disjunction, its merging of Roman, Islamic and Christian architecture forming a palimpsest of its complicated history. This spatial accommodation of temporal heterogeneity provides access to the pasts it represents, with the palace also notable for its preservation.

It is through her alter-ego that Amber's spectral role is indicated, as, preceding the narrative's 'beginning', Alhambra relates her own creation. In informing the reader that the film on show at the time of her conception was 'Poor Cow, with Terence Stamp', and in describing Stamp as 'an actor of such numinousness', the voice of Alhambra signals Amber's narrative employment, by invoking the next character that Stamp would play (p.1). Whilst the reference is, at best, suggestive, the intertext is significant, and serves as well to increase the novel's own temporal multiplicity. In its plot and form, *The Accidental* converses with Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1968 film *Teorema*, which, based on his text of the same title, relates the events that occur when a stranger enters the domestic space and the lives of those by whom it is inhabited. Through the sexual encounters he has with each member of the family portrayed, as well as with their maid, the stranger, played by Stamp, causes each to engage authentically with reality. Whilst in Pasolini's film this reawakening results in a repeated crisis of identity (the maid is the only character to progress productively from her encounter, becoming a divine presence herself), Smith, as Horton contends, rewrites Pasolini's 'pessimism' in the duality of Amber's 'obliterating, and yet also revelatory' role.⁶¹

It is in Smith's portrayal of Amber's temporal perspective that the intertext of *Teorema* is particularly significant, its analysis of spectatorship highlighting affect, as Maurizio Viano's discussion of the film elucidates, as essential within both experience and understanding. Pasolini's film demonstrates how signification is achieved through passion, 'the epistemological role of the body' indicated in its analysis of spectatorship,

⁶¹ Horton, "Everything You Ever Dreamed", p.644; p.645, quoting Berger. Reading Smith's novel in relation to post-9/11 trauma theory, Horton argues that Amber 'signifies 9/11's ambiguous destructive/productive ethical significance, as a demonic occurrence that simultaneously provides the basis for an urgently needed cultural reassessment' (p.651).

as the subjectivity of visual perception is underlined.⁶² Unveiling ‘the reality of difference’, the visitor in *Teorema*, Viano explains,

does not have a univalent meaning because he creates the possibility for meaning to exist for us as well as for the other characters in the film [...] the visitor is not one and the same for all the characters, for he simply makes the knowledge of their respective realities possible [...] He embodies an exceptional force capable of driving the signs in the text to a passionate (pathological) self-revelation. Hence, it is less a question of defining him than of understanding his effects.⁶³

Directly corresponding to Magnus’ explication of Amber as ‘an additive entity’, an absent presence knowable not ‘by what it means, or anything about it at all, more than the fact that it responds to certain given rules’, the affect of the unknowable that Viano underlines in *Teorema* is evident in Amber’s embodiment of suspended time (p.158). The portrayal of vision as ‘a mode of reading’ that Viano finds in Pasolini’s work is, moreover, made emphatic by Smith, as she examines the temporality of perception alongside the perception of time.⁶⁴ By evading the reassuring coherence of narrative interpretation, the exteriority of the stranger reveals the innumerable ways in which time can be lived and cognized.

Considering the ‘disorienting effects of spectral temporalities’, Levin posits Amber as ‘an “avatar” of spectral time’, whose haunting of narrative and form destabilizes temporal experience.⁶⁵ In his analysis, Levin considers spectral time to be synonymous with temporal multiplicity, and he accordingly stages the intrusion of Amber into the chronologically defined lives of the Smart family as a meeting of heterochronic with synchronic time. It is through an encounter with Amber that perceptions of time

⁶² Maurizio Viano, *A Certain Realism: Making Use of Pasolini’s Film Theory and Practice* (California: University of California Press, 1993), p.212.

⁶³ *A Certain Realism*, p.213; p.202.

⁶⁴ *A Certain Realism*, p.212.

⁶⁵ ‘Narrating Reminders’, p.41; p.42.

broaden as ‘boundaries between past and present become more permeable’.⁶⁶ Informed by the Marxist framework he employs, Levin’s reading of spectral time prioritizes the past. Amber, as spectral event or interruption allows a former ‘political agency’ to be reborn within the present in opposition to the ‘atrophying of global media’ by which it has become defined.⁶⁷ Yet although it is the presence of the past that Amber’s ‘spectral critique’ reveals in Levin’s reading, it is, as in Viano’s analysis of Pasolini’s stranger, her “‘out of joint’” temporality by which affect is enabled.⁶⁸ As ‘a means of disclosing the multiple temporalities that constitute the present’, the spectral time that Amber introduces ‘precipitates’, Levin argues, ‘a loss of mastery that can, through gestures of radical love and empathy, reconfigure social norms and intersubjective bonds’.⁶⁹ The ‘frenzied collision of temporalities’ that Amber introduces aligns specifically with a potential for affective connection.⁷⁰ It is both disruptive of and enabled by its association with representation, not only linguistic, but also visual in its scope.

‘The real world was elsewhere, like she was’: technology and representation

Whilst discussing them as a single narrative identity – ‘Amber/Alhambra’ – Julia Breitbach significantly distinguishes between the representative mediums with which Amber and Alhambra are respectively associated through the discrete temporalities that each exhibit. ‘[W]hile Alhambra expresses herself through *moving* pictures, her alter ego, Amber, is usually linked to the frozen moment of still photography’, testifying, Breitbach contends, to her ‘affiliation with saving, fixing, and preserving a particular contingent

⁶⁶ ‘Narrating Reminders’, p.41.

⁶⁷ ‘Narrating Reminders’, p.42.

⁶⁸ ‘Narrating Reminders’, p.47.

⁶⁹ ‘Narrating Reminders’, p.37; p.46.

⁷⁰ ‘Narrating Reminders’, p.42.

moment in the flux of time'.⁷¹ The preservative role that Amber's name indicates for Brietbach is, I would argue, far more complex than this analysis implies. More coherently affinitive with her name's definition in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), as a temporal pause that warns of change, or a signalling that 'heightened caution or vigilance is required', Amber's embodiment of represented time works to expose its artifice, preserving not 'a particular [...] moment' of the past, but the multiplicity of its representation.⁷² Amber makes emphatic the impossibility of preserving a 'contingent moment', preserving instead each moment's contingency – its innate liability to change.

Amber's exposure of narrative time is elucidated in her intricate association with the visual technology and luminary authorship of both photography and film, and the integration of the two mediums is underlined in Louise Hornby's reading of the former through Virginia Woolf's exploration of the latter. In 'The Cinema', Woolf considers the relationship between film and perception, describing the images seen on screen as

more real, or real with a different reality from that which we perceive in daily life. We behold them as they are when we are not there. We see life as it is when we have no part in it.⁷³

For Woolf, cinema re-enacts the 'displacement from the human to the external or object world' that Hornby elicits in her exploration of photographic stillness; it incites in its viewer an experience of absence in the perspectival position that it impels.⁷⁴ The renewed

⁷¹ Julia Breitbach, *Analog Fictions for the Digital Age: Literary Realism and Photographic Discourses in Novels after 2000* (New York: Camden House, 2012), p.153, emphasis original.

⁷² 'amber, n.2 and adj.', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2021), <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/6112?rskey=MPtfcz&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 05 October 2019].

⁷³ Virginia Woolf, quoted by Louise Hornby, *Still Modernism: photography, literature, film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.176.

⁷⁴ *Still Modernism*, p.147. This negation of the subject is also explored in Laura Mulvey's explication of the photographic index in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, Ltd, 2006).

perception that Hornby explores is recurrent throughout analyses of the photographic index; the medium's authentic representation of the real.

The indexicality of photography is heightened in *The Accidental* in Amber's association with cameraless photography, a mode of representation that, for Geoffrey Batchen, 'privilege[s] photography's indexical capacities over all others'.⁷⁵ Dependent on a physical interaction with the object that it depicts – the direct contact between 'referent and light-sensitive surface' – cameraless photography boasts a unique capability in its representation of time.⁷⁶ Continuing a theoretical tradition that underlines the medium's linking of time and vision, Batchen comments that,

A distinctive feature of cameraless photography is its ability to capture a diverse range of temporal experiences, from lengthy durations to fractions of a second, in both cases allowing the representation of phenomena otherwise beyond the capacity of the human eye to see.⁷⁷

As in Woolf's reflections on cinema, photography makes possible a non-human perception, yet cameraless photography further allows a 'diverse range of temporal experiences' to be captured in a single image, in a palimpsestic recording of multiple times of contact. Indeed, in its reliance on contact, cameraless photography demediates perception. It promises, Batchen explains, 'to fulfil a desire that lurks within all acts of representation: to collapse the boundary between absence and presence, between an image and what it's of, between that image and its process of production'.⁷⁸ Amber's repeated association with light can be read, in this way, as indicative of a temporal authorship – her suspension from time aiding her collapse of the boundary between time's absence and its presence, and between experience and its consciousness, or

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Batchen, *Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph* (London: DelMonico Books, 2016), p.46.

⁷⁶ *Emanations*, p.40.

⁷⁷ *Emanations*, p.41.

⁷⁸ *Emanations*, p.46.

representation. The vision she enables allows the multiple temporalities co-extant in the present to be perceived, without subjecting them to a narrative temporalization.

The renewal of vision produced by Amber's photographic authorship accords with Smith's reading of Woolf's statement, which underlines the elision of 'thereness' and 'non-thereness' that cinema creates, a self-effacement of the viewer that is joined, in Smith's own criticism, with a revelation of narrative illusion.⁷⁹ Smith comments that

No humans before this last century have experienced quite so intensely the edited mirror-imagery of our own living, the narrative language, narrative editing, narrative visualisation, delivery of narrative and documentary and advertising and propaganda information, on anything like the massive scale we have. Our brains, and our expectations, and our belief systems, must have been remade, to some extent, by it.⁸⁰

This analysis of cinema is joined with Smith's reflection upon her own engagement with the medium, in which she underlines the illusion of light through which motion is constructed through stasis, describing herself as enamoured by 'what's layeredly possible with just the play of light and dark and movement through minute frozen images'.⁸¹

Recalling the characterization of Brooke in *There but for the*, the stasis of movement that Smith identifies within cinema reinvokes the motif of light and dark that runs throughout the portrayal of Amber in *The Accidental*, as the character's suspension from time effects what Hornby terms 'the negative defamiliarization of stillness'.⁸² This, in Hornby's words,

opens the visual field to things that would normally remain unseen, unoccupied subject positions that would normally remain unrecognized, ways of seeing the world that are otherwise unknowable.⁸³

⁷⁹ Ali Smith, 'Gillian Beer interviews Ali Smith', in in *Ali Smith*, ed. by Germanà and Horton, pp.137-153 (p.139).

⁸⁰ Ali Smith, 'Interview: Ali Smith', *bookgroup.info*, 04 April 2006, <<http://www.bookgroup.info/041205/interview.php?id=19>> [accessed 06 September 2021].

⁸¹ 'Interview: Ali Smith'.

⁸² *Still Modernism*, p.9.

⁸³ *Still Modernism*, p.9.

The stillness intrinsic within photography lies behind the cinema screen, and this relationship between stasis and motion is repeated in Smith's excavation of narrative temporality, as she reveals the temporal suspension that it obscures. Smith's interest in exposing what is normally unseen is, in fact, pursued in Breitbach's own analysis, as she considers contemporary photographic, and literary realism's shared incorporation of the surreal or the unnatural. Drawing on the literary criticism of Susan Stewart, Breitbach examines 'nostalgia's utopia' of authenticity, formed because,

[b]y the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative (23).⁸⁴

According with the narratological analysis of nostalgia undertaken by Brooks and Currie, Breitbach underlines the distancing of the self from the present in a nostalgic attempt to temporalize the past. Through narrative, nostalgia is linked to represented time, and Amber's temporal broadening of such perspective repeatedly transforms the understanding of authenticity within the narrative of Smith's novel, whilst implicating the literary realism of its form.

Alongside technology, the question of representation is key to understanding Amber's spectral presence, as deconstructing their individual narratives of identity, she unites the respective gazes of Astrid, Magnus, Michael, and Eve in her evasion of causal explanation. Not needing to form meaning through narrative in her perception of self or other, Amber thus also resists the narratives imposed upon her. As each member of the Smart family attempts to temporalize her through biography, Amber refuses to give her age, or any fixed relation of her past, leading other characters of the narrative, and, by extension, the novel's reader, to infer an identity which will always be open and multiple in its characterization.

⁸⁴ *Analog Fictions*, p.145.

In the only direct narrative of Amber's past, the biographical understanding of character is playfully subverted. Offering Eve a cigarette from her packet of Gauloises (a French brand whose symbol, the winged helmet of Hermes/Mercury, reinforces her divine role as a messenger of the gods), Amber introduces the narrative as an authentic disclosure, apologizing for not being 'entirely straight', for not telling 'entirely the truth' earlier in the evening (p.100). However, the biographical overview that Eve extracts is one not necessarily attributable to Amber, or to any external, verifiable reality. It is presented instead as a discrete narrative, a separate story in which 'Amber MacDonald' becomes the subject. 'In the half-sentences of someone who finds something hard to say', Amber relates to Eve, that

When she was in her twenties Amber MacDonald worked in the city in a high-flying position [...] She had a Porsche. It was the 1980s. One sleeting winter night, the week before Christmas [...] a girl of seven wearing a little winter coat, its hood edged in fur, stepped between two cars on to the road in front of her and Amber MacDonald's car hit the child and the child died (pp.100-101).

Removed from its speaker (in direct contrast to the preceding section which relates the conversation of Eve and Amber with clarity), the narrative of 'Amber MacDonald' is one seemingly produced by the text, offered as an object for readerly interpretation. This is underlined as Amber's presence is reasserted at the end of the section, as Eve recalls that

She looked up, looked Eve right in the eye.
Well? she said. *Do you believe me?* (p.101, emphasis original).

In the question she poses, Amber impels a consideration of the temporal relationship between truth and representation, throwing into doubt the authenticity of a narrative in which the temporal setting is made clear, and, more pertinently, in which cause and effect are coherently linked in linear progression. Indeed, the role her question plays in effecting readership is reinforced by the use of italics, which reiterate those of the interview Eve has previously imagined in which the artifice of her authorship is exposed.

Traditional modes of realist representation are challenged in the presence of Amber, as her spectrality introduces the surreal into an authentic understanding of the present. For Breitbach, this is achieved specifically through a narrative portrayal that aligns Amber with the ambiguous temporality of photographic representation, but, as Levin's reading of the text suggests, her exteriority to narrative extends beyond this, destabilizing all representative modes. Such is evident in the renewal of vision that she incites in Michael, significant in its staging as an 'epiphany', a word whose figurative use within contemporary parlance as a moment of heightened understanding, is bound to spectrality and ekstasis in its literal definition as '[a] manifestation or appearance of some divine or superhuman being'.⁸⁵

Describing himself in the poetry he writes as a 'Lee | Miller/Man-Ray solarization', Michael becomes the product of Amber's solar authorship, not simply negated, but transformed (p.165). Denoting a technique whereby photographic film is exposed to light during its development, resulting in light and dark inverting within the image produced, solarization indicates the renewal of vision with which Amber is aligned. Michael's reference to the artists' who discovered the technique renders this renewal in highly temporal terms. This is, I suggest, revealed by a consideration of Man Ray's 'Object of Destruction', a ready-made that comprises a photograph of Miller's eye stuck to a moving metronome. Binding time to vision and to absence (Miller had recently ended their relationship), Man Ray's artwork further evokes the cycle of destruction and renewal that Amber's role enacts. Describing how to replicate the piece, Man Ray's instructions are as follows:

Cut out the eye from a photograph of one who has been loved but is seen no more [...] Attach the eye to the pendulum of a metronome and regulate the

⁸⁵ 'epiphany, n.2', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press June 2021), <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/63447?>> [accessed 20 October 2019].

weight to suit the tempo desired. Keep going to the limit of endurance. *With a hammer well-aimed*, try to destroy the whole at a single blow.⁸⁶

In a novel where '[e]verything is meant', no reference, however subtle, can be disregarded (p.3). Amber's authorship, one of perspective and of time, is indicated in Man Ray's 'Object of Destruction' in its connection of the eye to rhythm and in the method of its destruction – as Katrina either states, or Eve mishears within the novel, Amber's 'name is a hammer' (p.185). Moreover, the subsequent role of renewal that Amber assumes can be inferred from the complicated history of Man Ray's artwork. Destroyed and reproduced to such an extent that it resulted, in 1965, in an edition of one hundred such ready-mades, 'Object of Destruction', after many re-namings, was finally retitled 'Perpetual Motif' five years later, after a further edition of forty pieces, now with an eye opening and closing, was commissioned.⁸⁷

Like Man Ray's synecdochic representation, the loose meter of the sonnet that Michael writes sees that Miller's identity is divided, as a line break separates her name. Yet Michael is not only the author, but also the subject of representation, and he invokes the metronome's breaking in the disjointed rhythm of his writing, and in a self-description that figuratively aligns him with physical forms of temporal measurement; 'he turned from sand to glass and then he broke' (p.165). 'Overexposed' by Amber, Michael relates, in shattered typography, how

a new self b r o k e n took the world –

n o o n e (p.165; p.171).

⁸⁶ Man-Ray, quoted by Sophie Howarth, 'Man Ray: Indestructible Object: 1923, remade 1933, editioned replica 1965', *Tate*, April 2000, <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/man-ray-indestructible-object-t07614>>, [accessed 06 September 2021], my emphasis.

⁸⁷ Howarth 'Man Ray'. Amber's association with the artist can further be established in Man-Ray's own blurring of photographic and cinematic representation, as is noted by Batchen in *Emanations*.

He linguistically demonstrates the self-effacement of an affective perception, a revelation as clear as narrative, 'plain as abc', but that has thus far remained unseen (p.177). This unveiling of the invisible, or unreadable, is underlined in Amber's resistance to Michael's own authorship, as he attempts to narrativize her in the fantasies he constructs. As Michael tries to visualize a sexual encounter with Amber in various settings, he finds himself unable to do so; an impossibility of representation that is linked explicitly to cinematic illusion. As Michael relates how '[h]e put her down on her knees in front of him at the back of a near-empty cinema', his vision is intruded by light (p.75). He notes that, instead of Amber,

all he could see was the shaft of light from the projector above him, the movement of lazy dust in it as it changed with the frames, and ahead of him a stray pinpoint of light reflecting back off the screen where the screen had been tinily pierced (p.75).

Capable only of picturing her sitting opposite him, 'reading a book in a language he didn't know', Michael's inability to narrativize Amber is productive of an epiphany that binds affect to an acceptance of incomprehension (p.75). Exposed to a foreign language, both in his imagination of Amber and in the memory it produces of the time he spent with two Scandinavian girls as a child, Michael is witness to a representation that remains outside of meaning. With narrative inaccessible, his epiphany is linguistic. Realizing 'a new truth' that separates experience from its telling, he asks

who in the world gave a damn, when he was really alive, like this [...] about what things were called, about devices and conceits and rules and the boundaries of genres, the learned chronologies, the sorted and given definitions of things? (p.76).

Supporting Breitbach's promotion of the 'contingent Real' within contemporary literature, Michael's epiphany directly exemplifies Ihab Hassan's concept of 'fiduciary realism', on which Breitbach's argument is founded. In declaring that 'Silence or Absence is the ground of language, the ground of Being itself', Hassan binds the affective

realism he considers to an absence of knowledge, or ‘self-dispossession’.⁸⁸ In the critique that it produces, Michael’s epiphany, the ‘holy moment’ of ‘the empty seat filled with nothing but goodness’, reflects Hassan’s reasoning that ‘fiduciary realism [...] demands faith and empathy and trust precisely because it rests on Nothingness, the nothingness within all our representations, the final authority of the Void’.⁸⁹

Through the spectral and technological presence in which it is embodied, suspended time thus disrupts representation both within and through Smith’s narrative, working to establish realism in the contemporary period as one that promotes ‘an aesthetic of trust’ – a realism that, as shown by the texts considered in my first chapter, accommodates the multiplicity of interpretation. Indeed, existing, as Smith herself relates, as ‘*a pure fictional construct [...] made-up truth*’, Amber can be read as a personification of the text, her narrative exteriority signifying the heterogenous temporal possibilities of her artifice.⁹⁰ It is, somewhat antithetically, the temporal elusiveness of *The Accidental*’s stranger that proves formative of its plot, driving the narratives of Astrid, Magnus, Michael, and Eve from ‘beginning’, through ‘middle’ to ‘end’. Rather than a disavowal of chronology, what Smith’s novel offers is a recognition of chronology’s contingency, inducing, in Levin’s terms, ‘a loss of mastery’, through which time’s subjectivity, heterogeneity, and communality is revealed.

Making time visible: narrativizing the heterogeneity of presence

As has been discussed in scholarship of the novel, Amber’s presence serves a combined purpose of destruction and renewal in the effect it has on both visual perception

⁸⁸ Ihab Hassan, ‘Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust’, *Angelaki: journal of the theoretical humanities*, 8.1 (2003), pp.1-10 (p.9; p.7).

⁸⁹ Smith, p.76; Hassan, ‘Beyond Postmodernism’, p.10.

⁹⁰ Ali Smith, quoted by Julia Breitbach in *Analog Fictions*, p.148, emphasis original.

and understanding. Breitbach notes that Amber ‘stalls conceptual and perceptual routines’, Dominic Head considers her ‘cathartic function’ to be related to ‘image, and with perception and engagement’, and Katharine Weese reads Amber as an ‘agent of defamiliarization’, contesting ‘all four characters’ habitual practices of perception and representation’.⁹¹ Yet, whilst Weese’s analysis, in particular, examines how ‘[t]he novel depicts the unnatural permeation of Alhambra’s “self” into other characters and events they experience’, the fact that it is the temporality of Amber’s, or Alhambra’s, perspective that is incorporated remains neglected within readings of the text.⁹²

In her embodiment of suspended time, Amber’s presence within *The Accidental* incites the temporal displacement of its other more conventional characters. As examined already in Michael’s aesthetic epiphany, both the narrative construction of time and the visual perception it informs become disrupted, revealing the mediation of experience in an increasing awareness of temporal communality. Suspended time is portrayed as the (non)temporality of affect, replacing unitary narratives of individual causality with the interconnected temporal multiplicity of shared authorship. In line with affect’s opening of self to other, it is in Amber’s two physical engagements – her sexual relationship with Magnus, and her kissing of Eve – that her incitement of temporal ekstasis is most apparent. Noting, as has already been discussed, that Amber’s watch ‘always says seven o’clock no matter what time it actually is’, Magnus’ first sexual encounter with Amber portrays his own temporal displacement (p.143).

I need to keep an eye on the time, she says.

Yes, but it’s always the wrong time, Magnus says.

That’s what you think, Amber says.

Then, with her watch hand, she reaches down. What she does next blanks his

⁹¹ Breitbach, *Analog Fictions*, p.153; Dominic Head, ‘Idiosyncrasy and Currency: Ali Smith and the Contemporary Canon’, in *Ali Smith*, ed. by Germanà and Horton, pp.101-114 (p.107); Katharine Weese, ‘Feminism, Film, and the Fantastic: An “Unnaturalizing” Reading of Ali Smith’s *The Accidental*’, *Storyworlds*, 8.2 (2016), 135-160 (p.135).

⁹² ‘Feminism, Film, and the Fantastic’, p.148.

mind completely of time.
Time is nothing at a time like that (p.144).

The sexual act that Amber performs ‘with her watch hand’ removes Magnus from time, suspending him from the linear understanding of his traumatic repetition of the past, and exposing him to an alternate perspective in which multiplicity is embraced. Realizing that what Amber offers ‘is an astonishing way of looking differently at things’, this transformation in time-consciousness is explored in visual terms (p.144). As Magnus divulges that ‘it keeps getting dark when it’s light’, Amber diagnoses him with ‘persistence of vision’, enabling him to recognize the impairment of vision that his narrativization of time has caused (p.144).

Following his encounter with Amber Magnus incorporates her perspective, recognizing the artifice of the narratives that surround him. In relating the lack of punishment he faces after his suspension from school, Magnus opposes the narrative he is prescribed, analysing the falsity of its ‘abc’ progression. Thus, as Eve repeats the school’s verdict during a telephone call, it becomes punctuated with absences in Magnus’ hearing: ‘It’s (blank) this coming year (blank) repercussions (something) rest of your life’ (p.241). The artifice of ‘real’ time that this disruption signals is further emphasized in its concurrency with Magnus’ watching of *Love Actually* at the cinema, as noting the screen and the brick wall that it covers, and aware of the noise of the projector, he aligns the illusion of cinema with that of narrative, deducing that ‘the film is almost over now because everything is adding up in it’ (p.247). Through suspension, narrative closure is rejected, the cleanness of causality replaced by an incorporation of connection, as, following this refusal of narrative sense-making, Magnus realizes that ‘[h]is watch had stopped’, and progresses home to tell Astrid the truth (p.256).

Such affective ekstasis is repeated in Amber’s kissing of Eve, who experiences a virtual displacement:

Eve was moved beyond belief by the kiss. The place beyond belief was terrifying. There, everything was different, as if she had been gifted with a new kind of vision, as if disembodied hands had strapped some kind of headset on to her that revealed all the unnamed, invisible colours beyond the basic human spectrum, and as if the world beyond her eyes had slowed its pace especially to reveal the spaces between what she usually saw and the way that things were tacked temporarily together with thin thread across these spaces (p.202).

Spatialized in its portrayal as ‘the place beyond belief’, Eve’s removal from time’s causality produces an increased perception in its vision of connectivity rather than causation. The ‘new kind of vision’ induced by Eve’s self-distance reveals narrative temporalization to be no more than a fragile tacking of events ‘temporarily together with thin thread’ across spaces made newly perceptible. Directly invoking John Berger’s analysis of cinema, in which ‘see[ing] between two frames’, we ‘come upon a part of the visible which wasn’t destined for us’, Eve’s renewed vision further recalls the epigraph Berger provides to Smith’s novel.⁹³ This states that,

[b]etween the experience of living a normal life at this moment on the planet and the public narratives being offered to give a sense to that life, the empty space, the gap, is enormous.

In *The Accidental*, the ‘public narratives’ are also personal. What succeeds not only Magnus’ and Eve’s, but Astrid’s and Michael’s narrative understanding of time, is an awareness of time’s construction, and thus the heterogeneity of its consciousness and experience.

Indeed, the ‘democratic looking’ that Smith finds in Berger is underlined in the collective potential of this passage.⁹⁴ When, after being kissed, Eve ‘stop[s] Amber in the hall’, Eve, and the rest of the family stop too,

Astrid stood frozen. Magnus froze on the stair. The noise of chopping in the kitchen stopped; Michael was in there with his knife frozen in mid chop, mid

⁹³ Ali Smith, ‘A Gift for John Berger by Ali Smith’, *Verso Books*, 06 December 2018, <<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2923-a-gift-for-john-berger-by-ali-smith>> [accessed 07 September 2021].

⁹⁴ ‘A Gift for John Berger’.

air (p.202).

Evicting Amber from the holiday home, Eve assumes her spectral role, taking ‘a gap year from her history’ to arrive, unannounced, in the lives of a family to whom she is a stranger (p.286). In doing so, she, like Magnus, resists temporalization, denying others’ attempts to narrativize her in their understanding. First misconceived as staff, then assumed to be a guest, Eve is ‘[f]irst late, then early’, evoking her own embodiment of time’s suspension (p.302). Yet whilst disruptive of the synchronic constructions of time around her, Eve’s exteriority to time is generative of connection. No longer fictionalizing those of the past, Eve now incorporates the dead directly within her vision, and the increased perception of her temporal suspension is underlined in the last words recorded of the message she sends home: *‘from here I can see’* (p.289, emphasis original).

Whilst physically absent by the novel’s close, Amber’s temporality thus remains, incorporated into the perceptions of those she has affected. In looking at the family photograph taken by Amber during the time spent in Norfolk, Astrid considers not those depicted, but the perspective of its photographer, underlining the temporal suspension of affect in her analysis as she recognizes that ‘[a]t that moment forever in the photograph they are all looking at Amber and Amber is looking back at them’ (p.228). In a narrative populated by characters consciously pursuing an understanding of self and time (and of the two concepts in relation), and a form which simultaneously signals and contends the temporalization of narrative closure, *The Accidental* both portrays and initiates a rewriting of time-consciousness, in which time’s intersubjectivity and its openness are made to mean.

‘the place where reality and the imagination meet’: time and representation in the ‘Seasons’ tetralogy

Smith's most recent work builds upon the ways thus far explored, in which suspended time has been represented in her fiction, combining an analysis of perception with absence in an examination of visual representation and the temporal affect that it inaugurates. Visual art permeates Smith's writing, consistently described not through the critical distance of a third-person narrator, but through the emotive and subjective response of its narrative audience. This response invariably takes place within suspended time, as the artistic encounter incites the ekstasis of its viewer whilst revealing that of representation itself. The shared disjuncture enables affective connections to be made not only between art and viewer, but also, in the opening of temporal perception, between the seen and the unseen, as in her representation of suspended time Smith continues to make absence visible, whilst ensuring that it remains unknown.

In Smith's writing, 'images are gifts', and like the spectral presences that pervade her fiction, they confer the temporal implications and alterity of the Derridean sense of the term. Disrupting narrative time not in its immortalization of the instant represented, but via representation's own temporal suspension, the gift of the image is, for Smith, one that reveals connection *at the same time* as it ensures the open-endedness of meaning, and thereby of meaning-making, and the consciousness of time. In her quartet of novels named after the seasons Smith directly responds to contemporary politics, society and culture in a rapid writing and publication process. Within narratives that examine the physical and social borders that exist between countries and national identities, alongside personal memory and loss, Smith embeds visual representation, the encounter with which suspends individual time-consciousness, to uncover new ways of seeing and understanding. Each novel offers its reader the work of a different artist; the collage of Pauline Boty intersects with *Autumn's* exploration of gender and politics, the sculpture of Barbara Hepworth accompanies *Winter's* excavation of memory and myth, the vast chalk

pieces of Tacita Dean inform the border crossings portrayed in *Spring*, whilst the film of Lorenza Mazzetti aids the enquiry into communication that *Summer* pursues. It is through the suspended time of art, and of art's literary representation, that new ways of seeing, giving, and sharing time are produced.

By incorporating visual art within the 'seasons' novels, Smith makes manifest the necessity of an affective perception within meaning-making, as representation's suspension of time counters a narrative understanding that is dependent on conclusion. Representing each artwork she explores through the subjective responses of her characters, Smith's repeated portrayal of the interpretative act convincingly demonstrates that promoted within postcritical theory. Led by the thought of Rita Felski, among others, postcritique offers an affective mode of readership based not on the dissociation that is integral to semiotic or narrative analysis, but rather on attachment, as text and reader (painting and viewer) interconnect and impact one another.⁹⁵

In positioning postcritical thought in opposition to established modes of 'critique', Felski asserts that 'critique [...] looks backward, and in doing so it often presumes to understand the past better than it understood itself. Hindsight is translated into insight'.⁹⁶ Dependent on conclusion, critique follows the reflective meaning-making prevalent within the philosophy of time and narratology, establishing the subject within an anachronistic ekstasis. Postcritique, in contrast, offers a theory of interpretation in which '[d]etachment gives way to implication and entanglement', as '[i]nstead of absolute temporal difference and distance, we have a hotchpotch and rich confusion, a spillage across period boundaries in which we are connected to the historical phenomena we

⁹⁵ This contrast is elucidated by Felski's introduction to *The Limits of Critique* and by Marielle Macé in 'Ways of Reading, Modes of Being', trans. by Marlon Jones, *New Literary History*, 44.2 (2013) 213-229, (p.217).

⁹⁶ *Limits*, p.123.

describe'.⁹⁷ Disjunct from temporal progression yet immersed in time, postcritique replaces causal connection with a network of contingent relations in the meaning-making it proposes, in clear resonance with Smith's fiction and the viewership it portrays.

It is such that Elizabeth Anker finds in a text that precedes the seasons novels, *How to be both* – a text that offers 'something of a playbook in postcritical reading' in its analysis of interpretation.⁹⁸ In accordance with Felski's exposition, Anker contrasts the dispassion of critical distance with the epistemological value of affective attachment, arguing that Smith's 'novel effectuates a materialist, sensory, and embodied immersion in the experience of reading that short-circuits whatever negative distantiation [...] others attribute to critique'.⁹⁹ Indeed, prefiguring many of the main concerns of the seasons novels, *How to be both* is significant in elucidating Smith's representation of representation. The novel's interest in time and narrative is evinced in a formal refusal of chronological precedence and a narrative exploration of the significance of memory and knowledge in relation to the visual perception of the present. Divided into two sections, both titled 'one', the structure of Smith's novel presents narratives of past and present alongside one another, the order in which the reader encounters them left to chance through a publication process in which within half of the books produced the text's structure was reversed. One of the sections, set in the present, follows George, a teenage girl mourning the loss of her mother, who recalls the trip they went on to see the frescoes of Italian Renaissance painter Francescho del Cossa. The second narrative, also set in the present, is voiced by Francescho herself, as, resurrected, she observes George and recalls her own past, including her painting of the frescoes that George will later (in terms of

⁹⁷ *Limits*, p.159.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth S. Anker, 'Postcritical Reading, the Lyric, and Ali Smith's *How to be Both*', *Diacritics*, 45.4 (2017), 16-38, (p.19).

⁹⁹ 'Postcritical Reading', p.20.

narrative, if not structural, chronology) stand in front of. The narrative foregrounds questions of art, time, and vision, elucidating their affinity and the importance of absence within them, and establishing an affective understanding of time that places feeling over fact as it embraces mystery; the freedom '[n]ot to have to know'.¹⁰⁰

For Francescho, painting 'is a feeling thing', and in a novel immersed in images of crumbling walls and boundaries and which, faced with a plethora of dialectic binaries, tirelessly confirms its position as 'both', that the critical perspective Smith represents is also one of affect can hardly be in question (p.228). Francescho's understanding of viewership posits seeing as a transformation based on connection rather than on distance. Smith's novel advocates a postcritical mode of perception, attesting to James Elkins' analysis of vision in *The Object Stares Back*, that '[u]ltimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer'.¹⁰¹ This is, indeed, made explicit by the artist figure that Smith's narrative resurrects, as considering the communicative power of trompe l'oeil within painting, Francescho becomes impassioned by 'the thing that happens' when, rather than the subjects or objects it depicts, 'the life of the picture itself steps beyond the frame' (p.308). Francescho explains that when this happens, art

does 2 opposing things at once.

The one is, it lets the world be seen and understood.

The other is, it unchains the eyes and the lives of those who see it and gives them a moment of freedom, from its world and from their world both (p.308).

¹⁰⁰ Ali Smith, *How to be both* (London: Penguin, 2015), p.60. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰¹ James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* (New York: Harvest, 1997), pp.11-12. That 'seeing alters' is, indeed, playfully demonstrated in Smith's novel, as in response to her mother's speculation that Del Cossa's depiction of a 'boyish girl' figure indicates the female gender of 'its originator', the text resurrects the painter as female.

Suspended in time, the ‘life of the picture’ produces and shares in the ekstasis of its viewer, who momentarily ‘free’ from *both* the world they inhabit and the represented world they are observing, occupies a virtual space in-between.

Both perception and meaning-making are aligned with this ekstasis – reforming the temporal distance of critique. Considering the portrayal of ‘[s]eeing and being seen’ as a singular event within the novel, Cara L. Lewis supports Anker’s viewpoint, propounding that ‘the post-critical vision of reading as “a cocreation between actors that leaves neither party unchanged” (Felski, *Limits* 84)’, is made manifest.¹⁰² Reading this passage, in which Francescho considers the permeability of the frame, Lewis contends that in such viewership ‘we are temporarily suspended in the gift of the moment’.¹⁰³ Indicating a postcritical ekstasis, she argues that,

Smith reasserts the separateness of the worlds of the painting and the viewer [...] a separation that paradoxically also accomplishes the opposite: ‘it lets the world be seen and understood.’ [...] What the artwork manages to do, then, is to offer both an alternate ontological state – a mode of being that is not dependent on communication between the separate worlds of the picture and the viewer, or the novel and the reader – and a new episteme, so that we might know the world differently.¹⁰⁴

Whilst her argument that ‘the worlds of the painting and the viewer’ remain separate seems to contradict the postcritique of her analysis, Lewis’ evocation of ‘the gift of the moment’, and its enabling of both an ‘alternate ontological state’ and ‘a new episteme’, is productive in indicating the temporal ekstasis that Smith’s portrayal of viewership involves.

This viewership is evident in George’s encounter with Del Cossa’s work, as becoming disjunct from time, her perception is renewed. Previously described as a

¹⁰² Cara L. Lewis, ‘Beholding: Visuality and Postcritical Reading in Ali Smith’s *How to be both*’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 42.3 (2019), 129-150 (p.141).

¹⁰³ ‘Beholding’, p.144.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Beholding’, p.144.

‘migrant of her own existence’ as she watches an historical documentary from two different start points on separate devices, whilst simultaneously viewing YouTube clips on a third screen, George disregards the significance of the past in her temporalization – ‘[T]hat was then. This is now’ (p.41; p.104). Whilst her ability to manipulate the temporal conditions of her viewership and attention has the potential, to use Laura Mulvey’s analysis of digital technology in *Death 24× a Second*, to disrupt the ‘temporal aesthetic’ of the documentary, altering ‘the traditionally linear structure of narrative, fragmenting its continuities’, George’s observation indicates a consciousness of time in which the present has autonomy, demonstrating Felski’s indictment of a critical vision that translates hindsight into insight.¹⁰⁵ George’s aesthetic viewership, in contrast, incites a temporal ekstasis in which perception is renewed, as observing other ways of seeing – both her brother’s and her mother’s – she demonstrates a postcritical interpretation.

As Henry responds to George’s intentionally humorous ‘what’s-the-point-of-art game’ in sincerity, attesting to its prettiness, George impulsively describes the frescoes as ‘spectacular’ (p.46; p.48). In response to her mother’s silence (‘[s]he is looking’), George ‘looks too’, an act of focus underlined by a shift in perceptive scale as initially regarding the room and the act of looking it too encourages, George observes the walls themselves in a detailed description of del Cossa’s work (p.49). Moving across foreground and background, and between different subjects and different scales, vision is democratized in the viewership George ultimately performs. Noting that what she first describes is ‘only one detail. There are details like it everywhere’, George goes on to list the various subjects that the fresco portrays as she spatially navigates the image documenting what is ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘above and below’ (pp.50-51). This alteration of perspective both parallels and directs George’s shifting consciousness of time as in her understanding of

¹⁰⁵ *Death 24× a Second*, p.26.

grief, and in her school project on del Cossa, temporal boundaries previously upheld become dissolved. Emphasized throughout the multiple acts of perception that it portrays, *How to be both* demonstrates how Smith uses visual representation within her narratives to explore the perceptive possibilities of a viewership in which absence and presence, real and imagined, and self and other become co-constitutive of meaning – indicative of ‘a new episteme’.

Sharing perception: affective viewership in Smith’s quartet of seasons

Whilst in their rapid response to contemporary events Smith’s ‘seasons’ novels evince a determined attention upon the present, this temporal focus is nonetheless immersed within the polytemporality of experience, which, as this chapter has aimed to show, is central to Smith’s conception of time. Thus, whilst each narrative is embedded within an irrevocably current political and social context, the portrayal of this context is led as always by the individual, in formation of a temporality that is at once subjective and communal. This interweaving of temporal and perspectival scales is delicately achieved in each novel’s paralleling of contemporary issues with aesthetic viewership. The decontextualization, interaction between past and present, and affective immersion essential to postcritique are made evident through the artists Smith examines, and this impacts on the perception of her narrative subjects as art steps ‘beyond the frame’. The collage of Boty, in its democratic space, establishes connections between different subjects, objects and times; the sculpture of Hepworth elicits the change of perspective that a meeting of past and present, real and imagined effects; whilst the vast chalk-works of Dean bind seeing with feeling in their revelation of structure, and the film of Mazzetti professes a belief in the possibility of an alternative communicative form. In the temporal suspension integral to viewership, the perception of time, and of the contemporary present

is reconfigured – made open and heterogeneous in its renewal.

Introducing a new collection of his writings at the British Library in 2015, a year before the publication of *Autumn* began the seasons project, Smith describes her engagement with Berger, in an analysis of her readership:

My encounters with John Berger, whom I hadn't met till tonight, have always been vitally personal, coup de foudre then coup de foudre again, then the next time I read him, coup de foudre, struck by light, by enlightenment. I suspect many of his readers would recognise that sense of being literally struck, gifted something that makes you more than yourself – the thing that happens when the work you're reading or the art you're seeing actually demands of you that you engage, passes out of itself and takes up residence in the self, in correspondence with it.¹⁰⁶

Smith's appraisal of Berger underlines the aesthetic encounter, whether verbal or visual, to be one of ekstasis. 'Coup de foudre' literally means a 'stroke of lightning' and used to denote 'a sudden unforeseen occurrence' or 'revelation', it is a phenomenon defined by its temporal implications, signifying interruption, pause, or suspension.¹⁰⁷ It is, however, an interruption that recurs for Smith every time she reads Berger's work, indicating not only a temporal break, but also a renewal. Smith aligns the 'sense of being literally struck' with the gift and with a transformation that is reciprocal – affecting the perception of the reader, made 'more than' themselves, as well as the meaning of the text as it too extends, 'pass[ing] out of itself and tak[ing] up residence in the self, in correspondence with it'. It is the breaking down, or opening out, of boundaries that Smith's encounter with Berger's work entails: in the interpretative act, subject and object share in ekstasis.

This portrayal of readership closely corresponds to that already examined in *How to be both*; recalling Francescho's explanation of the 'thing that happens when the picture

¹⁰⁶ 'A Gift for John Berger'.

¹⁰⁷ 'coup, n.3', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2021), <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43112?redirectedFrom=coup+de+foudre#eid8113237>> [accessed 07 September 2021].

itself steps beyond the frame'. But the power aesthetic representation has to strike its reader or viewer and so alter their perception is moreover explored throughout Smith's 'seasons' quartet in her portrayal of the affective response that visual art incites. In each novel, Smith represents a viewership that is experienced as an ekstasis, signalled by the suspension of time with which it is concordant, and underlined in the recurrence of the word or image of being 'struck'. Just as George's mother in *How to be both* is described to be metaphorically 'struck by lightning' as she views the frescoes of del Cossa, so Elisabeth, in *Autumn*, examines the elements of Boty's work that 'strike' her imagination, Sophia, in *Winter*, describes the 'strikingly beautiful' stones of Hepworth, Richard is 'stopped in his tracks' by the art of Dean in *Spring*, and art is 'a shock' in *Summer*. Each encounter is, as in Smith's own readership, portrayed as an interruption of time, productive of a virtual ekstasis that is shared by art and viewer, in an extension of boundaries that enables correspondence.

'an art of putting things together': *Autumn*, imagination, and the collage of Pauline Boty

Engaged with repeatedly by the characters of its narrative, as well as formative of its structure, the work of British female pop artist, Pauline Boty, is central to *Autumn*. Boty's work, and her biography both indicate a breaking of boundaries, and, as Sue Tate notes throughout her extensive writing on the artist, Boty's representation of an affective and embodied experience is concordant. Discussing the exclusion of female artists from Pop exhibitions, Tate explains that '[g]iving expression to an affective, female experience, their work was deeply destabilizing to the narrative of Pop which was built

around masculinist assumptions and an imperative for “detachment”¹⁰⁸ Replacing detachment for affect, Boty’s work ‘eschews the slick closed surface of many Pop works’, exceeding the frame, and thus extending the world represented to that of its viewer, enforcing an interaction between them.¹⁰⁹ This affective extension is made emphatic in Boty’s inclusion of contemporary figures in her works, depicting not only those of popular culture, but also those of politics; exemplified most famously in her portrayal of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. It is furthered in her promotion of her art, as she chose to pose in front of her own pieces, often naked, and often assuming the exact stances of her subjects or of famous paintings of the female nude, including those of Diego Velasquez and François Boucher.¹¹⁰ In doing so, Boty actively engaged with and invoked the contemporary cultural consciousness to which her works responded, refusing their solitary existence as ‘objects d’art’ in drawing attention to the participative role of the viewer.

In *Autumn*, it is through Boty that Smith portrays the temporal suspension of art, the collage form of her work invoking a medium in which,

all the rules can be thrown into the air, and size and space and time and foreground and background all become relative, and because of these skills everything you think you know gets made into something new and strange.¹¹¹

As spatial and temporal dimensions become relative, the collage of Boty’s artwork collates difference, placing images as diverse as a ship and a hair advert, or figures as

¹⁰⁸ Sue Tate, ‘Re-occupying the Erotic Body: Paintings and “Performance” of Pauline Boty, British Pop Artist (1938-66)’, in *Sexual Politics of Desire and Belonging*, ed. by Nick Rumens and Alejandro Cervantes-Carson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp.205-228 (p.217). Tate also notes Boty’s subsequent exclusion from feminist discourse, arguing that this was due to Boty’s embrace of female sexuality and of the ‘reifying imagery of mass culture’ (p.217).

¹⁰⁹ ‘Re-occupying’, p.207.

¹¹⁰ This is noted by Tate in her 2007 chapter.

¹¹¹ Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), pp.71-72. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

disparate as Marcel Proust and Kennedy on common ground and thus in dialogue with one another. Indeed, as Smith has noted, Boty ‘forged an art of putting things together’, and in her formal democratization of temporal significance, a singular narrative of meaning is refused.¹¹² In a passage of free indirect discourse which playfully captures Boty’s voice, Smith indicates the impacts this collage-like affinity between suspended time and connection has upon its viewer. Boty asks her viewers, (Smith, her readers), to,

Imagine if pictures in a gallery weren’t just pictures but were actually sort of alive.

Imagine if time could be kind of suspended, rather than us be suspended in it (p.245).

The aliveness of pictures is linked to their temporal disjuncture. Smith captures not art’s static immortality, but its repeated and vigorous re-happening as it interacts with multitudinous and varied presents through the imagination of its viewers.

This interaction is demonstrated in the ekphrasis that Daniel, *Autumn*’s lead authority on art, performs as he relates an image of Boty’s work to his young next-door neighbour – the novel’s second central protagonist, Elisabeth. The formal implications of ekphrasis as a verbal description of the visual will be examined later in this chapter, but this narrative ekphrasis is significant here in its merging of remembered and imagined time. The shared encounter of an absent artwork neither subject can physically see displaces perception from the present, enabling an interpretation that is interpersonal. In giving Elisabeth a choice of two games – ‘One. Every picture tells a story. Two. Every story tells a picture’ – Daniel presents the interdependency of the verbal and the visual as mediums of representation (p.72). In making the image described one recollected, rather than visually present, Smith underlines the temporality of the ekphrastic act, as it re-

¹¹² Ali Smith, ‘Ali Smith on the prime of pop artist Pauline Boty’, *Guardian*, 22 October 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/22/ali-smith-the-prime-of-pauline-boty>> [accessed 10 October 2021].

presents the past, opening up meaning to new interpretation as it is verbalized by one subject and re-visualized in the imagination of another. The suspension of time is, in this way, again aligned with a sharing of perception. Elisabeth becomes the ‘pupil of [Daniel’s] eye’:

It’s real, Daniel said. Well, it was once. A friend of mine did it. An artist. But I’m making it up from memory. How did it strike your imagination? Like it would be if I was taking drugs [...] everything was in my head all at once, all sort of crowding in (pp.74-75).

The imagined viewership of Boty’s art conveys an experience of temporal suspension that is synonymous with its multiplicity. With her head becoming crowded with the details she imagines, Elisabeth demonstrates the entanglement that Felski’s postcritique conveys, and the ‘hotchpotch and rich confusion’ of its merging temporal perspectives is emulated by the permeability of Smith’s fiction.

Oscillating between Elisabeth’s interactions with Daniel as a child, and her visiting of him in hospital as an adult, and portraying Daniel’s dreams, the collage-like form of *Autumn* is apparent, and is much noted in early criticism of the novel. Whether read as a reflection of Brexit’s ‘divisive consequences’, or as a ‘quasi paratactical and/and/and’ inviting of interpretation, the readership that *Autumn* demands is agreed to be one of disjunction, but it is, as in all Smith’s fiction, a disjunction that is formative of connection.¹¹³ Exploring the perception that Smith’s temporal layering offers, Petra Rau reads *Autumn*’s suspension of time in line with theories of critical distance, arguing that

[t]o be alert to such semantic possibilities requires a Nietzschean untimeliness, a slight disjunction. The narrative voice thus pauses, several times, as do Elisabeth and her mother, to breathe and ponder the difficulty of

¹¹³ Kristian Shaw, ‘BrexLit’, in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. by Robert Eaglestone (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp.15-30, (p.21); Petra Rau, ‘*Autumn* after the referendum’, in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. by Robert Eaglestone (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp.31-43 (p.37).

identifying the theme.¹¹⁴

This critical distance, is, however, also affective, as Rau notes that ‘[t]he subjective experience of time and its unknowable import feature repeatedly’ within Smith’s novel, as ‘[f]iction blurs with facts, news with classic tales’.¹¹⁵ Such liminality between real and imagined is integral to *Autumn*’s analysis of narrative time, in which the hospitality of stories – their openness to the other, and to otherness – is consistently underlined. Considering it to be ‘a time of people saying stuff to each other and none of it actually ever becoming dialogue’, Elisabeth contrasts her contemporary political context with the interpersonal narration that Daniel once promoted (p.112). She recollects his suggestion that,

whoever makes up the story makes up the world [...] So always try to welcome people into the home of your story [...] if you’re telling a story, always give your characters the same benefit of the doubt you’d welcome when it comes to yourself [...] And always give them a choice [...] By which I mean characters who seem to have no choice at all. Always give them a home (p.120).

In Daniel’s and Elisabeth’s acts of co-authorship, narrative repeatedly opens up to the time of the reader-as-reteller (the tale of Goldilocks, for example, is transformed in the modern version they create).

Through her portrayal of both aesthetic and literary interpretation, Smith indicates the temporality of representation to be one of heterogeneity, a layering of times that evades simple narrative causality in its infinite possibility of renewal. This dialogic relationship between representation and interpretation, underlining the mutability of narrative, clearly accords with Boty’s work – referenced directly in Elisabeth’s description of her 1963 piece, *The Only Blond In The World*. In the painting, Boty leaves

the little corner [...] just the bare canvas like a corner of the painting had come away by itself, trompe l’oeil like you could peel them off and know

¹¹⁴ ‘*Autumn after the referendum*’, p.37.

¹¹⁵ ‘*Autumn after the referendum*’, p.37.

that's what they were, images (p.245).

Drawing attention to the factitiousness of the medium, and further combining cubist, futurist, and impressionist techniques, Boty's work, and Smith's inclusion of it makes what Tate describes in her consideration of the artist's work, as 'a play on pictorial space that reflect[s] the ambiguous relationship between fantasy and reality'.¹¹⁶ It is a liminality that is, in *Autumn*, and in the novels that succeed it, imbued with temporality, and revealed through the suspension of time that art creates.

'a way of seeing to the other side': *Winter*, myth, and the sculpture of Barbara Hepworth

The interaction between past and present that the spatial form of Boty's collage performs in *Autumn* is explored further in *Winter* through the sculptures of Barbara Hepworth and the intertemporal weaving of history and myth that they inform. Hepworth is an artist who aims to destabilize boundaries. Preferring to situate her works outside so that they can respond to and be changed by the landscape around them, her sculpture is characterized by a desire for interaction, and this fluidity is captured in the rounded edges and holes that have become the motifs of her artistic production. Her sculptures invoke cyclicity in their curvature at the same time as they signify absence in the gaps that are integral to their structure, and each piece thus operates as a specific meeting place between temporalities, as absence becomes co-formative with presence. It is such blurring of boundaries that Smith's novel explores in its representation of time and vision, shown most lucidly in the characterization of Sophia, who introduced to Hepworth's sculpture in the narrative past, is accompanied, in the narrative present, by the vision of a

¹¹⁶ Sue Tate, "'Forward via a Female Past": Pauline Boty and the Historiographic Promise of the Woman Pop Artist', in *Feminism Reframed*, ed. by Alexandra M. Kokoli (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp.177-203, (p.183).

disembodied head.

Hepworth's work is encountered physically only once within *Winter*'s narrative, introduced, like Boty's work, by Daniel, *Autumn*'s tutor of the eye. The piece is viewed by Sophia, who, recalling the sculpture years later, relates that, '[r]eally it was just two round stones. But they were strikingly beautiful stones. The sculpture was in two pieces, I mean. They were meant to fit together'.¹¹⁷ Sophia's description of the stones as 'strikingly beautiful' aligns with the 'coup de foudre' of Smith's readership, and the postcritical viewership that it evinces. Feeling compelled to interact with the artwork from all sides, '[i]t makes you walk round it, it makes you look through it from different sides, see different things from different positions', Sophia eschews critical distance for affective 'correspondence', in a viewership that diversifies perception (p.273, emphasis original). Hepworth's work allows the visibility of 'inside and outside something at once', and this co-constitution of meaning, refusing of the binary of absence and presence, is mirrored in the interaction between artwork and viewer that takes place as the frame is broken (p.273). Such blurring of boundaries is underlined in Jeanette Winterson's analysis of Hepworth's 'Single Form' (1963), as commenting that '[b]y surrounding space with form, the invisible becomes visible', she posits that '[t]he hole is a place of entry but not a place of defeat. It is a way of seeing to the other side, recognising that there is another side'.¹¹⁸

In *Winter* it is not only Hepworth's sculpture that 'steps beyond the frame' but Sophia herself, as she twice moves from being the object of another's gaze to enacting

¹¹⁷ Ali Smith, *Winter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), p.251. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹¹⁸ Jeanette Winterson, 'Jeanette Winterson: Barbara Hepworth's epic works changed the face of sculpture', *Telegraph*, 12 June 2015, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/11667899/Jeanette-Winterson-Barbara-Hepworths-epic-works-changed-the-face-of-sculpture.html>> [accessed 10 October 2021].

her own. First viewed by Daniel through the improvised frame of a Christmas wreath, Sophia relates how she ‘took the wreath [...] And I looked through it and I *saw* him. I mean I saw *him*’ (p.250, emphasis original). Signifying first the act, then the object of perception, the change in emphasis indicates the transition of Sophia’s perspective, as capturing Daniel in the frame, suspending him within it, a greater clarity of vision is attained. This shift is repeated in Sophia’s engagement with Hepworth’s work, as, ‘stretche[d] out naked on the long couch’, the act of looking liberates her from the passive subjectivity into which the pose she adopts has cast her – mimetic as it is of depictions of the female body dominant within classical art (pp.271-272).

Sophia’s subsequent response to the sculpture is one that immediately invokes a meeting of times, as commenting that it is ‘[l]ike in the book *The Owl Service*’, she indicates the convergence of past and present within the artwork, as well as the temporal significance of myth, a representative form that, having no fixed temporal referent, is perpetual but ever-changing (p.272). Based on the Welsh myth of Blodeuedd, a woman made by gods from flowers whose attempt to kill her husband sees her transformed into an owl, Alan Garner’s *The Owl Service* explores the impossibility of the past’s suppression. It is the standing stone of Blodeuedd’s lover, killed by her husband’s spear, that Hepworth’s unnamed sculpture invokes. The stone in Garner’s text, said to be Gronw’s pierced shield, incorporates a hole within it through which the past is made visible when captured by camera. Sophia’s invocation of Garner’s novel is indicative of the interplay between times, past and present, real and imagined, that Hepworth’s sculpture encapsulates, as absence, time and presence form a triadic unity in which boundaries are dissolved. Though commonly understood to be discrete from the present, Hepworth’s sculpture, and the intertext that it produces, considers a history without conclusion, still progressing, and thus informing the experience and events of the present.

As Garner's protagonist, Gwyn, explains, the past does not 'haunt' the present, it is 'still happening' within and through it.¹¹⁹

The hole at the centre of Hepworth's sculpture, and the absence that it signifies is, indeed, atemporal, aligned both with history in its viewer's recollection of 'time and ancient things', and with presence, in its tangibility; 'physical, sensory, immediate' (p.272). The connection that its suspended time makes possible with the past is consolidated in the representation of memory in the novel, made emphatic in a chapter in which Sophia experiences midnight over and over, passive to the recollections that ensue. The memories related displace narrative temporality, accentuated by Smith in a shift in authorial tone. No longer in control, the narrative voice, previously adept at relating the consciousness of Sophia, plays catch up to its subject, asking, in parenthesis, '(what year is it now? sometime in the early 80s, going by her clothes)' (p.130). The suspension of time incites a virtual polytemporality as memory is accessed and a repetition of the past is enabled through its dissociation from chronological representation.

Hepworth haunts this layering of time, enacting a temporal suspension that is synonymous with transformation as, 'swinging like a pendulum' and 'perching on [her] wrist' like a watch, the motion of the disembodied head envisioned by Sophia is replaced by its stillness and silence, culminating in its transformation into stone at the chapter's end (p.107). Evoking the small stone of Hepworth's sculpture, said to symbolize a child, the abstraction that this transformation entails is one of affect and of unity, again recalling Winterson's analysis of the artist's work. 'Hepworth', Winterson relates, 'understood the Modernist move away from representation to abstraction as a step toward greater feeling and truth', avoiding what she called "'particularisation"'.¹²⁰ By the chapter's conclusion,

¹¹⁹ Alan Garner, *The Owl Service* (London: HarperCollins *Children's Books*, 2017), p.63.

¹²⁰ 'Jeanette Winterson: Barbara Hepworth's epic works'.

the head Sophia envisions is unbound from its history and its subjectivity, progressing into ‘intimate’ passivity (p.141). Its transfiguration enables an emotional and a linguistic felicity, as feeling and expression, word and meaning align:

How could something be this uncomplicated?
How could it be, at the same time, so mysterious?

Look. It was nothing but a stone.

What a relief.

It was what the notion of relief aspired to and had always been meant to mean (p.142).

In suspended time connections across different times are made, as narrative chronology subsides. The dissolution of temporal boundaries results in an abstraction through which meaning is produced, and the ‘mysterious’ – ‘an understanding’, as *How to be both* explains, ‘that something would not be disclosed’ – is incorporated as perception is renewed (p.72).

‘an underworld of chance’: *Spring*, borders, and the art of Tacita Dean

Like Smith’s, Tacita Dean’s interest in time is explicit and sustained, evidenced throughout both her creative and her critical production. Writing on W. G. Sebald, whose influence she cites, and expressing her concern over the loss of analogue mediums, Dean’s own art is led by an archiving process through which traces of the past, rather than simply preserved, are recontextualized. Neither lost nor belonging to the past, meaning is thus transformed in multiplicity – made dependent on the artist’s portrayal, the dialogism of juxtaposition, and the active interpretation of the viewer that such curation demands. Indeed, as Hal Foster comments, Dean’s ‘archival tales hold out the possibility of errance in an otherwise plotted world’.¹²¹ It is this opening up of conclusion that Smith

¹²¹ Hal Foster, ‘An Archival Impulse’, *October 110* (Fall 2004), pp. 3-22, (p.16, footnote 40).

utilizes in her novel and its analysis of the narrativization of time in consciousness, as through an interaction with Dean's work, time becomes suspended, and its heterogeneity is revealed.

In *Spring* it is not only a connection between past and present that Dean's stalling of time offers, but a vision of an underlying structure that connects and informs contemporary society, inattentive of its borders. Visiting an exhibition of her work in a gallery in London, the first protagonist of Smith's novel, 'TV and film director' Richard Lease, views 'The Montafon Letter',

a mountain picture so huge that the wall became a mountain and the mountain became a kind of wall. There was an avalanche coming down the mountain picture towards anyone looking at it, an avalanche that had been stilled for just that moment so that whoever saw it had time to comprehend it.¹²²

'The Montafon Letter' is inspired by a narrative of recovery and exposure, influenced by the anecdote of successive avalanches in Austria in the seventeenth century in which, whilst officiating the burial of those killed by a first, a priest is buried by another, only to be uncovered by a third, having survived.¹²³ Recollecting the past in order to respond to the present, Dean has commented that the piece concerns Brexit, the political context to which Smith's novel also responds. Indeed, relating the horrors of the immigration system and a child's evasion of it, the plot of *Spring* is formed, like 'The Montafon Letter', as an expression of "hope that the last avalanche will uncover us".¹²⁴

Suspending time in its freezing of the avalanche, 'The Montafon Letter' incites a similar disjunction in its viewer. Richard, 'stopped [...] in his tracks', experiences a renewal of perception:

¹²² Smith, *Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2018), p.11; p.78. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹²³ Jonathan Griffin, 'Tacita Dean: "I don't care about the long run. I care about now."', *Royal Academy Magazine*, 21 March 2018, <<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/magazine-tacita-dean>> [accessed 10 October 2021].

¹²⁴ Dean, quoted by Griffin, 'Tacita Dean: "I don't [...]"]'.

As he stood there, what he was looking at stopped being chalk on slate, stopped being a picture of a mountain. It became something terrible, seen.

Fuck me, he said.

A young woman was standing next to him.

Fuck me too, she said (p.78).

The initial transpersonal connection that Richard's disjuncture enables is heightened in his subsequent viewing of the piece alongside the cloud images with which it is displayed, as his altered perspective extends beyond the temporality of viewership and the gallery space dedicated to its production. Reflecting on his response, Richard notes how the cloud pieces had

made space to breathe possible, up against something breathtaking. After them, the real clouds above London looked different, like they were something you could read as breathing space. This made something happen too to the buildings below them, the traffic, the ways in which the roads intersected, the ways in which people were passing each other in the street, all of it part of a structure that didn't know it was a structure, but was one all the same (pp.78-79).

The root meaning in Greek of 'aesthetics' denotes, as Stephen Cheeke observes, 'an act of perception, a sensory response, literally a "breathing or taking in" (*aesthesis*)'.¹²⁵ Making space to breathe as it incites a 'sensory response' in its viewer, Dean's artwork makes perception possible, revealing to Richard a connective structure that underlies and disregards the boundaries that delimit the experience and the consciousness of time.

The temporal disjuncture that an encounter with Dean's artwork produces thus enables a new form of perception, and it is this capability of art not to preserve, but to open time that Smith uses throughout her writing in examination of meaning's dependence on causality. From the start of *Spring*, Richard consciously struggles with his compulsion to narrativize time, actively trying to remove himself from 'story':

¹²⁵ Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p.3.

‘There’s no story. He’s had it with story’ (p.15). Significantly made in the present tense, this assertion is soon contested, and in the imagined dialogue that Richard continues with a child-version of the adult daughter from whom he is estranged the struggle is made explicit. Richard’s desire to escape time jars with the causal construction of events to which he is accustomed, as he uses the preterite tense common to narrative fiction:

He was a man on a railway platform. *There was no story.*

Except, there is. There always fucking is.

Why was he on a station platform? Was he waiting for a train?

No. [...]

Then why was the man on the railway platform at all if it’s not about getting or waiting for a train?

He just was, okay?

Why? And why are you using the past tense about yourself, you loser? (p.15).

Instinctively narrativizing his experience, Richard is at the same time rendered disjunct from temporal progression, made ‘hollow’ in his grief (p.16). His exteriority to time is, indeed, concurrent with his linguistic alienation, and establishing the relationship between language and temporal progression, the text simultaneously underlines a further relationship between affect and suspended time. Attempting to express his emotive response to the death of his close friend Paddy, Richard finds its temporal transcription impossible:

I’m just trying to put what I’m feeling into words, a feeling that’s not easy to describe, into –

Don’t story yourself to me, you waste of –

time in his life when he was able to love, literally be in love with, be at actual soul level happily infatuated with something like the simplicity of a lemon (p.16).

With the first statement seeking narrative and the second denying its possibility, the crisis of representation that Richard undergoes is clear. Beyond expression, Richard considers his ‘feeling’ to be exterior to time, highlighting grief’s resistance to language due to

language's own temporality – its narrative propulsion. Yet, as Smith's novel immediately demonstrates, and as shown in the preceding passage, the progression of time is inevitable, and so is its narrative conceptualization: as Paddy asserts; '[t]here's a difference between narrative strategy and reality, but they're symbiotic' (p.63). It is, in the passage above, 'time' that completes both unfinished sentences, signalling the potential accommodation of both contesting states. Narrative and reality; linear time and the heterogeneity of its experience, co-exist throughout Smith's writing in the 'intimate association' that symbiosis defines, and accordingly, in *Spring*, Richard's temporalization of events through narrative does not yield but instead remains integral to perception.¹²⁶

Whilst maintaining its narrative mode of meaning-making, Richard's consciousness of time is broadened in an incorporation of contingency, exhibited in the postcritical readership that he adopts as he researches the work of Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke for the film he is scheduled to direct. Based on a novel of little plot, in which Mansfield and Rilke eat dinner together but separately in the same hotel, sharing space and time but never meeting, the project is one that indicates a different way of being in time. In the excerpt of the metanarrative that Smith offers, a heterotopic vision of 'another world' is presented, 'a world unreachable from, yet still attached to, this quotidian one, and [...] a moment's access to, a fleeting vision of, the entrance to that other world with all its possibilities' (p.88).

Dean has described her archiving process as 'more like a journey through an underworld of chance intervention and epic encounter than any place I recognize. My story is about coincidence, and about what is invited and what is not'.¹²⁷ Richard's

¹²⁶ 'symbiosis, n.', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2021), <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/196194?redirectedFrom=symbiotic#eid19327264>> [accessed 07 September 2021].

¹²⁷ Quoted by Foster, 2014, p.12. Dean is specifically discussing her work *Girl Stowaway* (1994), a 16mm film of eight minutes, inspired by a photograph Dean happened across

research echoes that of Dean. He moves from reading the passage ‘from somewhere in the middle’ of the novel, to reading ‘here and there’ in Mansfield and researching the poetry of Rilke from his description as ‘hobbled and shackled’ – a process which, as Richard finds Rilke’s ‘white horse’ poem, ends in a line ‘about how images are gifts’ (p.90). Indeed, the postcritique of Richard’s readership becomes one of authorship too, as he constructs an alternate script to the one he has been given. Rather than a fictionalized narrative, in which the non-encounter of Mansfield and Rilke has been transformed into the story of a passionate affair, Richard’s offers a meditation on contingency, the ‘*gestures*’ by which life is structured (p.99, emphasis original). Recommending that the form of the film be guided by that of the postcard, in which ‘*image and text*’ are combined, Richard desires to capture ‘*the kind of coincidence that sends electricity through the truths of our lives*’ (p.97; p.99, emphasis original).¹²⁸

Richard’s proposal to combine ‘image and text’ returns the novel’s reader to the art of Dean, whose own work often combines the two forms. It is, however, Dean’s *Floh*, a collection of found photographs, or to use Dean’s phrase, ‘lost object[s]’, that Richard’s treatment of narrative particularly invokes.¹²⁹ Remarking that whilst there is sometimes thematic, or formal affinity between the images portrayed, it ‘elsewhere [...] seems impossible to reconcile the facing images to each other’, Mark Godfrey notes how the alternative archive that *Floh* presents evades causality.¹³⁰ Its juxtapositions ‘interrupt any

of Jean Jeinnie, a girl who stowed away on a ship leaving Australia for England, which wrecked as it neared the end of its journey.

¹²⁸ Richard’s combination of postcard and film recalls Dean’s *The Russian Ending*, a series of twenty postcard images of natural and man-made disasters displayed as if the final scenes of a film, with camera directions and directorial notes transcribed upon them. Delineating narrative chronology in a multiplication of conclusion, Dean’s work, rather than portraying the end, thus presents the past, and narrative as unfinished, dependent on the interpretation of the viewer and thus always open to change.

¹²⁹ Quoted by Mark Godfrey, ‘Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean’s *Floh*’, *The MIT Press*, 114 (2005), 90-119 (p.92).

¹³⁰ ‘Photography’, p.95.

thematic coherence just as we begin to recognize it, halting flows and sending the mind whirling off to other realms of thought'.¹³¹ Richard's postcritical readership is emulated in his interaction with Dean's work. The images within *Floh* that he relates are not adjacent to one another, nor are they chronological, but are dispersed instead throughout Dean's published collection. The order of their relation can be read as symptomatic of memory, but it can also be understood as indicative of Richard's act of flicking through the pages, moving back and forth between images and describing those by which he was 'struck'. Dean's arrangement of the photographs, like her collation of them, is structured by chance, establishing in viewership a perception that disrupts narrative causation, and offers instead a 'temporal experience [that] is far from fluid'.¹³²

The aesthetic frame through which Richard's temporal perception is explored is extended to the social, cultural, and political context of the contemporary present as the novel takes Brit as its subject. Opening with the collective first-person narration of a non-, or artificially inclusive 'we', *Spring*'s second section works to expose a technological management of time, in which narrative is employed as a method of control. Relating that '[w]e want to narrate your life. We want to be the book of you. We want to be the only connection that matters', the temporality conveyed recalls that of Jonathan Crary's 'spectacular culture', creating not community, but 'introspective individuals' in its narrative singularity (p.122). The liminal borders that Richard traverses through image and text in his mourning, (in Dean, in Mansfield and Rilke, in postcards and photography, and, explicitly, in his consideration of Orpheus), become physical in the narrative of Brit, who, employed as an immigration custody officer, describes the detention centre at which she works as 'a kind of underworld [...] Place of the living dead' (p.132).

¹³¹ 'Photography', p.95.

¹³² Godfrey, 'Photography', p.96.

These borders are opened by Flo, the mysterious child who, '[i]nvisible' to others due to her age and race, walks into detention centres and 'knocking houses' without challenge (p.137; p.192). Acting as a connective force within the text, Flo assumes the exterior perception common to the spectral figures that populate Smith's fiction. Reconfiguring boundaries, she asks,

What if [...] Instead of saying, this border divides these places. We said, this border *unites* these places. This border holds together these two really interesting different places. What if we declared border crossings places where, listen, when you crossed them, you yourself became doubly possible (p.196, emphasis original).

Dean's 'underworld of chance' comes in this way to be explored in terms of the 'afterlives' offered by the Auld Alliance, an invisible network of volunteers who, communicating through postcards, help those, including Flo, who would otherwise be detained by the immigration system. Disjunct from narrative time, identifying as 'a fairy story [...] a folk tale [...] all about transformation', the Auld Alliance signifies a time of possibility that is repeated throughout '*the unexpected afterlives*' presented in the novel (p.276).¹³³ Indeed, in Richard's own 'wide-open afterlife', gifted to him after his suicide attempt is stalled by Flo, he is 'free of time', open to change and interpersonal, as well as intertemporal, connections (p.231). Liberated from the consciousness of time with which he battled at

¹³³ The genre of the fairy tale is distinct in its representation of time, as well as the temporality of its form. Portraying a time of fantasy, the genre is itself informed by fluidity, repetition, and change, in its history as an oral tradition. This is famously explored by Walter Benjamin in 'The Storyteller' in which the polyvocality and heterogeneity of vocal storytelling is contrasted to the unilateral narrative of written fiction. Such evasion of boundaries is notable in Smith's own use of myth and folk lore within her novels, as well as in her use of multiple narrators. Indeed, Smith's exploration of nation within this context is significant, as the fairy tale transcends national, as well as temporal borders, explicated, for example, by Marina Warner in her reading of Andrew Lang's *Fairy Books*, which, in its interweaving of tales, evinces a 'world-embracing picture of the nations, flattened onto a plane of an eternal, monolithic past where making up fairy tales signified the human, and the stories joined us up together across time'. Warner, *Once upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.69.

the start of the novel, Richard produces, in his filming of the Auld Alliance, a non-narrative representation. As an accumulation of stories related by silhouetted subjects, and as a project that extends beyond the time of *Spring*'s own narrative, the work he creates is both heterogeneous and inconclusive, paralleling the archival process of Dean, as well as the authorship of Smith herself.

'I want you to other yourself': *Summer*, relativity, and the film of Lorenza Mazzetti

Smith's tetralogy culminates in *Summer*, a text that brings together many of the thematic and narrative strands of the preceding three novels, and that also links many of their characters. It is the film of Lorenza Mazzetti that provides the foundations of Smith's project of connection. An Italian filmmaker who lived in Britain after the war, studying at the Slade School of Art, Mazzetti is strongly associated with the movement of Free Cinema, the central tenet of which expressed the belief that '[n]o film can be too personal'.¹³⁴ Her work does, indeed, respond to her biography, exploring themes of trauma and alienation indubitably influenced by her loss of her parents as a child, of her aunt and cousins, who were brutally killed by Nazi soldiers during the war, and of her uncle, who committed suicide shortly after. It is, however, Mazzetti's concomitant portrayal of the possibility of transformation, and of alternative forms of communication that Smith celebrates and employs.

Mazzetti's 1956 film, *Together*, provides a significant intertext within Smith's novel in its exploration of interpersonal connection at the limits of communicative possibility. The film follows two male protagonists, both deafmute, as they navigate the post-war landscape of the East End, and its population, whom they live both apart from

¹³⁴ Lorenza Mazzetti et al., 'Statement (1956)', in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), p.149 (p.149, emphasis original).

and among. Commenting on the setting of her film, Mazzetti related being ‘overwhelmed’ by ‘[t]he people’s difficulty in expressing themselves, in communicating’, and this is examined in the piece by the friendship of the outsiders she depicts and the gestural nature of their communication, which exists outside of all pre-established modes.¹³⁵

In *Summer*, as in all Smith’s fiction, narratives proliferate, and it is the connections between them and their tellers that are pursued. The plot of the novel follows the Greenlaw family: Sacha, a sixteen-year-old climate activist, her younger brother Robert who parrots the worst statements of the UK’s political leaders yet has a love of Einsteinian theory, their mother Grace, an ex-actress plagued by remembered lines decontextualized from their sources, and their father, who lives next door with his new partner Ashley who writes on the power of words but has given up speech. It also, however, follows Art, Charlotte and Iris from *Winter* and the activism they engage in, Daniel Glück from *Autumn* and his time spent in a camp during the second world war, as well as Hero, who, in parallel to Daniel’s memories and the political use of war-like language during the coronavirus pandemic, is being held inside an immigration centre. Interlinking with each other, and with the many intertexts that Smith employs, such narratives work in delineation of conventional narrative time – it is, in Smith’s novel, in moments of suspension that communication is established.

Beginning with a scene in which Robert superglues an egg timer to his sister’s hand declaring it a ‘[p]resent [...] For the future’, *Summer* continues to weave together times past and present, real and represented in conscious counteraction to the temporal implications of its title, which denotes the ‘briefest and slipperiest of the seasons’ – the

¹³⁵ Lorenza Mazzetti, ‘Soup Dreams: interview with Bryony Dixon and Christophe Dupin’, *BFI*, <<http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/93>>, [accessed 08 September 2021].

season, Grace relates, ‘we mourn [...] while we’re in it’.¹³⁶ It is, therefore, appropriate that the theory of Albert Einstein threads throughout the many narratives that the novel contains. A cousin of Mazzetti’s uncle, Einstein influences the text in similar ways to the artist, attesting to the ways in which ‘time and space [...] lace us all up together’ (p.196). Like Mazzetti, Einstein is used by Smith to testify to humanity’s need to be free of ‘the delusion first that we’re separate from each other and second that we’re separate from the universe’, and this affective ethics is joined through Einstein’s theory, to a counteraction of time’s narrative conceptualization (p.196). Einstein’s stone theory foregrounds the reality of the inexplicable. It is, Robert relates,

about how reality isn’t what we see or what it seems, and you can prove it, and how susceptible the mind is and how we make stuff up all the time about reality, by lining up different coloured stones in a geometric shape and counting them. Then you add some more stones [...] But when you count them again it’s like you didn’t add *anything* because the number seems to add up to the same as it was before (p.350, emphasis original).

Discussed by Robert with Daniel (who believes he is conversing with his own sister, Hannah), Einstein’s theory exposes the ‘great absence’ that habitual narratives veil, but it also acts as a means of connection, as through its own narrative different perspectives converge. In exposing the facticity of reality and the susceptibility of the mind, an alternative perception is gestured towards, and it is this that Mazzetti’s film also explores.

The dis-temporality of the friendship that *Together* portrays is examined by Ben Cranfield in relation to contemporariness, which he considers etymologically as both a being together with one’s own time and a being together in time, with another. Employing the philosophy of Agamben, who, as the conclusion of my thesis will further explore, relates the contemporary to be both disjunct from time and connective of different temporalities, Cranfield establishes the contemporary’s position outside of time. But in

¹³⁶ Smith, Ali, *Summer* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2020), p.290. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

also defining the contemporary through Agamben's theory of the 'con-sentiment' of friendship, Cranfield aligns this exteriority with a feeling of connection to posit a togetherness that operates in ekstasis. Cranfield argues that

If Agamben's notion of the contemporary draws attention to the with-ness of temporal belonging – the paradoxical quality of being adjacent to one's time in order to apprehend it – then 'The Friend' marks with-ness as fundamental to the becoming of selfness: 'The friend is not an other I, but an otherness immanent to selfness'.¹³⁷

Additionally applying queer theory's explication of heteronormative time to a reading of *Together*, Cranfield locates the hope of Mazzetti's film within the connection or 'consenting' that takes place in moments that 'exceed the strict delineations of accepted contemporaneity'.¹³⁸ He contends, moreover, that 'the rupture of the time-frame of a conventional ending brings us as viewers into a hopeful moment of con-sentiment as witnesses of the failure of timeliness'.¹³⁹ It is in the failure of coherence that, disrupting the temporalization of closure, 'a hope of a radically other way of consenting can emerge'.¹⁴⁰

The temporal disjuncture of the interpersonal identification that Cranfield identifies is playfully evoked in *Summer* as Smith uses the intertext of *David Copperfield* in an interrogation of interpersonality. In Grace's recollection of an acting warm-up exercise that Dickens' text formed the basis of, Smith considers the 'concept of a multiple selfhood' as a counter-temporal force:

I want you to other yourself, Ed says.
 Anticlockwise? Joy says.
 I want you to take the line: *The clock began to strike, and I began to cry simultaneously*, Ed says. And before you say it, I want you to go right back to the moment of birth of someone who's *in* you, but is *other* than yourself

¹³⁷ Ben Cranfield, 'On (Not Being with) Time (Queerly) in Post-War Britain', *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 23.4-5 (2018), 127-133 (p.129).

¹³⁸ 'On (Not Being with)', p.128.

¹³⁹ 'On (Not Being with)', p.133.

¹⁴⁰ 'On (Not Being with)', p.133.

(p.280-281, emphasis original).

Reformulating David Copperfield's line: 'Not to meander myself, at present, I will go back to my birth', Smith notes that in its Latin form the word 'meander' means 'make myself other', and she thus diverts Dickens' narrativization of identity in her inclusion of the other, relating not the birth of the self, but of one in connection with whom the self has been constructed.¹⁴¹ Underlined in Smith's reversal of temporal progression, as the group work anticlockwise, *Summer* makes emphatic the interpersonal formation of the individual, and thus the intertemporality of the individual's consciousness of time.

For Cranfield it is through the viewer that the affective contemporariness of Mazzetti's film arises, and in Smith's novel this is echoed. Mazzetti's work appears in *Summer* as a '**fragment of moving image from across time**' and entering the narrative in direct opposition to 'the political cultivation of indifference', it offers the potential for a shared contemplation (p.125, emphasis original; p.5). It is in the viewing of art and the listening to stories that connections between self and other are repeatedly forged. In fact, communication itself becomes 'an aesthetic practice', as during a national lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic, Art and Charlotte – characters of both *Summer* and of *Winter* – agree to phone each other every day to 'tell each other expressly, consciously, something we've happened to see or experience' (p.324).

It is significant that the characters of *Winter* intervene in *Summer* and that they direct the political action of the novel. It is a communication corroborated, in fact, by the Shakespeare play that Smith takes as her influence. *The Winter's Tale* is, as Grace explains 'all about summer, really. It's like it says, don't worry, another world is possible. When you're stuck in the world at its worst, that's important. To be able to say that'

¹⁴¹ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. by Trevor Blount (London: Collector's Library, 2004), p.19.; Smith, *Summer*, p.280.

(p.300). Just as Summer provides hope in Winter, art provides a means through which political apathy can be fought. For Charlotte, who feels ‘at a disconnect from’ the world around her, and powerless to change it, ‘Art lower case a’ is ‘about the moment you’re met by and so changed by something you encounter that it uh takes you both into and beyond yourself, gives back your senses. It’s a, a shock that brings us back to ourselves’

(p.329). Recalling Smith’s interaction with Berger, Charlotte’s view of art is directly affirmed by the author, as in explanation of Mazzetti, her voice enters the text. Addressing her reader, Smith relates that

I can’t remember where this next quote you’re about to read is from. It’s nothing to do with Mazzetti, though it’s everything to do with her, and us all [...] *Creativity is cultural not because it is derivative of it, but because it aims to heal culture. Art saturated with the unconscious acts like a compensatory dream in the individual: it tries to rebalance and address deep-rooted problems* (p.263, emphasis original).

Existing without an authorial citation, textual source, or temporal referent, the quote Smith gives is suspended within her representation, and it is therefore connective of, and across time.

Einstein’s theory reveals time to be dimensional and to be relative, but it also reveals how, as Smith notes, ‘when two [particles] meet each *other* [...] something changes in both of them’ as a lasting association is formed (p.329, emphasis original). Disrupting narrative in the exteriority to meaning that it reveals, art’s suspended time is detemporalizing, but also retemporalizing. Represented time becomes for Smith the means by which connections can be made, for it is ‘the gift we get to give to others’ (p.374).

The ‘articulation’ of ‘art’: Smith’s post-critical authorship

Portraying in narrative the affective perception that suspended time incites, the formal structures of Smith’s novels simultaneously demand the same mode of

interpretation from their readers in the disjuncture from causal time that they impel. This somewhat aporetic association is elucidated by Marielle Macé, a theorist of postcritique to whom Felski repeatedly refers. Indicating the temporality of reading to be one of isolation and slow-motion, Macé parallels the inhibition of movement of Ribot's psychology, suggesting that the affective engagement of 'emotional interest' is produced as attention becomes 'diverted, rendered more dense, and [is] extended'.¹⁴² Considering reading to incite ekstasis, as the reader 'move[s] aside, in order to occupy a new sphere and be enveloped by it', Macé argues that

The cloistered and private context of reading brings, in Jean-Christophe Bailly's words, 'a very vivid impression of slow-motion,' a feeling of being 'at the edge of time' resulting from the inaugural act of retreat. Being at the edge of time places us, by the same token, at the edge of things in general. The reader is, indeed, more than alone, or something other than alone, as a double escapee: first, from a community in the ordinary sense, and second, from presence itself (the exterior flow of phenomena and perceptions).¹⁴³

Evident in the viewers that Smith presents within her narratives, this analysis further indicates how each of her novels encourages a postcritical engagement. Smith's fiction, as she herself explains, is about both 'being held and being flung open'.¹⁴⁴ It practices a style that, in Macé's words, 'both affects and constrains the reader'.¹⁴⁵

Like the construction of 'images of images' that Boty's work conveys, Smith's authorship of art reveals to her reader a non-narrative mode of meaning-making, one of suspension rather than conclusion. Made emphatic in her ekphrasis, this suspension is further produced by the intertextuality, formal breaks, subversion of chronology and aleatory structure that Smith's writing celebrates. As 'the place where reality and the

¹⁴² 'Ways of Reading', p.226.

¹⁴³ 'Ways of Reading', p.225.

¹⁴⁴ Ali Smith, 'Ali Smith: Style vs content? Novelists should approach their art with an eye to what the story asks', *Guardian*, 18 August 2012, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/18/ali-smith-novelists-approach-art>> [accessed 06 September 2021].

¹⁴⁵ 'Ways of Reading', p.224.

imagination meet', representation, whether visual or linguistic, is formative of a temporal suspension that is shared in by its interpretative subject. As Smith notes in Berger's elucidation of the linguistic root that 'art' and 'articulation' share, both the visual and the verbal comprise in their nature "[...] a comparable flow of connections".¹⁴⁶

Promoting an event of interpretation based on contingency rather than causality, Smith's portrayal of postcritical viewership concurs with the postcritical authorship that her own description of art and the aesthetic encounter entails. Ekphrasis, following James Heffernan's much cited definition, is widely conceptualized as the verbal description of visual art, a contemporary understanding that has narrowed the term's meaning from its original context within rhetoric. This alteration is explained by Gabriele Rippl in her encyclopaedia entry for the Greek term 'whose etymological meaning is "to speak out" or "to show in full."'.¹⁴⁷ Rippl states that,

Ekphrasis was considered a mode of speaking capable of bringing absent things before the listener's inner eye by aiming at *energeia*, a vivid quality of language producing *evidentia* (evidence) and rousing emotions through lively, precise, and detailed verbal descriptions.¹⁴⁸

Ekphrasis is itself a making visible – a presencing of absence that underlines interpretation as an interaction in which meaning is attained through affect rather than causation. Indeed, considered specifically within narrative fiction, the temporal implications of ekphrasis' intermedial role become apparent. As 'a mode of disruption', it

¹⁴⁶ 'A Gift for John Berger'.

¹⁴⁷ Gabriele Rippl, 'Ekphrasis', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 25 June 2019, <<https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-1057>>, [accessed 08 September 2021].

¹⁴⁸ 'Ekphrasis', emphasis original.

frequently halts the narrative flow and produces *new temporalities* that undo conventional forms of plot- and action-driven storytelling, thus offering readers *space* for reflection.¹⁴⁹

Rather than reproduce Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's much cited distinction, which defines visual and verbal representation as those of space and time respectively, contemporary theory, as Rippl's overview shows, considers ekphrasis to be a textual site of temporal-spatial convergence, moving away from the binary conception of Lessing's model. Productive of time as well as of space, ekphrasis operates not in opposition to narrative, but as a disruption of narrative that encourages its extension and divergence. Like the 'inward attention' of Bennett explored in the first chapter of this thesis, it forces its readers to reflect upon the ways in which time within literature is conventionally represented and conceived.

Considering it not only 'an affair between a speaking/seeing subject and a seen object', but a 'relation' between 'the speaker and the audience or addressee', W. J. T. Mitchell determines ekphrasis to be 'a social practice'.¹⁵⁰ Ekphrasis, Mitchell comments,

is stationed between two 'othernesses,' and two forms of (apparently) impossible translation and exchange: (1) the conversion of the visual representation into a verbal representation, either by description or ventriloquism; (2) the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader.¹⁵¹

Both a verbalization of the visual, and a visualization of the verbal, ekphrasis is a process of exchange, and enacted in the narrative of *Autumn*, such reciprocity is instilled within the readership that Smith's novels require.¹⁵² Just as Elisabeth first encounters Boty's art

¹⁴⁹ Birgit Neumann and Gabrielle Rippl, 'Ekphrasis', in *Verbal-Visual Configurations in Postcolonial Literature: Intermedial Aesthetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp.16-19 (p.18, emphasis mine).

¹⁵⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.151-182, (p.164).

¹⁵¹ 'Ekphrasis', p.164.

¹⁵² This is supported in Stephen Cheeke's analysis, in which, established as an 'encounter with alterity', ekphrasis takes on 'a special charge when it is not merely an occasion for

through Daniel's description of it, as, playing his game '[e]very story tells a picture', she constructs a representation in her mind, Smith, whilst knowing that in the digital age the works she describes can be accessed by her reader, nonetheless refuses to provide the images within her narratives. As Sylvia Karasthathi notes, its referential purpose no longer necessary, ekphrasis within contemporary writing, 'in contrast to its lineage', has shifted from being 'a source of information', to 'one of interpretation' due to the accessibility of the image.¹⁵³ But Smith simultaneously restores ekphrasis to its original, emotive role.¹⁵⁴ Placing only a single example at the end of her narratives, of the pieces she examines within them, Smith asks that her readers encounter art imaginatively, highlighting the subjectivity of interpretation in the ekphrasis she performs. This is accentuated in *Winter*, as the artwork encountered is left unnamed, the ekphrasis perhaps even notional, describing an artwork that is fictional (though certainly in Hepworth's style), rather than extant.

It is, in this way, not simply through the description, but through the subsequent visualization that it entails that narrative time becomes suspended in ekphrasis, as contributing to the 'affective ethics' of Smith's fiction, it is opened to the 'other' of the

the discovery of difference but a place of *relation* and therefore of the possibility of exchange' (*Writing*, p.6, original emphasis).

¹⁵³ Sylvia Karasthathi, 'Ekphrasis and the Novel/Narrative Fiction', in *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, ed. by Gabriele Rippl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), pp.92-112, (p.97). The digital accessibility of the image brings with it great temporal implications – noted by Batchen in his analysis of the contemporary archive, as he relates that, 'no longer a matter of discrete objects [...] stored and retrieved in specific places', the archive is now 'also a continuous stream of data, without geography or container, continuously transmitted and therefore without temporal restriction (always available in the here and now). Exchange rather than storage has become the archivist's principal function'. Geoffrey Batchen, 'DA[R]TA', in *Each Wild Idea: Writing Photography History* (London: MIT Press, 2001), pp.177-191, (p.183).

¹⁵⁴ This restoration of ekphrasis' original meaning within contemporary representation is noted by Gabriel Rippl, who explores the coincidence of the rise of ekphrasis within contemporary literature with both the digital age and the 'iconic turn' of the twentieth century. See 'Ekphrasis'.

reader. For Smith, '[a]rt is always an exchange', and the multivocality of her tetralogy, and of her fiction more broadly, incorporates that of its readership as in the act of interpretation, narrative linearity is suspended and transformed (A, p.160). This is explicated in Milly Weaver's analysis of Smith's use of description more generally. Arguing that Smith's character descriptions perform a verbal portraiture as they 'still and distill', 'isolate and [...] frame' their subjects, Weaver suggests that, contesting the separation of the verbal and the visual in terms of their respective associations with time and space, Smith instead demonstrates how the two forms of representation 'define' and 'originate' from each other.¹⁵⁵ In refusing the binary between linguistic and artistic representation, Weaver's reading of Smith runs the risk of affirming that between description and narrative, as exploring the stasis that the former entails, she implies its opposition to the temporality of plot. Evincing a semiotic framework in which, in Ruth Ronen's terms, 'description is a type of non-temporal modelling' imposing 'spatial relations' that do not exist in reality, this secondary binary is, as Ronen highlights, misleading in its denial of description's potential to drive narrative action, and, conversely, that of narrative to perform a referential function.¹⁵⁶ Recognizing that Smith aligns description with temporal suspension is not, however, to suggest that the 'polar divisions between description on the one hand, narrative and meaningfulness on the other' should be maintained, but that they are destabilized.¹⁵⁷ As Weaver's reading of *How to be Both* suggests, Smith uses temporal stasis to produce, rather than withhold meaning, promoting an alternative mode of interpretation that 'emphasizes how assessment of

¹⁵⁵ Milly Weaver, 'Reading Words alongside Images: Ali Smith and Visual Portraiture', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 20.4 (2018), 527-548 (p.535; p.530).

¹⁵⁶ Ruth Ronen, 'Description, Narrative and Representation', *Narrative*, 5.3 (1997), pp.274-286, (p.277).

¹⁵⁷ Ronen, 'Description', p.282.

another's emotion calls on the same interpretative structures as those directed at visual art'.¹⁵⁸ Description becomes, as David James concurs, a 'conduit for affect'.¹⁵⁹

The affective potential of art's suspension and its essentiality to meaning-making is, indeed, foregrounded throughout the narratives of *Autumn*, *Winter*, *Spring* and *Summer*, making connection possible for the characters in each novel and across the novels in the characters they share. If '[a]rt makes nothing happen in a way that makes something happen', it also 'make[s] more than one time possible at once' (*Htbb*, p.46; *W*, p.224). Its suspension from time merges the real and imagined temporalities of representation, as well as of those that it connects with. As Smith herself relates: 'Art is one of the prime ways we have of opening ourselves and going beyond ourselves. That's what art is, it's the product of the human being in the world and imagination, all coming together'.¹⁶⁰

'Time means' (again): Conclusion

Smith's fiction, as this chapter has examined, employs the representation of suspended time to destabilize the dominance of causality within subjectivity, society, and aesthetic representation. Considering a postcritical ekstasis that displaces narrative subject, text, and reader not at the end of, but outside of time, Smith proposes in her writing an affective perception, and promotes a mode of meaning-making that works not

¹⁵⁸ 'Reading Words', p.537.

¹⁵⁹ David James, 'Critical Solace', *New Literary History*, 47.4 (2016), 481-504 (p.501). The association between the imagination and description further contends the 'notion of description as pure reference on the one hand, and of narrative as tied to the imaginative, not necessarily referential constructions of a text' that Ronen argues 'seems to underlie the very opposition between narrative and description' ('Description', p.281).

¹⁶⁰ Ali Smith quoted by Olivia Laing in 'Interview: Ali Smith: 'It's a pivotal moment...a question of what happens culturally when something is built on a lie'', *Guardian*, 16 October 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/16/ali-smith-autumn-interview-how-can-we-live-ina-world-and-not-put-a-hand-across-a-divide-brexit-profu>> [14 January 2020].

through time, but between times and across it. Whether advocating the incorporation of the other within the conceptualization of presence in *Hotel World*, or of the unknown or unrecorded within that of history in *There but for the*, suspended time produces a renewal of perspective, unveiling absence in the disjuncture it comprises. Explicitly linked to vision in *The Accidental* and to viewership in *How to be both* and the ‘Seasons’ tetralogy, this disjuncture contests the narrativization that has become ingrained within contemporary culture’s consciousness of time, as well as in the novel form itself.

A ‘conclusion’, therefore, seems a somewhat ill-fitting end to a discussion of Smith’s work, imposing the meaning-making that her representation of suspended time disrupts. But that suspended time *disrupts*, and does not *replace* causality is significant, as Smith, throughout her fiction, binds the narrativization integral to the subject’s and to the novel’s consciousness of time, with the alternative perception that suspended time confers. *Artful* elucidates this coincidence, as it explicitly considers the epistemological value of causal linearity. Its absent author asks:

Is it time that translates our lives into sequence, into meaning? Does sequence mean that things mean? Sequence will always be most of the word consequence. José Saramago in his memoir, *Small Memories* (translated by Margaret Jull Costa), recalls being ten years old when his grandmother died; he specifically remembers this time of his child self’s coming to consciousness by a linkage of clocks and death (pp.20-21).

Articulated by a subject who, having died, is made present through representation (in the talks she has written, and in imagination) the speaker of this passage, in contrast to the analysis that she offers, testifies to Smith’s refusal of the end’s temporalization and of the temporalization of the end. The aporias that *Artful*, in its evasion of genre, accommodates with relative ease, resound throughout Smith’s more determinedly *narrative* fiction, as it repeatedly spotlights the temporal implications of its form. Through spectral characters who in metalepsis transcend narrative, an intertextuality that forms a palimpsest of other times (both real and represented), and a cyclicity created by obscure beginnings and by

conclusions that resist closure, the textual spaces that Smith constructs are themselves ‘tangible pieces of [*suspended*] time in our hands’ (A, p.30). Suspending narrative, her fiction suspends its reader too, demanding a postcritical interpretation that couples causality with contingency, and that transcends the binaries of absence and presence, self and other, and real and imagined in the affective consciousness of time it constitutes.

In the borderlessness upon which it thus insists, Smith’s representation of suspended time constitutes ‘the richness of the possible’, which, posited by Félix Guattari, offers ‘an ethics and politics of the virtual that decorporealizes and deterritorializes contingency, linear causality and the pressure of circumstances and significance which besiege it’.¹⁶¹ In Smith’s fiction time is ‘decorporealized’ both literally, in spectral characters who eschew the temporalization of others, as well as of narrative itself, and metaphorically, in the affective ethics that her portrayal of suspended time establishes: a determined opening up and out of the narrative temporalization that individual and novel instinctively perform. Such decorporealization is also, then, a deterritorialization, as the narratives of self and of the text extend beyond the borders of their respective structures, embracing the alterity of the other, the unseen and the unknown. Smith’s novels are gifts of time; suspended from time they disrupt its linear conception, and obfuscating the binaries to which time is integral, they promote a mode of meaning-making based on affect and contingency. Affirming time to be dialogic and heterogeneous in its experience, Smith promotes the same within time-consciousness, and the ethical imperative of this shift is made emphatic. In Smith’s fiction time is formed not by narrative’s causality but by narrative fiction’s ‘richness of the possible’ instead.

¹⁶¹ Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm*, trans. by Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p.29.

Chapter 3:

'into their timelessness': The Solace of Suspended Time in Contemporary Grief

Writing

Introduction: 'it is called feeling but is its real name thought?'

As I have argued so far, the mode of meaning-making that is both habitual to consciousness and integral to literature is that of narrative, and its temporalization is problematized throughout twenty-first century Anglo-American fiction in the representation of suspended time. Used to overlay the self-distance of critique with an affective mode of intuition, suspended time disrupts the causality of narrative in an incorporation of the inexplicable and enfolds the perspectives of innumerable others within the heterogeneous and embodied epistemology that it promotes. This chapter aims to further explore the ethics of this relatedness by considering a genre in which suspended time is both formed and inscribed by the irrevocable absence of the other it invokes.

Already encountered in the linking of affect and absence that the self-erasure of DeLillo's, McCarthy's and Lerner's protagonists, and the grieving subjects and spectral presences of Smith's fiction each convey, the effects of loss in suspending time and the affective ethics of its suspension are made nowhere more emphatic than in contemporary grief writing. In the texts that fall under this broad genre time is again considered to be relational, and it is through this relationality that suspension is installed. The time of the bereaved, having been formed and sustained in connection with that of a present, living other continues to be shared after their death, in a disjuncture from time in which it is instead the temporalities of presence and absence that intertwine. Developing an elegiac tradition underpinned by the afterlife's promise of continuation and reunion, current grief writing, as this chapter will show, responds to the secularism of a contemporary culture

in which it is thought, rather than faith, that is predominant, reimagining the possibilities of a communication with the dead through its exploration of the consciousness of time.

Rooted within the twentieth century turn to psychoanalysis, studies devoted to the psychology of loss have long combined the analysis of thought with that of time. This is perhaps most notably exemplified by Sigmund Freud's seminal essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia', first published in 1917. Theorizing the alienation from the present that loss induces, this essay distinguishes between the two states of its title in terms of the specific subjective and temporal responses each connote. In Freud's analysis, mourning defines a construction of causality – a critical act in which the temporalities of absent and present are contrasted before they are accepted as distinct. Mourning is, as such, a process of 'reality-testing' in which,

[e]ach single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists.¹

The act of separation that mourning entails is both psychic and temporal. If 'successful' the lost loved object becomes fixed within the past, inaccessible to the bereaved subject who, benefiting from an essential narcissism, is restored within linear progression: the sequential movement of past-present-future that defines a normative consciousness of time.

Framed by Freud's enquiry, the conceptualization of mourning as a staged process with resolution persists within contemporary culture. Yet within both literary representations of loss and critical thought, as well as in Freud's own writing, this analysis

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia (1917)', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, Vol. xiv (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), pp.243-258 (p.244; p.255).

has been challenged since its emergence.² As David Eng and David Kazanjian note, it has, '[a]fter Freud [...] become ever more important to consider an intellectual and political genealogy of loss through melancholia'.³ Current grief theory consistently pursues the integration of the two responses: melancholia is considered essential for the continued bonds that it maintains.

In melancholia, as Freud's essay defines, loss is not diminished through a recognition of physical absence but is instead internalized. The psychic presence of the loved object is incorporated into the identity of the mourner, whose ekstasis from time is, therefore, prolonged. As the presence of the lost loved object is maintained, the presence of the bereaved is altered – made disjunct from time not only in their social withdrawal, but in their psychic enfolding of absence. Freud's consideration of loss extends beyond that of death: his analysis of melancholia, it should also be noted, focuses on the transformation of identity as it becomes divided in self-criticism, rather than affective attachment. Yet his examination of the ego's 'alterat[ion] by identification' is significant in establishing melancholia as a response to loss in which the temporality of the self becomes suspended in its internalization of another's.⁴

Traditionally perceived, as Sanja Bahun explains, 'as a state subjacent to creativity', melancholia's internalization of the lost loved object constitutes an act of imagination, or inner-representation, formed in opposition to the narrative trajectory upon

² After the loss of his daughter, Freud's understanding of mourning altered to incorporate melancholic internalization. In a letter written after Sophie's death, Freud considers that '[a]lthough we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute [...] And actually this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish'. Quoted by James A. Godley, 'Infinite Grief', *Angelaki*, 23.6 (2018), 93-110 (p.95).

³ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, 'Introduction: Mourning Remains', *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (California: The University of California Press, 2003), pp.1-26, (p.3).

⁴ 'Mourning', p.249.

which authorship usually relies.⁵ Described by Julia Kristeva as a ‘*breakdown of biological and logical sequentiality*’, it is the condition’s disruption of causality that ensures the connection it imagines be maintained.⁶ Determined by Eng and Kazanjian as a ‘constellation of affect’, rather than a critical response to loss, melancholia is key to understanding the modes of meaning-making that contemporary grief writing considers and employs.⁷ Disrupting narrative in its refusal of progression and of closure, melancholia throws cognitive instincts into disarray, and the challenges that its inner-representation poses for the consciousness of time are replicated and made visible in the outer-representation that the writing of loss entails.

The literary implications of grief are illustrated throughout its psychoanalytic exploration – articulated with clarity in Kristeva’s *Black Sun*, in which melancholic creativity is examined. In explicating the authorship that melancholia incites, this text makes clear the contradictions conferred by grief’s narrative representation, arguing that,

literary creation in a material that is totally different from what constitutes mood [...] transposes affect into rhythms, signs, forms. The ‘semiotic’ and the ‘symbolic’ become the communicable imprints of an affective reality, perceptible to the reader [...] and yet dominated, set aside, vanquished.⁸

Correlative to the ‘work of mourning’ in its application of causality, literary creation transforms the affect of grief in the symbolization it enforces, giving form to the formless. Made perceptible through its representation, feeling is refigured by thought. The temporality of writing inevitably alters the meaning of that which it attempts to convey.

Exploring narrative’s adumbration of grief, the literary criticism of Bahun similarly views writing as a ‘boundary condition’ that marks a transition from

⁵ Sanja Bahun, *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.7.

⁶ Kristeva, Julia, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.20, emphasis original.

⁷ Eng and Kazanjian, ‘Introduction’, p.3.

⁸ *Black Sun*, p.22.

‘melancholic affect’ to ‘mourning effect’ in its construction of causality.⁹ However, Bahun also argues that this transition is resisted in the melancholic aesthetic of literary form. She contends that modernist literature ‘finds a therapeutic “container” in the form itself’, as ‘by representing the historical content through formal inflection rather than description [...] melancholic dynamics are not – or not only – depicted [...] but *performed*’.¹⁰ The analysis is temporal. Working against the narrative progression of Freudian mourning, ‘a process of concrete temporality’, and destabilizing too the chronological foundations of history, the aesthetic Bahun identifies privileges the psychic space.¹¹ Modernist melancholia establishes a ‘narrative cross-temporality’ filled with gaps, and resistant to completion.¹²

Demonstrative of the contradiction that the writing of suspended time unveils, the modernist opposition between internal and external time-consciousness becomes in the twenty-first century more greatly invested within the former, as an introspective examination of the dialectic of feeling and thought is undertaken. Whilst, therefore, its ‘social function’ is somewhat relocated, Bahun’s reading is usefully applied to the contemporary texts this chapter will consider, which each enact a similar interweaving of absence in the melancholic aesthetic of their forms.¹³ However, in accordance with the affective turn that recent criticism discerns, these texts moreover combine this apparently modernist construction with postmodernist techniques, as they place an interrogative emphasis on both the possibilities and limitations of representation.

Outside of normative temporality, the experience of grief is resistant to narrativization, and the writing of grief thus unavoidably contends with the symbolic

⁹ *Modernism and Melancholia*, pp.7-8.

¹⁰ *Modernism and Melancholia*, p.10, emphasis original.

¹¹ *Modernism and Melancholia*, p.60.

¹² *Modernism and Melancholia*, p.62.

¹³ *Modernism and Melancholia*, p.197.

signification that it employs. Twenty-first century representations of loss expose this aporia, explicitly opposing the temporal progression of narrative's 'rhythms' and 'signs' and suspending time in the melancholic aesthetic that such overt textuality foregrounds. Whilst remaining, in Bahun's terms, performative of the psychic space, form works, therefore, not only alongside, but also in opposition to narrative, and the tension is productive. Repeating the enfolding of timelessness that their writers experience and convey, the works explored within this chapter each hold on to grief's affective reality, incorporating it within the meaning-making they permit, as well as that they ask their readers to make use of. Rather than acting as a mode of scriptotherapy in which through writing loss is cast aside or 'let go', twenty-first century grief literature stalls the causality of narrative with the intemporality of affect, and it is in accommodating this contradiction of time that, positioned in ekstasis, what Denise Riley terms a 'literature of consolation' is approached (p.61).

The analysis of time that this chapter pursues correlates in this way with the affective potential of critique that David James' *Discrepant Solace* expresses in consideration of literary form. 'Uncoupled from kinships' of 'appeasement, alleviation, progressive adjustment' or 'redemption', James argues that consolation within twenty-first century writing 'coincides with the examination rather than dissipation of sorrow and apprehension'.¹⁴ This is, he suggests, often achieved by 'putting style and structure in argumentative relation to "topics of comfort" [...] helping us to see how literature formally collides with as much as it reciprocates the emotions it plots'.¹⁵ The concomitant collision and reciprocation that James outlines is indicative of the way in which the writing of loss works both with and against the temporal implications of the structures it

¹⁴ *Discrepant*, p.13.

¹⁵ *Discrepant*, p.13.

inhabits. Representing grief as a lived experience of temporal disjuncture, contemporary authors, as already suggested, make explicit the contradictions of its narrative portrayal. In doing so, however, literature's own construction of and *as* an imagined temporality is made clear, and it is the sincerity of this self-reflexivity that positions writing too within ekstasis – consolatory in the affective mode of meaning-making it accesses, and the connection that this allows to be maintained.

The question posed in the subtitle to this introduction, 'it is called feeling but is its real name thought?', comes from Denise Riley, a poet, philosopher, essayist, and critic whose work, both knowledgeable and articulate in the discourse outlined above, provides the initial focus of this chapter.¹⁶ The line is taken from 'A Shortened Set', a poem that assesses the long-established opposition between poetry and philosophy by exploring the mediums' respective associations with emotion and with reason. The familiar binary of affect and critique, to which this opposition equates, is placed under constant strain in the poem's representation of grief, effected by means of the unstable lyric 'I' of a female speaker who attempts to navigate and communicate the loss of her unborn child. Riley articulates the meeting of feeling and thought explored throughout my thesis, and indicates, moreover, the ways in which suspended time's aesthetic entanglement with absence is extended by the writing of loss itself.

In her 2012 essay, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, Riley communicates her experience of suspended time after the sudden death of her son, expressing not only her own disjuncture from sequence, rhythm, and causality, but also a stalling of her son's progression into the past. Considering time's interpersonal construction through the maternal bond, *Time Lived* examines through both content and form the act of

¹⁶ Denise Riley, 'A Shortened Set', in *Mop Mop Georgette* (Cambridge: Reality Street Editions, 1993), pp.16-24, (p.19).

incorporation that the discourses of affect and melancholia both theorize. Riley considers her experience of suspended time to be produced by the loss of the temporal connection that she had previously shared with her son. But after loss it is this connection that suspended time paradoxically maintains. Inciting an absencing of the self that is concordant with a presencing of the other, suspended time constitutes a site of solace in the imagined communication that it offers. *Time Lived* is, however, a meditation not only on the experience of suspended time, but also on its representation, and the temporalities of the two cannot be reconciled. In self-reflexive examination of the narrativization her writing enacts, Riley embeds suspension within the writing she constructs. Accommodating the absent presence of her son in the liminality of her essay's form, she forges the consolatory power of its ekstasis.

Both the experience of suspended time as a virtual site of solace and the contradictions that its representation produces recur throughout contemporary grief literature. Continuing from a discussion of Riley's writing to consider grief memoir, this chapter will examine two texts which similarly work to understand the temporal impacts of personal loss. First published in 2005, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* drew much attention to the writing of grief and to the memoir genre, its early reviews evincing a shared curiosity in how the tone of critical detachment established in Didion's journalism could communicate so deeply personal and affective an experience.¹⁷ Relating

¹⁷ This is exemplified in reviews of Didion's memoir, as well as in the criticism of writers such as Jeffrey Berman. See, for example, Robert Pinsky, "'The Year of Magical Thinking': Goodbye to All That", *New York Times*, 09 October, 2005, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/09/books/review/the-year-of-magical-thinking-goodbye-to-all-that.html>> [accessed 10 October 2021]; Robert McCrum, 'The 100 best nonfiction books: No2 – The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion (2005)', *Guardian*, 08 February 2016<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/08/100-best-nonfiction-books-2-the-year-of-magical-thinking-joan-didion-robert-mccrum>> [accessed 10 October 2021]; Berman, *Writing Widowhood: The Landscapes of Bereavement* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015).

the year after the sudden death of her husband, in which she sustained a belief in the possibility of his return, Didion's memoir offers an insight into the altered inhabitation of time and space that loss induces. Erudite in its engagement with psychoanalytic theory, the text is formed through Didion's self-critique, mimetic of both the reality-testing of Freudian mourning, as well as the temporal division of identity that the retrospection of autobiography demands. Published nine years after Didion's text, Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* is comparable in its negotiation of psychoanalytic conceptions of mourning. Like Riley and Didion, Macdonald examines her estrangement from time and causality, relating not only an escape from the progression of time, but an alteration of perception. Whilst their portrayals contrast greatly, both Didion and Macdonald consider suspended time to be a site of solace, and both, due to the analepsis of the memoir genre in which they write, place its experience within a narrative of mourning. Considering the conclusion of disjuncture either as inevitable or productive on reflection, both nonetheless resist closure within the formal strategies they employ.

The third section of this chapter will explore how the transpersonal a-temporality that runs throughout contemporary grief writing is portrayed in texts that share Riley's concern with the temporal implications of representation, but which position their examinations within fiction. Both Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015) and Yiyun Li's *Where Reasons End* (2019) effect to displace autobiographical loss within a genre seemingly removed from its facticity. Porter's text responds to the death of his father when he was a child in a narrative that follows a father and his two sons as they mourn the loss of the boys' mother. Solace comes in the form of the imagined presence of Crow, an embodiment of temporal suspension who offers guidance to those grieving, and a connection to the absent. The autobiography of Li's novel is complex. Complicated by its insistence upon its own fictionality, its narrator's loss of her teenage son is mimetic

of Li's own. In Li's novel suspension is actively constructed, as its narrator creates a 'timeless world' through language in order to converse with her child. Whilst Porter's text, in its polyphony, evades classification, Li's novel insists upon its genre; but both authors concord in an exploration of imagination as a shared ekstasis from time, portraying fiction itself as a site of solace in the refusal of conclusion it allows.

In the fiction so far examined in this thesis suspended time reveals connection, but in the writing of grief it is, moreover, shown to be creative of it. Inhabited rather than merely encountered, and suspending not only the present, but also the absent from causality, temporal ekstasis enables an interpersonal connection to be maintained. In the experience of grief closure is ardently refused, and in its representation the refusal is repeated. Mirroring the incorporation that its content portrays, the melancholic aesthetic of contemporary grief writing enfolds time's exteriority within the textual body. Attending to attention both as an act of focus and as an act of care, the writers considered in this chapter critique affect, but they also affirm the affect of critique. Disrupting narrative conceptualizations of identity and mourning, the suspended time of literature confirms the possibility of thinking and feeling otherwise. In the writing of grief, and in its reading, thought becomes imbued with feeling, and feeling's 'real name [becomes] thought', in the shared consciousness of time that is imagined.

'this non-time of sheer stasis': the interpersonality of suspended time in the writing of Denise Riley

Denise Riley's essay, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, documents the altered consciousness of time that loss brings into being. First published in 2012, the text was written in response to the sudden death of Riley's adult son in 2008 in an explicit effort to communicate an experience of grief which, though not uncommon, remained scarce in

representation. Explicative of the difficulty of its articulation, the essay's approach to its subject is wide-ranging, and Riley's writing reflects the breadth of influences by which its thinking is informed. Accordingly, her essay collates a diverse range of intertexts, using myth, poetry, linguistic theory, philosophy, fiction, and cultural references in its exploration, as well as continuing strands previously examined within Riley's own feminist and linguistic interrogations.

Relating that she will 'not be writing about death, but about an altered condition of life', Riley begins *Time Lived* with an assertion of her project, expressing with clarity its aim to communicate an experience of grief that remains free from its conventional conceptualization (p.7). Seeking to convey the altered consciousness of time that loss inaugurates, the text relates a dissociation from chronology which, rather than being framed in opposition to a 'normative' way of life, is shown to impart its own 'livability'. This aliveness of suspended time, what Alice Oswald calls the 'being of grief', is often discussed by Riley.¹⁸ It is, she explains,

the livability in conjunction with the a-temporality that is so interesting [...] I'd naturally have assumed one could not have both livability and the suspension of time, as we are such temporal creatures. That suspension of the flow of time would mean a failure to live and feel, and be a functioning working human, but actually I didn't find it to be so.¹⁹

The suspension of time induced by loss reveals for Riley an alternate way of being, and this shift is concomitant with that which takes place in consciousness. With its temporality altered, Riley's narrative mode of meaning-making is destabilized as, recalling the fiction so far explored in this thesis, a separation of sequence and consequence occurs. Knowing 'only [...] whether an event came before or after the date

¹⁸ Quoted by Max Porter, 'Introduction', in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Picador, 2019), pp.1-10, (p.1).

¹⁹ Lisa Baraitser and Denise Riley, 'Lisa Baraitser in Conversation with Denise Riley', *Studies in the Material*, 8(1): 5 (2016), 1-16 (p.10).

of the death', loss becomes for Riley the sole temporal referent by which she lives, and her dissociation from continuity marks an incapacity to form a causative link between events (p.20). Both individual perception of the present, and relation to the past are accordingly rewritten as Riley's personal history also becomes disjunct from time; a coevality of moments in which memories 'loop back on themselves [...] crop[ping] up all over again but as if, on each occasion, they were newly thought' (p.13).

Riley explores this alteration through an intertextual analysis of Emily Dickinson's poem, 'I felt a cleaving in my mind', focusing, in particular, on the following quatrain:

The thought behind I strove to join
Unto the thought before,
But sequence raveled out of sound
Like balls upon a floor (p.34).

Riley uses Dickinson's poem to illustrate the separation of her consciousness of time from its perception. She explains that 'noting small events and their effects' fails to constitute an inhabitation of time: 'The tap turns, water pours. You observe sequence. Nothing, though, follows from this observation to propel you, too, onward into the old world of consequences' (p.34; p.35). Recalling the questions posed by Smith through *Artful's* spectral voice ('Is it time that translates our lives into sequence, into meaning? Does sequence mean that things mean?'), Riley shows suspended time to destabilize normative modes of cognition (p.20). For Riley, sequence is the temporal 'scaffolding' by which consciousness is supported, and without its provision of futurity, meaning-making falters: '[t]he old edifice of "knowing" now droops forward and flops' (p.32).

Riley's suspension from time alters the ways in which she intuits and inhabits the present. This is articulated through a subsequent reading of Dickinson's poem alongside the ontology of Hegel, which, Riley explains, declares that '[t]he self itself [...] belongs to time [...] Time *is* the being of the self' (p.67, emphasis original). Paired together, the texts provide for Riley a theoretical framework through which loss of continuity is

equated with loss of being, leading her to contemplate how ‘a disruption of your grasp of [...] sequence [...] would alter your own presence to yourself’ (p.67). Riley considers how

You are, in effect, embodied and established in the sequence of rhythm. So to be inside the experience of a-temporality, which must be without any sounding rhythm and without any confident expectation of futurity, would mean that you lived in a kind of prolonged suspension (pp.67-68).

Recalling Ricœur’s ‘emplotment’ of the self, in which identity is formed through its narrativization, Riley thus outlines a dissociation from temporal sequence that is inextricable from the consciousness of being that it supports. The *detemporalization* of selfhood that this constitutes, however, is not one of alienation, but revelation. Riley relays her ‘a-temporality’ not as an antithesis of time, but as an alternative mode of temporal experience:

Rather than being just a temporal swerve, it’s more of a stepping outside of the entire sheltering sky of temporality itself – into a not unpleasant state of tremendous simplicity, of easy candour and bright emptiness (p.50).

Slipping ‘*outside* of [...] temporality’ and ‘*into* a state of a-chronicity’, Riley consistently presents this “timeless time” in spatial terms, and this is eloquently communicated in the water imagery she employs (p.50, emphasis mine; p.49). Evoking the living-space of her temporal exteriority, she relates that,

A sudden death, for the one left behind, does such violence to the experienced ‘flow’ of time that it stops, and then slowly wells up into a large pool. Instead of the old line of forward time, now something like a globe holds you. You live inside a great circle with no rim (p.25).

Subverting time’s traditional figuration as water by replacing the progressive momentum that the river evokes with the stasis that its damming produces, Riley spatializes the present in which she is ‘lodged’ (p.25). In doing so, she evokes suspended time as a

virtual site that she inhabits, configuring her experience of grief as an ekstasis.²⁰ Though in the spatial quality of its portrayal, the perception revealed to Riley is thus shown to be produced through an attenuation of presence, it is a ‘stepping outside’ generative of affective connection rather than critical distance. Continuing to describe the pool that holds her to be ‘like the banks of the river Lethe’ (one of the five rivers of the Underworld, through which the souls of the dead forget their mortal lives), Riley’s liminal presence is a gesture towards absence, but one that remains specific to the personal loss she grieves (p.25).

‘an incorporated presence’: the cohabitation of suspended time

The exploration of affect and the phenomenological tradition to which it is aligned is common within the contemporary writing of loss. Affect’s positioning of the self in relation to the other is used by writers as a means through which to examine the impacts of a loved one’s absence, and their alteration of a consciousness that had previously been shared. Underlying all the texts considered in this chapter, the use of such phenomenology is overt in Riley’s essay, which explicitly employs the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to consider the transformation that grief entails.²¹

²⁰ Naja Marie Aidt’s 2017 memoir, *When Death Takes Something From You Give It Back*, published in English in 2019, provides a lucid example of how the representation of suspended time within contemporary grief writing exceeds the Anglo-American focus of this thesis. Riley’s essay provides a recurrent intertext through which Aidt explores her loss and her account of time compares to Riley’s in the lived in ekstasis it evokes. Stating that ‘time is broken’, Aidt inhabits an endless ‘now [...] outside days and nights’. Directly invoking the son she has lost, she explains that ‘now that you can no longer be in chronological time, neither can we’, attributing her altered sense of time, like Riley, to a loss of interpersonal temporality. She quotes Riley’s description of time as a ‘large pool’ in explication. *When Death Takes Something From You Give It Back*, trans. by Denise Newman (London: Quercus Editions, 2019), p.88, emphasis original.

²¹ Riley’s use of this strand of phenomenology extends beyond her memoir essay, visible throughout her theoretical and critical writing in its exploration of the ‘social nature of identification’. Recurrent throughout these engagements is an understanding of human bodies as ‘constant live bridges for us between the external and the internal’, directly

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty conceives the body as an ‘element’ in which subjective experience and objective existence are combined, positing a transcorporeal perspective in which self and world, and self and other, are intertwined. Through a consideration of the reversibility of touch and vision, Merleau-Ponty theorizes corporeity’s extension beyond embodiment. He postulates a ‘thickness of the flesh’ in which the individual and that with which they interact are interdependent and formed in relation to one another. He argues that

the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.²²

Also terming this ‘thickness of flesh’ the ‘chiasm’, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy correlates with the self-extension of affect theory, proclaiming, as Riley notes, that each individual exists ‘from the start outside’.²³

Whilst the terminology originates only in his posthumous publications, this exteriority of subjectivity defines Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and is considered in depth in *The Phenomenology of Perception* which specifically postulates the social construction of time. Merleau-Ponty asserts in this text that

there are no events without someone to whom they happen and whose finite

relating to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. “‘What I Want Back is What I Was’: Consolation’s Retrospect’, *Diacritics*, 32.1 (2002), 49-62 (p.59; pp.59-60).

²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Selection from *The Visible and the Invisible*’, in *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: basic writings*, ed. by Thomas Baldwin (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp.247-271 (p.252).

²³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p.530. This is a phrase Riley responds to directly in her poem “Outside from the Start”. Explaining the influence of her poem’s title Riley quotes Merleau-Ponty’s statement that ‘[n]othing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but on the contrary because I am from the start outside myself and open to the world’. The speaker of Riley’s poem similarly comments that ‘none have hard real edges, since each one | is rightly spilled over, from the start of her life’. ‘Outside from the Start’, in *Selected Poems* (London: Reality Street Editions, 2000), pp.97-101. This connection is further explored in Andrea Brady’s essay, ‘Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 7.2 (2013), 138-156.

perspective is the basis of their individuality. Time presupposes a view of time. It is, therefore, not like a river, not a flowing substance.²⁴

Time doesn't flow, it is formed and reformed in the thickness of the flesh, and is, therefore, intercorporeal:

two temporalities are not mutually exclusive as are two consciousnesses, because each one knows itself only by projecting itself into the present where they can interweave. As my living present opens upon a past which I nevertheless am no longer living through, and on a future which I do not yet live, and perhaps never shall, it can also open on to temporalities outside my living experience and acquire a social horizon.²⁵

If, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, '[w]e must understand time as the subject and the subject as time', then time, like the body, is formed in the chiasm in relation to and with the other.²⁶ Its consideration as such is used by Riley to explain the maternal time-consciousness that grief retrospectively reveals.

Relating that 'to outlive a sudden death makes it evident that your ordinary time which had once "flowed" had never been much like a clear stream [...] It had always been thick', Riley evokes Merleau-Ponty's chiasm to consider the 'affective history' that is constructed within motherhood (p.49; p.71). Offering the image of 'a set of nested Russian wooden dolls', her essay conveys how a child's lived time is installed within that of its mother, both literally, in the stages of gestation, and after birth, through the consciousness of time (p.72).²⁷ This maternal temporality is transfigured by loss, as Riley

²⁴ *Phenomenology*, p.477.

²⁵ *Phenomenology*, p.503.

²⁶ *Phenomenology*, p.490. This is examined in psychological enquiries into intersubjective time, which define the 'self-constituted flow' of a collective time-consciousness that refers to its own pasts and futures as 'the transparent background' of an embodied perspective which is 'not just a point of view in the spatial domain' but 'also a temporal perspective'. Julien Laroche, Anna Maria Berardi and Eric Brangier, 'Embodiment of intersubjective time: relational dynamics as attractors in the temporal coordination of interpersonal behaviours and experiences', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5.1180 (2014), 1-17 (p.3).

²⁷ This convergence of the temporal consciousnesses of mother and child differs from that examined by psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein and Julia Kristeva, but Riley's exploration of time intersects with Kristeva's in interesting ways. Kristeva suggests that

attributes as the cause of her suspension the sudden absence of a time that was ‘internal to [her] own’ (p.72). She notes of the dolls, that ‘the inner ones had fallen out’ (p.72). *Time Lived* considers death as an end of a consciousness of time that had, subconsciously, been transpersonal. The loss of a child is a reduction to the self, repeatedly configured as a hollowing out, or ‘scooping away’, ‘of that particular doubled sense of time that you’d lived in before, if without always being conscious of it’ (pp.72-73).²⁸

Employed as a framework within current grief theory in exploration of embodied absence, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy aids a consideration of death as an end of transpersonal perspective.²⁹ Yet, extending the somatic focus of such engagements,

maternal time is one in which ‘neither the instant nor the irretrievable flow of time’ is experienced, but a ‘duration by means of new beginnings’. She argues that the development of the child occurs through an absencing of the mother, as, in language acquisition, the mother sublimates herself in promoting her child’s disassociation from her - a movement from body to thought. For Riley, time and language are always transpersonal, but after the loss of her child, the movement from body to thought that Kristeva outlines as occurring through absence takes place, with its subject positions reversed and with a goal of association, rather than separation. (see Kristeva, ‘Motherhood Today’, *Colloque Gypsy V*, 21-22 October 2005, <<http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html>> [31 January 2021]).

²⁸ Whilst interpersonality is central to Riley’s portrayal of the maternal relationship after loss, it is important to note that this relationship is never considered in isolation in Riley’s work, but always in relation to the socialization of identity with which it is concurrent. Riley’s theory argues that the self be understood in terms of what she defines as its ‘socialised biology’; at once embodied and produced by social discourse from the start. For further discussion of this, see Samuel Solomon, ‘Denise Riley’s Socialized Biology’, *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 5.2 (2013), 167-199.

²⁹ Theories of embodied absence utilize Merleau-Ponty’s positing of the flesh as a ‘means of communication’ between self and other, examining loss in physical terms, as a wound to an intertwined corporeity (*PP*, p.252). James Krasner aligns mourning with the experience of a ‘phantom limb’, describing a ‘tangible expectation’ in which, the mourner continues ‘to feel the vitality of this intervening space as the dilation of [their] body schema, and [...] know[s] terrible confusion when the space turns out to be not between two bodies but only around the edges of’ their own. Enacting a similar analysis, Laura Tanner directly engages with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, conceptualizing grief ‘as a struggle to relocate the missing body through which the mourner’s identity is constituted’ and considering grief itself as an ekstasis located ‘in the space between the body and the image’ of the deceased. (Krasner, ‘Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief’, *PMLA*, 119.2 (2004), 218-232 (p.225); Tanner, *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp.89-90.

Riley's representation of the consciousness of time effected by loss works differently, eliciting suspension as an act of psychic connection rather than as a separation that resists cognizance. The difference is subtle, but it underpins Riley's exploration, and can be usefully elucidated by widening the phenomenological framework her essay applies. Corresponding to the social formation of time that Merleau-Ponty outlines, Emmanuel Levinas, as my introduction to this thesis has considered, emphasizes the essentiality of plurality within temporal perception. His exploration of the self's incorporation of the other is specifically thought through in relation to death.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas asserts that in the historiographic conceptualization of time, 'the death of the other is an *end*, the point at which the separated being is cast into the totality'.³⁰ In the affective ethics that Levinas offers such separation is impossible. In grief, he explains,

the psychism extracts an existence resistant to a fate that would consist in becoming 'nothing but past'; interiority is the refusal to be transformed into a pure loss figuring in an alien accounting system. The death agony is precisely in this impossibility of ceasing, in the ambiguity of a time that has run out and of a mysterious time that yet remains; death is consequently not reducible to the end of a being.³¹

Through interiority the temporal absence that death conveys is denied at the same time as it is acknowledged in a temporal contradiction that refuses death as the limit of being. Comparable to the melancholic internalization that current grief theory and literature consider, Levinas' exploration can thus be read as an incorporation of the time (or timelessness) of the other; a reading that is furthered in his subsequent assertion that '[t]he inner life is the unique *way* for the real to exist as a plurality'.³² Produced by absence,

³⁰ *Totality*, p.56, emphasis original.

³¹ *Totality*, p.56.

³² *Totality*, p.58, emphasis original.

the suspended time of grief is also institutive of presence – maintaining a connection through a ‘lived in a-temporality’ that is transpersonal in the reciprocity it imagines.

The ‘consoling dialectic’ of suspended time

In the psycho-social theory of Lisa Baraitser it is temporal suspension, rather than flow, that is the site of transpersonal experience. Exploring different settings in which time, when interpersonal, becomes stalled, Baraitser develops an analysis of care as an embodied a-temporal perception. Whilst never referencing it directly, her work thus correlates with the phenomenological tradition that Riley’s essay explores. Baraitser posits care as ‘psychosocial stasis’, in which, through ‘someone’s capacity to paradoxically remain faithful [...] to the *non-event*, the not-yet-happening’, change is produced, and the personal and social intertwine.³³ She explores maternal time as an example of this heteronormative temporality, describing a

dynamic *chronicity*, alive to the potentials of *not* moving on, whilst at the same time maintaining its link with the ethical principle of one’s own future being bound up with the future of another.³⁴

Employing Riley’s memoir-essay to evince this analysis, Baraitser reads *Time Lived* in terms of the end of transpersonal time that it conveys. Responding to Riley’s disclosure that,

If you had once sensed the time of your child as quietly uncoiling inside your own, then when that child is cut away by its death, your doubled inner time is also ‘untimely ripped.’ Yours, and the child’s (p.44).

Baraitser argues that it is

[p]aradoxically through the death of her child we are able to retroactively understand the time of the unfolding of one life in relation to another; the kind of stilled time that is neither developmental, nor meaninglessly repetitive, but a kind of mutual unfurling or uncoiling.³⁵

³³ Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.21, emphasis original.

³⁴ *Enduring*, p.92, emphasis original.

³⁵ *Enduring*, p.91.

Whilst this offers a productive reading of Riley's text, Baraitser's 'retroactive' analysis places emphasis on the suspension of maternal time experienced between two living subjects, neglecting that experienced after loss to which her analysis repeatedly gestures. Exploring, as Baraitser elicits, 'what it means [...] for another kind of stopped time, the lively and prolonged time of the dead, to occupy lived time', Riley's text in fact relates the continuation of intercorporeity after loss.³⁶

Transpersonal temporality does not conclude, it transforms into 'shared a-temporality' (p.73). Thus, whilst Riley experiences her son's death as a physical 'scooping away' of his time from her own, she continues to share his time, incorporating the "'timeless time'" of his absence in her altered intuition (p.72; p.38). Riley converts her son's corporeal absence into quasi-presence in her consciousness of time. Her essay's physical description of the loss of time that death configures progresses to relate how,

in the same moment, the dead one, although sheared away from your familiar conjoined temporality, now comes to re-inhabit your arrested time vividly, as an incorporated presence (pp.72-73).

Engaging with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in terms of language in her 2004 essay, "'A Voice Without a Mouth": Inner Speech', Riley finds a 'consoling dialectic' in the 'condition of being in *ekstasis*' when understood not simply as being 'outside yourself', but, concurrently, 'inside' another.³⁷ Encapsulating the 'dynamic chronicity' that Baraitser examines, Riley explores the sociality of language.³⁸ She asserts that

Merleau-Ponty's conviction that we are outside from the start implies that we live in an *ekstasis* which should not be considered as alienated; far from trailing mournful veils, it shines with immediacy.³⁹

³⁶ *Enduring*, p.89.

³⁷ Denise Riley, "'A Voice Without a Mouth": Inner Speech' *Qui Parle*, 14.2 (2004), 57-104 (p.85).

³⁸ *Enduring*, p.181.

³⁹ 'Inner Speech', p.85.

In *Time Lived* and the state of loss that it portrays, mourning and immediacy combine. Bereft of the ‘conjoined temporality’ that motherhood produces, Riley experiences ekstasis in her grief, and the consolatory potential of ekstasis remains resident in the interpersonal connection it confers (p.73). Although the intercorporeity of the chiasm has been ‘blown away’ and replaced by a present which is ‘paper-thin’, the ekstasis of this present offers ‘a vividly physical perception’ that whilst no longer ‘thick’ in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, is nonetheless made multiple (p.51). The flow of time so strongly linked to embodied perspective is thus at once inverted and broadened in the representation of temporal suspension that Riley’s essay evokes. The ‘elaborate, dynamic, silent temporal abundance [...] [found] in loss’ produces a new perception of time that is questioningly defined as ‘[l]iminal’, allowing ‘sensations that once would have been incommensurable [to] [...] flourish side by side’ (p.74; p.42).

Asserting that ‘[t]ime ‘is’ the person. You’re soaked through with it’, that ‘[y]ou *are* time. You are saturated with it’, and, invoking Hegel, that ‘[t]ime *is* the being of the self’, Riley determines her experience of time to be inseparable from her experience of identity (p.46; p.59, emphasis original; p.67, emphasis original). Yet, explaining that ‘those who lose a child will go out with the lost one into their timelessness’, she underlines the continuation of interpersonality, as it remains integral to the construction of a reformed self and the ‘altered temporality’ to which it is tied (p.54; p.53). Maintaining the presence of her son and absenting her from the world in ‘vicarious death’, the solace of suspended time is found in the reciprocity of its disjunction (p.21). The interpersonal connection between two living subjects that was constituted in time continues outside of time as absent and present intertwine: ‘They draw you across to their side, while you incorporate them on your side’ (p.40).

‘lean[ing] forward into life’: the temporal (im)possibilities of language

As already indicated, in Riley’s earlier works of critical theory it is through a consideration of language that the intertwining of self and other is explored. Posited as both impersonal and interpersonal, Riley examines language as an ‘innocent ekstasis’, formed and shared between numerous individuals, open to change, and inherently social. After loss, however, Riley’s relationship to language gains a different dimension, denoting a futurity from which, in her suspension, she is estranged. It is a contention that defines not only *Time Lived* but also ‘A Part Song’, a lyrical sequence first published alongside the essay, in 2012. In both works Riley considers the implications and possibilities that representation entails, negotiating a tension between content and form which, paralleling that between time and timelessness, mirrors the contradictions that the experience of grief reveals.

The formal structure of *Time Lived* is significant in the temporality that it conveys. Framing the notes made within the experience of suspension with an introduction and ‘postscript’ which work to analyse and explain them, the text enfolds timelessness within progressive time. The notes themselves, whilst documenting a-temporality, are dated, and ordered chronologically, asserting in subheadings their temporal distance from the ‘event’. The content of Riley’s essay thus relates not only an experience of timelessness but a fear of time’s resumption within a strict temporal form, a contradiction that underlines suspension’s solace. Writing ‘*Two and a half years later*’, Riley considers the return of temporal progression as constitutive of a secondary loss:

Perhaps only through forgetting the dead could it become possible to allow them to become dead. To finally be dead. And that could only follow – but only after Time had taken the initiative here by itself – from consigning them to a Time that had decided to resume its old flow. Of its own accord [...] Time ‘is’ the person (p.36, emphasis original; p.46).

Having rendered them both disjunct in its suspension, Riley fears that the resumption of time's 'old flow' will return not only her, but her son to temporality, entailing an act of forgetting which *allows* death in a delayed psychic repetition of the physical occurrence.⁴⁰ The restoration of time is conceptualized as a restoration to individuality: a separation of identity that enacts totalization. Indeed, that temporal suspension does indeed conclude is made evident by the very possibility of its representation.

Written three years after the death of her son, Riley relates that the communication of her own altered consciousness of time was possible only after it had ended. As her self-proclaimed 'postscript' parenthetically explains,

(It was only when a familiar intuition of sequence eventually and spontaneously restored itself, having 'taken its time' over the passage of a few years, that I could begin to sort out my fragmented notes and start on these paragraphs.) (pp.57-58).

The 'sort[ing] out' of the notes related by Riley enacts a narrative temporalization, embedding the experience of suspended time within a strict temporal structure – a disjuncture between content and form that is made all the more apparent by the inclusion of a contents page in the essay's second edition. It is not, however, only the temporal structure of the essay that contradicts what it conveys, but also the narrative, grammar, and language essential to any literary representation. Riley relates how, whilst 'lucid' in its experience,

A life of no time can't be recounted. Your very condition militates against narrative [...] A sentence slopes forward into its own future [...] your newly stopped time is stripped of that direction. Or rather, the whole notion of directedness has gone (pp.56-57).

⁴⁰ This secondary loss is relayed also by Riley in her poem, 'A Misremembered Lyric', in which the focus is placed more emphatically on the experience of the bereaved, asserting, amidst a heteroglossic layering of altered lines from diverse songs and poems, that, 'you get no consolation anyway until your memory's | dead;'. (*MMG*, p.31.).

The ‘directedness’ of narrative is significant. For Riley language is progressive, and it thus contends the timelessness of the content that it carries. Concurrently, however, language offers a ‘curious [...] quasi-resurrection’ in the confusion of presence and absence that tense allows (p.55). Riley notes that ‘[e]ven the plainest “he died” is a strange sentence, since there’s no longer a human subject to sustain that “he”’; corporeal absence marks an estrangement of signifier and signified, yet language refuses closure (p.54). Disregarding their lack of physical referent, words in their very insufficiency effect a continuation of presence, as ‘possibilities for discussing the no longer existing person’ remain (p.55). The experiential paradox of Riley’s ‘lived in’ a-temporality is, in this way, made visible through a staging of the temporal contrast between her essay’s content and its form, and the significance of the resulting tension becomes emphatic in grief’s poetic portrayal.

First published in *Mop Mop Georgette* in 1993, Riley’s poem ‘True North’ highlights the interpersonality her philosophy considers, conveying the open boundaries of identity as the corporeal body enfolds within itself a fragment of its external surroundings. Relating a ‘[s]liver of outside that I cradle inside and which guarantees me | my life also’, Riley’s lyric evokes the affective extensity of selfhood – a being that, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, is ‘from the start outside’.⁴¹ Discussing the ‘nomadism of the “I”’ in Riley’s poetry, Carol Watts explores this positionality, explicating through affect the sociality of identity it underlines.⁴² Watts argues that in Riley’s work lyric

⁴¹ Denise Riley, ‘True North’, in *Mop Mop Georgette* (Cambridge: Reality Street Editions, 1993), p.40 (p.40); Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, p.530. Clair Wills similarly reads ‘True North’ as elucidative of Riley’s portrayal of interpersonality. In an exploration of feminist experimental poetry, Wills underlines the reciprocity in Riley’s work between the female self and the ‘discourses which surround her’. See Wills, ‘Contemporary women’s poetry: experimentalism and the expressive voice’, *Critical Quarterly*, 36.3 (1994), 34-52 (p.49).

⁴² Carol Watts, ‘Beyond interpellation? Affect, Embodiment and the Poetics of Denise Riley’, in *Contemporary Women’s Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, ed. by Alison Mark

poetry's representative aim 'to validate the "I"' becomes both challenged and informed by the impersonal voices that exist beyond it.⁴³ Affect, Watts contends, disrupts

the conventional ties between the lived body and the perceived world and the laws of language that secure them [...] [It] does not emanate from 'outside' in any simple sense, but it demands the recognition of the otherness of the self, which makes it, by definition, social.⁴⁴

The social nomadism of the lyric 'I' is sustained throughout Riley's poetry, formally accentuated by the diverse intertextuality that it employs to convey the myriad discourses of and through which being is comprised. However, Riley's recognition of the self's otherness attains new focus within her 2012 collection, *Say Something Back*, as the subject of loss is explored. It is in these poems that, rather than that of the speaker, the positionality of the apostrophized becomes a central concern.

In his exploration of the function of lyric as employed within *Say Something Back*, Peter Riley underlines the sociality of the mode. He contends that

It seems more likely that lyric is not a kind of poetry at all, but a poetical technique. The purpose of the technique is to create an illusion of song [...] Song (actual, sung song) is collective. It is sent out into the world in search of auditors and to form or confirm a body of felt mutuality.⁴⁵

Considered as 'an invitation to a collective', lyric's musicality is outward reaching and seeking of connection.⁴⁶ In Denise Riley's philosophy, this sociality is not limited to lyric, but is, as already considered, characteristic of language in general. Formed exterior

and Deryn Rees-Jones (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp.157-172 (p.162). Watts' analysis is echoed by Sarah Howe, who considers the sociality of internal consciousness and emotion within Riley's work, identifying a broader lyric shift within contemporary writing that interrogates the relationship between feeling and thought. Sarah Howe, 'The Feel of Thinking – Sarah Howe on lyric connections and incisions', *poetry london*, < <https://poetrylondon.co.uk/essay-the-feel-of-thinking-sarah-howe-on-lyric-connections-and-incisions/> > [accessed 09 September 2021].

⁴³ 'Beyond', p.162.

⁴⁴ 'Beyond', p.165.

⁴⁵ Peter Riley, 'Denise Riley and the "awkward lyric".', *Poetry Notes, The Fortnightly Review*, October 2016, <<https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2016/10/denise-riley/>> [accessed 29 January 2021].

⁴⁶ Peter Riley, 'Denise Riley and the "awkward lyric".'.

to the self and internalized in thought, or ‘inner speech’, ‘language’s affect’ is, for Riley, ‘that outward unconscious which hovers between people’.⁴⁷ Both impersonal and interpersonal, it is formed with and through the other, in extensity.⁴⁸

In Riley’s sequence of twenty poems titled ‘A Part Song’, the ekstasis of language is joined to that of time in an extended negotiation of the possibilities and implications of apostrophic address. Defined by the OED as ‘[a] figure of speech, by which a speaker or writer suddenly stops in [their] discourse, and turns to address pointedly some person or thing, either present or absent’, apostrophe denotes a disjuncture from narrative, and the linear progression that narrative implies.⁴⁹ Used to invoke an absent other, apostrophe becomes particularly significant within the genre of elegy, in which the futility of its project is unequivocal. But its futility only makes it more essential.

For Jonathan Culler, apostrophe’s ‘neutralization of time’ is achieved through its reflexive ‘reference to a temporality of writing’; rather than responding to an event, apostrophe is constitutive of one, suspending time is its self-referentiality.⁵⁰ Employed within elegy, apostrophe’s mode of address, Culler argues, therefore displaces the ‘irreversible structure’ of loss as it removes ‘the opposition between presence and absence from empirical time’ to position it within ‘discursive time’ instead.⁵¹ Thus,

⁴⁷ Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005), pp.3-4.

⁴⁸ For further discussion of extensity in Riley’s poetry, see Brady 2013.

⁴⁹ ‘apostrophe, n.1’ *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/9448?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=fv8aPB&>> [accessed 11 February 2020].

⁵⁰ Jonathan Culler, ‘Apostrophe’, in *The Pursuit of Signs*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.149-171, (p.169). This analysis has as its foundation the a-chronicity of non-mimetic representation that Culler’s later work attributes to lyric poetry more broadly.

⁵¹ ‘Apostrophe’, p.166.

The temporal movement from A to B, internalized by apostrophe, becomes a reversible alternation between A' and B': a play of presence and absence governed not by time but by poetic power.⁵²

Apostrophe, as an event of writing, becomes reciprocal. Not only is an absent subject made present, but the presence of the speaker is altered in their act of invocation, which, it is significant to note, Culler presents as an *internalization* of temporal movement. Reflective of the 'melancholic' internalization now promoted within grief theory, apostrophe binds absence and affect in its linguistic suspension of time. In 'A Part Song', Riley examines this connection.

The first poem of Riley's sequence opens in an immediate questioning of the lyric mode that it employs.⁵³ Asking, 'what are you *for* now?', the poem initiates a staging of its own failure to make present the addressee that it invokes.⁵⁴ It is physical presence that the poems' speaker desires and discarding the forms of presencing offered by reincarnation, spectral haunting, and the uncanny, she pursues corporeality through the 'resurrection song' that she performs.⁵⁵ It is in the acknowledged futility of this project that the reciprocity of apostrophe becomes clear, as the fictive, or optative, space of the poem is shared in an elision of absence and presence.⁵⁶

Whilst berated for its futility, the 'slim' and 'ultraflexible' hope of the lyric is established in this opening poem in the form's potential for performative polyvocality.⁵⁷

⁵² 'Apostrophe', p.166.

⁵³ The contradiction that this evinces between content and form is visible throughout Riley's poetry and is noted in criticism that interrogates her use of interpersonality (see, for example, Solomon, 2013 and Watts, 2000).

⁵⁴ Riley, 'A Part Song', in *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), pp.2-14 (p.2, emphasis original).

⁵⁵ 'A Part Song', p.13.

⁵⁶ Noted in Culler's essay 'Apostrophe', this is indicated in relation to Riley's 'A Part Song' specifically by Peter Riley's review of the work, see, 'Denise Riley and the force of bereavement', *Poetry Notes, The Fortnightly Review*, March 2012, <<https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2012/03/denise-riley-force-bereavement/>> [accessed 10 October 2021].

⁵⁷ 'A Part Song', p.2.

In the line, ‘Flap thinly, sheet of beaten tin’, Riley refers to her 1993 poem, ‘Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else’, in which the positionality of the speaker is continually questioned and refracted, described as ‘[a] body shot through, perforated, a tin sheet | beaten out then peppered with thin holes’.⁵⁸ It is, in this poem, through the ‘tracery’ of its speaker’s destabilized presence that ‘light flies [...] voices leap’, suggestive of the interpersonality that the form enables in its invocation and ventriloquism.⁵⁹ The failure of the form to present its absent addressee is not synonymous with a failure of the form itself. Instead, because in reaching for the absent other the presence of the speaker is disrupted, both speaker and addressee, present and absent, converge in a shared suspension from time and cohabitation of the fictive space.⁶⁰ Whilst a corporeal connection is denied, an incorporation of the absent within the present – the containment of ‘the time of the dead [...] within your own’ that *Time Lived* communicates – is performed through the lyric address (p.73). In two moments that draw attention specifically to the aporia of apostrophe, this potential for connection is powerfully underlined.

In the eleventh poem of ‘A Part Song’, Riley states directly the impossibility of presencing the absent through apostrophe, moving instead to address a present subject: ‘I’ll cry “Oh bee!” to you, instead – | Since my own dead, apostrophised, | Keep mute’.⁶¹ In doing so, however, Riley replaces the ‘O’ conventionally employed in lyric with ‘Oh’,

⁵⁸ ‘A Part Song’, p.2; Riley, ‘Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else’, in *Mop Mop Georgette* (Cambridge: Reality Street Editions, 1993), pp.27-28 (p.27).

⁵⁹ ‘Wherever’, p.27.

⁶⁰ That invocation fails is also indicative of the ethical encounter Riley’s apostrophe imagines, underlining the self-absenting it performs as one that maintains the alterity of the other it invokes. The ethics of this is considered by Peter Robinson in his reading of *The Words of Selves* alongside Riley’s elegy, in which he states that Riley’s ‘strategy [...] is to reserve an emptied-out, non-identifying self as the site for needed solidarity toward those with whom one cannot and should not identify’ (Peter Robinson, *The Sound Sense of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.186).

⁶¹ ‘A Part Song’, p.9.

performing a telling introspection. Recalling Plato's *Republic*, in which the sweetness of poetry associated with the bee, is opposed to the reason of philosophy, Riley's poem evokes the contrast between feeling and thought in its examination of grief.⁶² The move from critical to affective meaning that 'A Part Song' thus expresses is accentuated, moreover, by the change of subject that the additional 'h' evokes, helpfully underlined by Barbara Johnson in an analysis of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', 'the ultimate apostrophic poem'.⁶³ Aided by the linguistic theory of Roman Jakobson, Johnson examines Shelley's attempt to

build [...] the bridge between the "O" of the pure vocative, Jakobson's conative function, or the pure presencing of the second person, and the "oh" of pure subjectivity, Jakobson's emotive function, or the pure presencing of the first person.⁶⁴

Riley's sequence plays with this opposition, for its apostrophic presencing is reciprocal. Whilst her invocation of her son fails, substituted by the subjective 'Oh bee!', her son's presencing, (and thus absencing) of his mother succeeds. The last poem, in which his voice is ventriloquized, ends

O let me be, my mother
In no unquiet grave
My bone-dust is faint coral
*Under the fretful wave.*⁶⁵

⁶² Riley's familiarity with this philosophical tradition is underlined in her previous use of apian imagery in 'A Shortened Set', a poem which, as explored in the introduction to this chapter, examines the relationship between feeling and thought, and in which, in contrast, 'A round O says I feel', (*MMG*, p.19). Riley's use of apian imagery within this poem, and its philosophical foundations are examined in greater detail by Rana Saadi Liebert in 'Apian Imagery and the Critique of Poetic Sweetness in Plato's *Republic*', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-2014), 140.1 (2010), 97-115.

⁶³ Barbara Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 28-47 (p.31).

⁶⁴ 'Apostrophe', p.31.

⁶⁵ 'A Part Song', p.14.

As this stanza demonstrates, the invocation of apostrophe becomes mirrored in the allusiveness of Riley's writing; her sequence suspended by the polytemporal community of mourning voices that it holds. Spoken by the absent, the 'unquiet grave' evokes a fifteenth century ballad in which the dead are denied rest by the mourning of the living.⁶⁶ The 'faint coral' is suggestive of Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which, alongside the sea imagery employed throughout the sequence, signals at once the impossibility of retrieving the dead, and the 'sea-change' of their transformation.⁶⁷ Indeed, portrayals of the sea and shore are characteristic of elegiac writing, employed throughout its lineage in exploration of the boundary between living and dead.⁶⁸ Here, however, in the dual signification of 'unquiet', 'faint' and 'fretful', this imagery is linked to sound and voice, underlining the capacity of lyric to operate as a site of convergence instead.

As the direct address of 'A Part Song's' apostrophe is paralleled by the invocation of its many allusions, Riley underlines the ineluctable impossibility of the meeting she imagines. The inclusion of *The Tempest*, a play concerning, in Sophie Ratcliffe's view, a 'radical scepticism about other minds, about the possibility of goodness and sympathy, and about the possibility for art to convey meaning', signals Riley's questioning of the invocation she enacts.⁶⁹ Yet lyric, as a disjuncture from time, and a convergence of times,

⁶⁶ Specifically referencing number 78 of Child's Collected Ballads, this allusion is noted by Peter Robinson, who considers it in relation to Riley's sustained questioning of the purpose of poetry and its techniques of apostrophe and rhyme. (*The Sound*, p.184). Smith too, uses this intertext in her exploration of mourning in *Artful*, highlighting the invocatory power of grief in the spectral presence that her text portrays, and its rootedness within language.

⁶⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p.123.

⁶⁸ The history of such imagery is explored by Rebecca Mills in her reading of elegy through the framework of geocriticism in 'The Elegiac Tradition and the Imagined Geography of the Sea and the Shore', *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 17.4 (2005), 493-516.

⁶⁹ Sophie Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.67. In her own reflections upon grief, Ratcliffe too portrays an ekstasis from narrative time,

both questions and asserts the possibility of a continued connection between the living and the dead, and despite a sustained acknowledgment of its limitations, the form of the sequence becomes the site in which solace is found. Riley and her son share in each other's presence and absence inside the fragile space and liminal a-temporality that is constituted by writing itself.

In his analysis of apostrophe, Culler quotes Paul de Man's reading of prosopopoeia in William Wordsworth's *Essays on Epitaphs*, in which, commenting on the 'symmetrical structure of the trope', De Man asserts that, in the act of 'making the dead speak', the living enter 'into the frozen world of the dead'.⁷⁰ In Riley's writing apostrophe refuses the 'sinister connotation' De Man attributes; the reciprocity of the trope offers solace in its destabilizing of presence.⁷¹ This potential for solace is underlined in the excerpt of W. S. Graham's poem 'Implements in their Places', that Riley includes as an epigraph to her collection: 'Do not think you have to say | Anything back. But you do | Say something back which I | Hear by the way I speak to you'.⁷² Insufficient to the speaker's aims of resurrection, apostrophe nevertheless sustains connection in the imagined reciprocity of its timeless address.

The examination of the timelessness of discourse and writing in Riley's poetry sheds light on her treatment of representation's paradoxical evasion of and 'lean' towards the future in *Time Lived*. In accommodating timelessness within the forms that she employs, Riley offers representation itself as a virtual space of non-time, an ekstasis

explaining, as she explores the temporalities of love, trains, life, and loss, how the death of her father produced in her 'a defiance of the way in which the world measures things. The sense of time that other people live by no longer matters. Death robs you of an imagined future. It also removes your belief in standard chronology, in the idea that a life lived in time works like a railway timetable'. *The Lost Properties of Love: An Exhibition of Myself* (London: William Collins, 2019), p.163.

⁷⁰ 'Apostrophe', p.169.

⁷¹ 'Apostrophe', p.169.

⁷² *Say Something Back*, p.v.

through which a connection to absence can be constructed and maintained. Riley's writing, as Porter claims, thus 'carrie[s] in the very texture of its lines the remade relationship between a person gone and a person remaining. [It is n]ot about grief, but fashioned of it and for it'.⁷³ Whether through apostrophic address or formal framing, Riley's 'literature of consolation' enacts the maternal enfolding of time, and of its absence, that her experience of loss reveals (p.61). Her writing offers a 'way' of being in time that at once resists and exists alongside time's linear chronology, but that nonetheless refuses its need for closure.⁷⁴

'Grief has no distance': The temporal affect of loss in contemporary grief memoir

Directly examined in Riley's essay, the effect loss has on the consciousness of time is represented throughout twenty-first century grief memoir in which a similar uncoupling of sequence and consequence sees normative modes of meaning-making destabilized and reformed. Such alteration of time-consciousness is demonstrated in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and in Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk*. Though contrasting starkly in the experiences that they relate, these texts exemplify the analeptic mode of the memoir genre in the self-analyses that they portray. Reflecting explicitly upon the effects grief has on the experience of time, both also engage directly with the temporal implications of grief's writing.

⁷³ 'Introduction', p.5.

⁷⁴ Comparable to the authors examined in the preceding chapters of my thesis, Riley's desire to resist conclusion extends beyond her portrayal of grief to that of meaning more generally, as her reading of Merleau-Ponty links understanding to a lack of closure. Providing an overview of her influences in 'A Short History of Some Preoccupations', Riley notes how Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* examines 'the perspectival character of knowledge, its necessary unfinishedness'. 'A Short History of Some Preoccupations', *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 121-129, (p.126).

In an interweaving of experience and representation, feeling and thinking, and grief and mourning, Didion and Macdonald use the specific temporality of the memoir genre to examine the disjuncture from time that loss entails. As an act of self-representation, memoir enforces the temporal division of its author as past experience becomes the object of present observation. It is a dual subjectivity that, like psychoanalysis, encourages the temporalization of identity, with unification sought through a narrative linking of cause and effect. Thus, whilst both authors posit grief as a suspension from time in which narrative meaning-making cedes to affect, both also narrativize this experience within the genre they employ. *The Year* and *H is for Hawk* in this way highlight the same contestation identified by Riley in *Time Lived*. Whether grief is framed for Didion as ‘magical thinking’ or for Macdonald as ‘a madness designed to keep me sane’, its representation positions an affective experience beyond both time and meaning within a literary genre that searches for both.⁷⁵ Whilst Didion considers the writing of her memoir as a connection lost upon completion, Macdonald reflects upon her authorship as a means through which she let go of her grief. Despite this difference, however, both authors convey the suspended time that they experience as an act of incorporation or enfolding of the absent within their consciousness of time, and this is repeated in the form of their texts, whether consciously or not, within the suspended time of discourse that the writing of grief maintains.

Written in attempt to ‘make sense of’ the sudden death of her husband and her subsequent grief, Didion’s memoir interweaves an analysis of loss with that of time through a sustained interrogation of narrative. Its exploration is varifold. Aware of her dependence on narrative as a mode of making meaning Didion is by profession an author

⁷⁵ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), p.33; Helen Macdonald, *H is for Hawk* (London: Vintage Books, 2014), p.16. Further references to these editions are given after quotations in the text.

of narrative, and the loss of John Dunne, not only her husband, but her collaborator, the first reader of her writing, and the editor of her work, forces a change in the linear temporality that had previously defined both her thought and representation.

The Year relates loss as an event of temporal rupture; occurring suddenly, John's death signifies within Didion's consciousness of time '*the instant*' in which '*[l]ife changes*' (p.3, emphasis original). But it is the *timelessness* of death that the memoir makes emphatic. Relating that she 'felt invisible for a period of time, incorporeal', Didion notes the effects loss has on her own physical presence, as she shares in the absence of the person for whom she grieves (p.75). In doing so, she employs similar imagery to Riley to evoke liminality in spatial terms. Understanding 'for the first time the power in the image of the rivers, the Styx, the Lethe, the cloaked ferryman with his pole', Didion discloses that 'I seemed to have crossed one of those legendary rivers that divide the living from the dead, entered a place in which I could be seen only by those who were themselves recently bereaved' (p.75). Having viewed the world and herself 'through John's eyes', she relates a shattering of her self-perception that, explained as a loss of interpersonality, is concordant with her way of being in time (p.197).⁷⁶

Time dominates Didion's consciousness of loss. Immediately after John's death and alongside the exact chronology she provides, she conveys her estrangement from causality, noting her inability to conceptualize a temporal experience that is either universal or cohesive. She finds herself

wondering, with no sense of illogic, if it had also happened in Los Angeles. I was trying to work out what time it had been when he died and whether it was that time yet in Los Angeles. (Was there time to go back? Could we have a

⁷⁶ The change in self-perception that this indicates is further examined by Sam Meekings in an application of Linville's self-complexity theory, which considers loss as an alteration in an identity that has always been relational. See 'Writing through Loss: The Rise of Grief Narratives through the Lens of Linville's Self-complexity Theory', *Life Writing*, 16.3 (2019), 413-427.

different ending on Pacific time?) (p.31).

The timelessness of absence transfigures into that of imagination. Didion's instinctive desire to change the 'ending' elucidates her contradictory relationship to narrative, as from within her suspension she searches for causality not to comprehend the fact of loss, but to sublimate it to authorial control. The passage highlights a temporal perspective that focuses on, and actively seeks difference; the normative spatialization that the measurement of time entails is delineated as Didion searches for a way to exploit the time difference of the two locations she considers.

The altered consciousness of time that Didion's desire portrays is that of 'magical thinking': a suspension from causality through which belief in the return of the lost can be maintained. Didion identifies her husband's autopsy as the first manifestation of such thought. Whilst initially presented as a need for causal explanation, it is soon disclosed that the procedure's narrative chronology is sought instead to regain the agency of authorship that is professed by her career. The autopsy, in Didion's thinking, could reveal the cause of death to be so trivial as to be rectified in the flux of time that she conceptualizes: '[i]n this case, the reasoning went, they might still be able to fix it' (p.37). Didion aligns 'magical thinking' with the imaginative capacity of childhood, demonstrating an irrational belief that 'thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome' (p.35). Pursuing the exact chronology of the events surrounding her husband's death via hospital reports and the log book of her apartment building, she works tirelessly to establish a narrative of her loss, but causality is sought not as a mode of understanding, but in order that it be made contingent.

Inhabited by Didion in her estrangement from causation, and by John in her belief in his return, suspended time is configured as a psychic space that brings solace in the reciprocity it imagines. However, Didion's virtual occupation of this space is repeatedly

threatened by her own corporeality, evinced in what she in hindsight terms ‘the vortex effect’: the traumatic reassertion of the present through an uncontrollable recollection of the past. Memories, for Didion, are not consolatory, and this is made clear in her subsequent memoir, *Blue Nights*, in which she reflects upon the loss of her daughter Quintana in 2005. Didion relates:

‘You have wonderful memories,’ people said later, as if memories were solace. Memories are not. Memories are by definition of times past, things gone [...] Memories are what you no longer want to remember.⁷⁷

In *The Year*’s relation of the vortex effect, efforts to ‘keep [...] on the correct track (the narrow track, the track on which there was no going back)’ are repeatedly curtailed by memories of the past (p.53). Time is spatialized in its consciousness, and Didion’s memories, which begin in relation to her physical location, continue to proceed in a cognitive linking that is beyond her control. A visit she makes to see her daughter at Beth Israel North hospital provides a lucid example, as submerged in memory by the detail of the patterned wallpaper, she first recalls the history of the building itself (its prior existence as the Doctor’s Hospital) before deeply personal memories are rapidly produced. Didion associates the Doctor’s Hospital with her time working at *Vogue*, recalling it as the site chosen for clandestine abortions, and she links this memory with the novel in which she included it, before continuing into a memory of its writing. She recalls that she

had been writing that book when Quintana was three.

When Quintana was three.

There it was, the vortex.

Quintana at three (p.110, emphasis original).

Evincing an associative, rather than causal linking of events, Didion’s mind moves from ‘the wallpaper border at Beth Israel North to Quintana at three and I should have listened

⁷⁷ Joan Didion, *Blue Nights* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011), p.64.

to John' (p.112). Whilst in this way disruptive of time's narrativization, the vortex effect forces Didion's present into a positionality of conclusion, marking her loss whenever John or Quintana are recalled. Showing the topography of grief to be temporal, the vortex effect asserts a division between absence and presence – a rift Didion's magical thinking persistently refuses to acknowledge.⁷⁸ Stating that she 'plotted these evenings as carefully as I plotted the routes', Didion seeks to sublimate her consciousness of time and space to her authorship, avoiding places she associates with those she loves in an effort to remain in control of her temporality (p.117). Such attempts, however, prove futile, and it is in suspension that solace is found.

The Beverly Wilshire hotel, at which Didion stays during Quintana's hospitalization, is a site full of memories. Having stayed at the hotel numerous times with John, it should, following Didion's own reasoning, be institutive of the vortex effect she fears. It is, however, remarkable for its evasion of time altogether; portrayed as a liminal space that, accommodating a plurality of times, provides a secure means of recalling the past.⁷⁹ Identifying the site as 'the only safe place for me to be', Didion makes clear the solace that its dys-chrony provides, describing it as

the place where everything would be the same, the place where no one would know about or refer to the events of my recent life; the place where I would still be the person I had been before any of this happened.

What if.

Outside the exempt zone that was the Beverly Wilshire, I plotted my routes, I remained on guard (p.114, emphasis original).

⁷⁸ The topography of grief is examined in the theory of Judith Butler, among others, who argue that consciousness becomes spatialized and virtually inhabited in loss. See Butler 'Psychic Inceptions: *Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage*', in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp.167-200.

⁷⁹ The effects of this are noted by Marta Bladek, who, interrogating Didion's spatial experience of loss, asserts that the hotel 'mobilizes place's inherently reservative quality, or its ability to hold the past "steadily within its own embrace" (Casey 184)'. See Bladek, "'A Place None of Us Know Until We Reach It": Mapping Grief and Memory in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*', *Biography*, 37.4 (2014), 935-952, (p.944).

As a site of suspension, the hotel allows Didion a re-identification with the past that remains free from the vortex's assertion of the present. The disjuncture from time that the hotel offers is thus accommodative of magical thinking – the grammatical framing of the italicized '*What if.*' as a declaration rather than a question signifies the imaginative capacity of grief in its offering of potential. Free from linearity, the 'safe space' of the hotel makes possible an alternate way of being in time. That it remains, however, an 'exempt zone' indicates the narrative dependency that Didion continues to exhibit.

Narratives of mourning

Essential to understanding the contradictory portrayals of time in Didion's memoir is the distinction she makes between 'grief' and 'mourning' – a distinction that, apparent also in Macdonald's text, is brought to the fore by the temporal structure of the memoir genre. As a suspension of the self, grief is 'passive', explicative of the non-temporal meaning-making it involves. Mourning, on the other hand, denotes a process through which the self is reconstituted in time. Contemplating her daughter's recovery, Didion decides to pursue her own, explaining that

I did not yet have the concentration to work but I could straighten my house, I could get on top of things, I could deal with my unopened mail.

That I was only now beginning the process of mourning did not occur to me.

Until now I had been able only to grieve, not mourn. Grief was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention (p.143).

Paralleling the feeling of grief with the thinking that mourning requires, Didion echoes Alice Bennett's reading of Ricœur explored in the first chapter of this thesis, assigning to the belief that '[n]arrative is what makes time meaningful [...] and attention is what makes time narrative'.⁸⁰ Didion portrays grief as a suspension from sequence,

⁸⁰ *Contemporary Fictions*, p.59.

progression, and causation, yet in the understanding that she seeks grief is repeatedly temporalized. Whilst opposing the prescribed narratives of mourning she encounters within literature, medicine, and science, Didion nonetheless applies narrative in an aim to ‘make sense’ of her loss and she thus enfold the suspension of grief within the narrative analysis that her consciousness, through mourning, performs.

The narratives of mourning with which Didion contends are varied, but they nonetheless compare in the generalizations they enforce, which each prove incompatible with personal loss. Outlining, for example, a technique known as “re-grief therapy”, developed at the University of Virginia, Didion challenges a professed ability to “explain and interpret” feeling (pp.55-56). She asks

from where exactly did Dr. Volkan and his team in Charlottesville derive their unique understanding of ‘the psychodynamics involved in the patient’s need to keep the lost one alive,’ [...]? (p.56).

Proclaimed knowledge is undone as the narrative temporalization it evinces is opposed not only by the temporal singularity of the event of loss, but by the affective history related. Asserting the specificity of her grief through that of time and place, Didion repeatedly asks ‘Were you there?’ as she recalls various personal memories of her relationship with John in a representation that refuses the stable framework of chronology.⁸¹

Positioning grief in relation to such narratives, Didion’s memoir marks a temporal contrast. Unlike mourning, grief pays no heed to time, and challenging the closure that literature, science, and society each prescribe, its experience further contends with the

⁸¹ Whilst narrative remains incompatible with Didion’s experience of grief, it does prove useful in the social role it serves to function. Discussing Emily Post’s 1922 book of etiquette, Didion highlights a ‘prescriptive [...] treatment of grief’ in which, rather than be categorized or assimilated within ‘proclaimed knowledge’, the alterity of the mourner is maintained (p.60; p.61). Instead of representing the experience of loss, narrative here acts as a guide for others’ negotiation of it in the ‘apprehension of this other way of death’ that it provides (p.61).

narrative drive of consciousness. Unassimilable to the temporalization of critique, Didion's evocation of grief binds suspended time to a mode of meaning-making that is overwhelmingly somatic. The memoir relates that '[g]rief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life' (p.27). Experienced moreover as a '[t]ightness in the throat', a '[c]hoking', and a 'need for sighing', the autonomy of grief is evoked in its physicality (p.28).

Directly opposing the linearity of 'daily life', the 'thoughts and wishes' of Didion's grief evince an affective consciousness of time, yet in trying to understand the experience, a narrative mode of meaning-making is reaffirmed. Whilst criticism has noted within her work a consistent derision of 'psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychopharmacology', Didion's navigation of the treatment of grief within such discourse is far more nuanced than this analysis allows.⁸² Countering the 'stress on "overcoming"' loss that she identifies within the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, Didion's understanding of her 'other way' of being nonetheless recalls and explicitly engages with their work (p.35). Her examination of the imaginative capacity of grief corresponds with psychoanalytic explications of internalization as a psychic incorporation of the lost loved object, and in comparing her 'magical thinking' to that of childhood, it is the writing of Klein that Didion most recalls. Klein argued that experiences of loss in adulthood repeated the 'depressive state' essential within the early stages of child development, in which the child's separation from the mother incites an effort to recapture her by representing her *within* the self. Explaining, in the same essay Didion quotes, how the baby, 'having incorporated his parents, feels them to be live people inside his body', Klein postulates mourning as a recovery of this process, a

⁸² Berman, *Writing*, p.138.

‘deepening in the individual’s relation to his inner objects’ through which ‘relations to external objects’ are built up.⁸³ It is a process through which independence is achieved, a totalization of the self that, disavowed in the interpersonality that underpins her magical thinking, Didion’s self-understanding paradoxically relies upon.

This use of psychoanalysis to narrativize suspended time is repeated in Didion’s relation of the vortex effect, which she reflectively aligns with the Freudian ‘work’ of mourning.⁸⁴ Having already considered Freud’s exploration of mourning as a derangement of the mind socially acceptable due only, she quotes, to ‘its being overcome after a certain lapse of time.’, Didion nonetheless tries to make sense of her grief by comparing the vortex effect to the ‘reality testing’ that Freud outlines (p.34). Quoting Freud’s description of a process in which ‘[e]ach single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect to it [...]’, Didion reflectively totalizes and temporalizes her identity, at the same time as she resists the closure that this implies (p.133). In Didion’s consciousness the melancholic incorporation of the lost that is both productive of and made possible by grief’s suspension is enclosed within a narrative of mourning that marks the self’s progression through time.

‘The way I write is who I am’: narrating non-narrative time

The contradiction between affect and critique that loss exposes in Didion’s consciousness coincides with the representation she completes. Didion’s critical mode of

⁸³ Melanie Klein, ‘Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States’, in *Female Sexuality: Contemporary Engagements*, ed. by Donna Bassin (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999), pp.252-278, (p.253; p.269).

⁸⁴ Whilst explicitly linked to Freud, Didion’s relation of the vortex effect also closely aligns with the theory of Kristeva, who outlines how a ‘moment’ of trauma removes any horizon or perspective within depressive temporality, as ‘[a]n overinflated, hyperbolic past fills all the dimensions of psychic continuity’ (*BS*, p.60.).

meaning-making informs her writing style, the detachment of which is much noted within responses to her memoir. Didion is, as *The Year* relates, widely considered to be a ‘cool customer’, and whilst a label too reductive in its description, the self-distance that critique dictates is self-attributed by Didion, who examines throughout her journalism her separation from the world (p.15). In an introductory piece for *Life* magazine in 1969, titled ‘A problem of making connections’, Didion explicates the perspective from which she writes. Addressing her reader, she explains:

I want you to understand exactly what you are getting: you are getting a woman who for some time now has felt radically separated from most of the ideas that seem to interest other people. You are getting a woman who somewhere along the line misplaced what slight faith she ever had in the social contract, in the meliorative principle, in the whole grand pattern of human endeavour.⁸⁵

Expressing the ‘implacable “I”’ of human perception, Didion shields herself from generalization, refusing an identification that would make her representative of ‘the society in microcosm’.⁸⁶ In doing so, she establishes a singularity of perspective defined by distance – indicated to be necessary due to the horror of what she is reporting, but suggestive nonetheless of the critique that she employs. An act coincident with understanding, autobiographical writing serves for Didion as a mode in which to study emotion, a function attributed also by her husband, in whose work it is applied specifically to loss.⁸⁷ In his 1989 memoir *Harp*, Dunne explains to his reader how

clarity only comes when pen is in hand, or at the typewriter or the word processor, clarity about what we feel and what we think, how we love and how we mourn; the words on the page constitute the benediction, the

⁸⁵ Joan Didion, ‘A problem of making connections’, *Life*, December 1969, p.34 (p.34).

⁸⁶ Joan Didion, ‘On Keeping a Notebook’, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (London: 4th Estate, 2017), pp.131-141 (p.136); ‘A problem’, p.34.

⁸⁷ This differs, for Didion, from fiction, which she conceptualizes as ‘a technique for withholding whatever it was I thought or believed behind an increasingly impenetrable polish’ (*The Year*, p.7).

declaration, the confession of the emotionally inarticulate.⁸⁸

Separate from perception and from feeling, authorship, as a process of thought, enacts both a representation and a mediation of experience, and this conceptualization of writing is apparent throughout Didion's memoir, where it is explored in relation to time.

Explaining that she 'write[s] entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means', Didion asserts a mode of consciousness formed by and dependent upon literature, finding the mediation of narrative to be productive of understanding and essential to existence.⁸⁹ She accordingly announces the writing of her memoir to be a project that aims 'to make sense' of the

weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck [...] about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends [...] about life itself (p.7).

'[C]ut loose' from previous thought, Didion frames loss as a rewriting of consciousness that proves in subsequent explication to be inextricable from its foundations in time. '[D]eath', 'illness', 'probability', 'luck', 'marriage', 'children', 'memory', 'grief' and 'life' are all concepts to which time is integral, and so, more importantly, is the 'attempt to make sense' of time itself, 'the period [...] [of] weeks and then months' in which its progression was suspended.

The contention Didion indicates between the experience and the representation of

⁸⁸ John Gregory Dunne, *Harp* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), pp.15-16. Donne's conceptualization of writing as a mode of making meaning is similarly applied to Didion's writing by Berman (*Writing*, p148).

⁸⁹ Joan Didion, 'Why I Write', *New York Times*, 05 December 1976, p.270. This correlation between writing and thought is explicit throughout Didion's autobiographical work, notable in the temporal form of *Blue Nights* where Didion notes how the subject of her writing became apparent only during the memoir's progression. Having begun 'writing these pages' believing 'their subject to be children', Didion finds '[a]s the pages progressed' that the subject of her text was in fact the very refusal to 'engage in such contemplation'. The temporality of the text coincides with that of its writing, its thinking and its reading, and a shared 'continuing present' is evoked. (*BN*, pp.54-55.).

loss is made explicit in her repeated consideration of the impossibility of conveying grief through the temporality of writing. Noting her ‘sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs’, Didion compares with Riley in her estrangement from representation’s ‘lean towards the future’ (p.7). She discloses that

The way I write is who I am, or have become, yet this is a case in which I wish I had instead of words and their rhythms a cutting room, equipped with an Avid, a digital editing system on which I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time, show you simultaneously all the frames of memory that come to me now, let you pick the takes, the marginally different expressions, the variant readings of the same lines. This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning (pp.7-8).

Underlining the limitations of the medium in which she writes, Didion, like Riley, contends the temporality of language with the experience of time that it portrays. Made emphatic by grief, the disparity is one of representation – its familiarity apparent in Didion’s earlier journalism in which the narrative foundations of consciousness are examined. Reflecting in her essay, ‘The White Album’, upon historical events and figures of the 1960s, Didion considers a period of a few months in which she is displaced from normative time. She relates that

We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, 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.⁹⁰

In exploring her alienation from her habitualized mode of cognition, Didion, as in *The Year*, employs the cinematic image of the ‘cutting-room’ to express plot’s incompatibility with her perception. What she sees resists temporalization: ‘flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no “meaning” beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience’.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Didion, ‘The White Album’, [written 1968-1978], in *The White Album* (New York: Farrar, Stratus and Giroux, 2009), pp.11-48, (p.11).

⁹¹ ‘The White Album’, p.13.

Similarly mutable, the altered temporality that loss instils within Didion's consciousness requires a different form of representation that, beyond 'words and their rhythms', accommodates plurality. In evoking, in *The Year*, the simultaneity of different 'frames', 'takes', 'expressions' and 'readings' of memory, Didion asserts the need for a post-critical perspective, explored already within this thesis in its reading of ekphrasis. Working across surface and depth, the suspension of time that such interpretation entails, proceeds in parallel to Didion's instinctive mode, which, reliant on linking an event or action to its consequence, remains grounded in time's narrativization.

The lack of distance that Didion highlights in her grief significantly counters that which she seeks to apply in her search for meaning, and this tension between affective and critical perception is made manifest in the memoir's temporal form. Didion's instinctive desire to understand her loss through narrative allies with the analepsis of the genre she employs. It is through memoir's reflective structure – its division of authoring and authored self – that she explores her bereavement, as, in the writing of *The Year* she indicates her return to a consciousness of time that is rooted within linear progression. Didion confides late in the memoir that she

realized that since the last morning of 2003, the morning after he died, I had been trying to reverse time, run the film backward.

It was now eight months later, August 30, 2004, and I still was.

The difference was that all through those eight months I had been trying to substitute an alternate reel. Now I was trying only to reconstruct the collision, the collapse of the dead star (pp.183-184).

The dual temporality of autobiography explicates the relationship Didion has to her writing. During her experience of suspension, Didion's search for narrative is one of agency, as she seeks to 'substitute' the succession of events that led to her loss. In writing her memoir, however, Didion's relationship to narrative develops as it becomes a means of 'mak[ing] sense' through reconstruction, and *The Year* thus enacts the temporalization that its title suggests, placing grief itself within a narrative of mourning. Writing is a

process of temporalization, and whilst its capacity to represent grief is shown to be limited, its reassertion of temporality is considered necessary by Didion, who views it as a means in which to ‘let go’ of the dead. However, the conclusion that narrativization demands is nonetheless resisted, as the opposition between thought and feeling impacts the memoir’s form.

Didion has reflected upon the writing of her memoir as a paradoxical process of preservation and relinquishment, disclosing that ‘for as long as I was writing it I was in touch with him in some way’ and relating the loss of this connection on the text’s completion.⁹² It is in writing that Didion maintains a connection with the dead, but in writing’s narrativization of time this connection ends, the text’s conclusion coinciding with the secondary loss that Riley too considers. It is, indeed, a conclusion that both Didion’s memoirs fear. She relates in *The Year* that

I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account.
Nor did I want to finish the year.
The craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place.
I look for resolution and find none (p.225).

Subsequently, in *Blue Nights*, she explains that ‘[t]he fear is not for what is lost [...] The fear is for what is still to be lost [...] there is no day in her life on which I do not see her’.⁹³ The dread of authorship’s completion underlines the alignment between thought and writing that Didion repeatedly makes clear.

The convergence of time and timelessness that Didion relates is shared by her readers – performed in the formal suspension of her memoir’s temporality. Whilst its narration repeatedly steps back from its affective relation to provide an ‘outline’ or ‘try a chronology’, the form of *The Year* is characterized by a repetition of italicized phrases

⁹² Griffin Dunne, *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold* (Netflix, 2017).

⁹³ *Blue Nights*, p.188.

both symptomatic of and contributing to its evasion of chronology (p.6; p.83).⁹⁴ Indeed, the text's own exteriority from the chronology it seeks is established in its opening pages, as *The Year* begins by exploring a misrepresentation of its composition. Didion relates that she uses a computer programme that records the time of the first words she writes after John's death (the first words of the memoir) to be "May 20, 2004, 11:11p.m.," a temporalization she knows to be false having 'made no changes to that file since [she] wrote the words, in January 2004, a day or two or three after the fact' (p.3).

Whilst narrativizing grief within mourning, Didion's memoir resists its closure. As the temporality of the narrated self catches up to that of its narration, *The Year* concludes with a critique of the present rather than the past, and in doing so offers not a 'resolution', but a recognition of grief's future progression – unknowable, yet assured. Didion writes:

I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us.

I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead [...]

Knowing this does not make it easier to let go of him in the water (pp.225-226).

Restored to her knowledge of time, Didion still resists its progression, re-emphasizing the opposition that underlies the entirety of her memoir. Thinking about swimming with John to a cave only accessible when 'the tide was right', Didion ends her text with an image that binds her own progression with the continuation of the lost (p.227). Relating that '[y]ou had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change', Didion expresses an awareness that she must '[l]et go' of John 'in the water' (p.227; p.226). Yet, noting that

⁹⁴ The reader's inhabitation of the textual space is accentuated in the dramatic version of Didion's memoir, which directly addresses its viewers to underline that the event of loss and the response that it produces is common to human experience. This is, indeed, continued by Didion in *Blue Nights*, the style of which contrasts to *The Year* in its mode of address.

‘[h]e told me that. No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that’, she further indicates a continuation of presence that is resolutely atheistic (p.227).

Referring to the hymn ‘The eye is on the sparrow’, which attests to the watchful presence of God, Didion diverts from the religious consolation traditionally offered within memoirs of grief. This tradition is most famously demonstrated by C. S. Lewis’s 1961 *A Grief Observed*, a text that Didion notably cites in her exploration of why ‘grief feels like suspense’ (p.195).⁹⁵ Positing death as the loss of the time, space, and body alongside and in connection with which he had previously inhabited the world, Lewis underlines in his memoir the embodied interpersonality that Didion later explores. In line with melancholia’s symptomology, it is the alteration, rather than the conclusion, of shared perception and experience that Lewis considers, as he indicates the solace of suspended time and the continued interpersonal connection that it makes possible once normative temporality is resumed. Lewis quotes the same gospel that influences the hymn Didion’s memoir rewrites, his use of the Bible working ultimately to restore him to his faith. Comfort is assured to the mourner through the continuance of Christian belief, as Lewis recognizes that to see his wife again, he must accede any hopes of such reunion. Didion’s use of the Bible, however, works to different effect, as she substitutes for the religious afterlife the communication she remembers and imagines.⁹⁶

Rather than purveying the ‘resourcelessness’ that Rochelle Gurstein determines ‘endemic to this pragmatic and therapeutic age’, Didion’s estrangement from her Episcopalian upbringing, and from the belief in resurrection more generally, does not

⁹⁵ Quoting C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p.39.

⁹⁶ For further exploration of Didion’s use of this hymn, in relation to that of C. S. Lewis in his memoir *A Grief Observed*, see Ethan Campbell, ‘An “Eye on the Sparrow?” Joan Didion and C. S. Lewis Read the Prayer Book’, *Christianity and Literature*, 59.3 (2010), pp.411-435.

prohibit her solace.⁹⁷ Her memoir itself becomes a site of consolation in the presences that it holds – Didion’s own, as well as those of her husband and her daughter. Indeed, commenting on the dramatization of *The Year*, directed by David Hare, and first performed at The Booth Theatre in New York in 2007, Didion highlights the consolation that representation provides. Extended to relate her subsequent loss of her daughter, the play accommodates Didion, in her viewership, within a time in which both John and Quintana were alive, its running time providing a duration in which ‘the question remained open’.⁹⁸ Similarly positioning the reader within the suspended time that it conveys, the refusal of closure that *The Year* desires is enabled by its physical existence as a text. In a reflexivity akin to Riley’s lyricism, Didion’s memoir finds solace in literature’s own ekstasis from time.

‘older ways of seeing’: Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk*

An academic by profession, Macdonald, like Didion, examines the affective experience of personal grief in relation to its narrative consciousness, using the memoir’s temporal form to parallel past and present. Correlative to *The Year*, *H is for Hawk* evokes grief as an imaginative ekstasis from time, providing solace not only in its denial of the progressive present, but in its resistance to explanatory sequence.

Following the loss of her father, Macdonald’s inhabitation of the world around her becomes altered as, incapable of representation, her causal mode of making meaning proves redundant. The continuity by which her consciousness of time had been informed is accordingly replaced by its suspension. This is underlined in the water imagery that

⁹⁷ Rochelle Gurstein, ‘Mourning in America’, *The New Republic*, 234.16 (2006), pp.29-33.

⁹⁸ Didion, *Blue Nights*, p.167.

Macdonald uses to portray her estrangement, as the flow that the metaphor of time-as-river conveys becomes solidified. Macdonald relates that

Time didn't run forwards any more. It was a solid thing you could press yourself against and feel it push back; a thick fluid, half-air, half-glass, that flowed both ways and sent ripples of recollection forwards and new events backwards so that new things I encountered, then, seemed souvenirs from the distant past (p.16).

Comparative to the temporal distortions enacted by Riley's 'great circle with no rim', Macdonald presents a suspended temporality with a flow that reverberates and rebounds, displacing her from continuity. She articulates grief as irreconcilable with the temporal register of the memoir's narrative voice and the chronology that it attempts to establish.

Reflecting on her experience, she explains that,

I can't, even now, arrange it in the right order. The memories are like heavy blocks of glass. I can put them down in different places but they don't make a story. One day we were walking from Waterloo to the hospital under clouds [...] And when we left, clutching a plastic bag with his belongings, the clouds were still there, a frieze of motionless cumulus over the Thames flat as a matte painting on glass (p.14).

In loss time is suspended. Perceiving 'a frieze of motionless cumulus', Macdonald inhabits the landscape around her as if encountering a piece of art, and through such topography grief maintains its evasion of temporal, and thus narrative bounds. Reflecting on the process of her memoir's composition, Macdonald has related that '[r]ecalling my grief and putting it in words required a colder quality of attention: logical and distanced', yet in the text itself Macdonald's distance proves to be expressive of the inexplicability of grief instead.⁹⁹ Not only rewriting the conception and the experience of time but itself exterior to continuity, grief remains incompatible with the temporal ordering that representation demands. The glass-like stasis of the clouds Macdonald notes within the

⁹⁹ Helen Macdonald, "Grief Shatters Narratives": Helen MacDonald on "H is for Hawk", *London Review Bookshop*, 2014, <<https://www.londonreviewbookshop.co.uk/blog/2014/8/grief-shatters-narratives-helen-macdonald-on-h-is-for-hawk>> [accessed 13 June 2020].

specific memory of collecting her father's belongings echoes the simile she uses to convey memories themselves, underlining her relationship to the past to be one void of fixed temporal referent.

Comparable to Didion's portrayal of memory, in which spatial imagery is also employed, this non-sequentiality of the past is compounded in Macdonald's subsequent relation of grief. Macdonald states that

the archaeology of grief is not ordered. It's more like earth under a spade, turning up things you had forgotten [...] not simply memories, but states of mind, emotions, older ways of seeing the world (p.199).

The stratified chronology of the past is, in grief, disrupted, and recollections become contingent as memory's authorial agency is lost. No longer capable of 'mak[ing] a story', chronology is replaced in Macdonald's consciousness by an affective mode of time. Informing her sense of self, she conveys a distance from the present that is defined by liminality, detached from the security of both physical and temporal limitation. Feared and desired, this suspension, too, is conveyed in spatial terms. It is recorded that,

Something else was there, something standing next to me that I couldn't touch or see, a thing a fraction of a millimetre from my skin, something vastly *wrong*, making infinite the distance between me and all the familiar objects in my house (p.24, emphasis original).

Invisible and intangible, yet physically present, the 'something' related by Macdonald transcends the normative rules of space, at once intimately close and rendering infinite the distance between her and her surroundings. Yet this disjuncture is also temporal, as Macdonald's paradoxical dislocation from the domestic space that she inhabits is mirrored in the disjunctive relationship to the present that she conveys. In grief's reformation of dimensions, Macdonald increasingly inhabits the gap she identifies as existing between the present she bodily occupies and her father, who is absent from it. Relating her progressive regression from society, marked by her avoidance of others, the termination of her job, and the loss of her house, Macdonald relates the disintegration of

the social, financial, and domestic forms which collectively serve to bind an individual to the present. This act of self-isolation is, it seems, prerequisite for the connection with the absent that Macdonald pursues, her reclusion mimetic of that of the author T. H. White, whose biography she includes within her own.

White's 1951 *The Goshawk*, published fifteen years after it was written, is embedded within *H is for Hawk*, and through her readership of the text Macdonald indirectly enacts a self-analysis that is in many ways similar to White's own. Alienated from society by his repressed sexuality, traumatic childhood, and what Marie Winn describes as a 'somasochist streak', White finds in nature a means of being both "ferocious" and "free".¹⁰⁰ Macdonald argues that in *The Goshawk* and in his other nature writing White discovers a concealed means of self-expression, which grants privacy, or, in his words, '[i]ndependence – a state of being self-contained' (p.41). Yet this 'independence' from the present is, simultaneously, a reaching to the past, as in his training of Gos and in his documentation of it, White aligns himself with the chivalric traditions and symbolic histories to which the hawk is associated. Macdonald's 'kinship' with White is formed through this affective connection to other times, that, solitary and highly literary, is achieved through an immersion within the alternate timescale of the natural world. This is, indeed, made overt in Macdonald's self-analysis, as identifying her favourite passage of *The Goshawk* as a child, she contemplates its portrayal of the 'communion with something lost and forgotten' – a communion of which 'somehow a hawk was at the heart' (p.105).

Whilst White seeks a general sense of belonging in his *association* with the hawk, in *H is for Hawk*, it is through *identification* that the retrieval of connection is pursued.

¹⁰⁰ Marie Winn, 'Introduction' to T. H. White's *The Goshawk* (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), pp.v-xv, (p.v; p.vii).

This is apparent in the memoir's relation of Macdonald's training of her goshawk, Mabel – Macdonald's animalistic embodiment recurrently portrayed by the shared perception she exhibits. The initial stages of identification occur as the reactions that Macdonald expects from Mabel on first exposure to the exterior world are transposed onto her instead. She discloses that 'I'm seeing my city through her eyes [...] I stare at traffic lights before I remember what they are. Bicycles are spinning mysteries of glittering metal' (pp.101-102). In a significant shift into the present tense, Macdonald shares the hawk's visual perception, bound to an alternate consciousness in which '[t]ime runs slower' (p.98). Describing her heart as 'bating' and herself as 'spooked', she increasingly uses hawk-like language in self-portrayal, illustrating her growing identification with Mabel to be simultaneous with her own self-estrangement (p.111; p.124).

Becoming ill-attuned to her own dimensions, Macdonald relates that

I cracked cups. I dropped plates. Fell over [...] I was as clumsy as I had been as a child. But when I was busy with Mabel I was never clumsy. The world with the hawk in it was insulated from harm, and in that world I was exactly aware of all the edges of my skin [...] when the hawk was on my fist I knew who I was (p.143).

It is in Macdonald's relation of hunting that her inhabitation of suspended time becomes emphatic. She records a 'radical change in subjectivity' in which

the world dissolved to nothing, yet was so real and tangible it almost hurt [...] every passing second slowed and stretched, catching us out of time: when I stepped back onto the road to walk home I was astounded how low the sun had fallen. We'd been out for less than an hour. It had felt like years (p.176).

Exploring her identification with the hawk through her consciousness of time, Macdonald underlines the curious affectivity of the perception she attains. Caught 'out of time', she inhabits and intuits the world differently, as the critical distance of causation is replaced by sensory interaction in the mode of meaning-making she employs. This contention is underlined in the memoir's further relation of hunting as an experience that resists representation. It states that

There's no narrative to be spoken of. There is the moment when I turn and see the calm, haunting face of a young rabbit [...] There is the moment where I'm running blindly after the hawk [...] Then the moment [...] (p.259-260).

Relaying her break from chronological time, Macdonald's evocation of her temporal dissociation opposes the affective experience of time to the habitual narrativization of understanding. Mirrored in the form her writing assumes, which itself denies continuity in its representation of a series of fragmented 'moment[s]', this denarrativized time creates an elongated present that provides solace in its refusal of progression. Asserting that '[t]here could be no regret or mourning in her. No past or future. She lived in the present only, and that was my refuge', Macdonald describes her embodiment of the hawk as a consolatory suspension (p.160). But solace is found not only in suspension's resistance to progression, but in the transpersonality that its experience enables. Macdonald shares her evasion of time not only with her hawk but with her father, as the liminal perspective that she attains through Mabel forms a connection between the living and the dead.

Recording her first encounter with goshawks, Macdonald reflects that it

seemed that the hawks couldn't see us at all, that they'd slipped out of our world entirely and moved into another, wilder world from which humans had been utterly erased (p.22).

In imagining the hawks' perception of a 'wilder world', Macdonald imagines her own world to be invisible, and she conceptualizes her own imperceptibility in accordance. Destabilizing the categories of absence and presence, it is this capability of crossing boundaries that in her grief Macdonald seeks to mimic, as relating that 'in ancient shamanic traditions right across Eurasia, hawks and falcons were seen as messengers between this world and the next', she reflects upon the solace that her identification brings (p.226). In this way, and referencing Klein's psychoanalysis directly, Macdonald, like

Didion, links her psychic response to loss with the imagination of childhood. In the self-analysis she completes, she records that,

I'd wanted to slip across the borders of this world into that wood and bring back the hawk White lost [...] part of me had hoped, too, that somewhere in that other world was my father. His death had been so sudden [...] He could only be lost. [...] I know now what those dreams in spring had meant, the ones of a hawk slipping through a rent in the air into another world. I'd wanted to fly with the hawk to find my father; find him and bring him home (p.220).

The evasion of time that Mabel offers proves consolatory in the continuation of the transpersonal connection that it makes possible as, akin to Didion's 'magical thinking', Macdonald states her belief in her father's return. In Mabel's eyes what is usually invisible is perceived, and existence thus becomes for Macdonald untethered from the visual, enabling the categories of absence and of presence to be reconceived. Spatialized, absence becomes locatable. No longer the antonymic negative of presence, it resides in an elsewhere, reached through the hawk's mythical ability to 'slip across the borders', and through the creative capacity of Macdonald's grief – the 'logic of myths and dreams' that she associates with childhood (p.220). It is, indeed, not only for White that '[t]he hawk was a myth. A legend' (p.45). The bird facilitates for Macdonald a traversal of the imaginary that makes possible the incorporation of the lost.

Such incorporation is communicated in the imagery Macdonald uses to describe her grief as she relates feeling 'hollow and unhoused, an airy empty wasps' nest, a thing made of chewed paper after the frosts have murdered the life within' (p.130). Positioning the mourning child as a nest emptied of its parent, Macdonald portrays her loss as a physical 'scooping away' in an image that resounds with that of Riley's Russian dolls. In striking comparison to Riley's evocation of her grief as a maternal enfolding of absent time, the metaphor used by Macdonald conveys her nurturing of her father's absence in an inversion of their natural roles. The maternal time that Riley elicits extends beyond the biological relationship by which it is defined.

Engaging, like Didion, with the work of Klein, Macdonald considers in her memoir how ‘adults try to manage newer losses the way they managed older ones’ (p.220). In doing so, she makes grief explicable, conceptualizing her aim to recover her father as akin to the ‘rebuild[ing]’ of the ‘inner world’ that Klein outlines.¹⁰¹ The solace that her identification with the hawk provides is attributed by Macdonald not only to the connection that it allows her to maintain with her father, but also to the return to normative time that it enables. It is the dissociation from Mabel and the return to selfhood that, producing the narrative voice of the memoir, makes possible the self-analysis that it completes.

The altered perception that Macdonald attains through Mabel is, however, retained as normative time resumes, informing Macdonald’s way of seeing and making sense of the world. Mabel introduces for Macdonald a sense of scale and time which awakens her to the ‘non-human minds and non-human lives’ within the world.¹⁰² The experience of grief is an exposure of plurality. Revealing alternate ways of being in time, the suspension from time that loss entails, made manifest in a non-human identification, offers ‘a window into that sense of difference, which is something to treasure’.¹⁰³ Thus, at the end of *H is for Hawk* Macdonald reflects that

In my time with Mabel I’ve learned how you feel more human once you have known, even in your imagination, what it is like to be not [...] I’d brought the hawk into my world and then I pretended I lived in hers. Now it feels different: we share our lives happily in all their separation. I look down at my hands. There are scars on them now [...] And there were other scars, too, but they were not visible. They were the ones she’d helped mend, not make (p.275).

¹⁰¹ Klein, ‘Mourning’, p.278.

¹⁰² Stephen Moss, ‘Interview: Helen Macdonald: a bird’s eye view of love and loss’, *Guardian*, 05 November 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/05/helen-macdonald-interview-winner-samuel-johnson-prize-falconry>> [accessed 15 September 2021].

¹⁰³ Moss, ‘Interview’.

Whilst actively disentangling herself from her hawk and returning to a mode of meaning-making that is founded upon narrative, Macdonald nonetheless retains the altered temporality to which she has been exposed. Vowing not to ‘reduce my hawk to a hieroglyph, an historical figure or a misremembered villain’, Macdonald distances herself from the self-fantasy White’s autobiography exhibits, establishing in opposition a perception that maintains the alterity of the other it has encountered (p.275). *H is for Hawk* resists performing the romanticism of the natural world that its author simultaneously longs for and distrusts.

Tracing the ‘course of loss to acceptance’: temporalizing grief in memoir

If, as Macdonald suggests, her melancholic identification with the hawk is the ‘madness that kept me sane’, then writing is the analysis of this experience – and the very possibility of conceptualizing, naming, and representing her grief as ‘madness’ marks a temporal distinction explicative of the mode of meaning-making that memoir enforces. Whilst the experience of loss, exterior to time, shatters the integrity of sequence and consequence, Macdonald’s act of writing rebuilds it, temporalizing the affective suspension of grief within a narrative of mourning. White determined his accipitrine ‘association’ to be demonstrative of ‘the psychiatrist’s art’, a ‘matching [of] one’s mind against another mind with deadly reason and interest’.¹⁰⁴ Macdonald’s relationship with the hawk is different to White’s, one of identification rather than distance and, matched against her own mind as well as that of the goshawk she trains, Macdonald becomes the subject of her own analysis.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ T. H. White, *The Goshawk* (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), p.212.

¹⁰⁵ The same is true, in fact, for White, whose postscript provides an interesting addition to his text – serving as much as an interrogation of his writing as of his training of Gos. White’s writing about nature in this way offers not only a means of self-expression and a sense of belonging, but also a means of self-analysis. *The Goshawk*, pp.205-215.

Macdonald, like Didion, uses writing to make sense of her loss. Completed five years after the experience it relates, *H is for Hawk* makes a temporal distinction between the affect of grief and the analysis of its literary representation. Macdonald has disclosed that

When I was writing, I didn't think the book had any therapeutic value [...] But when I'd finished, there was a great sense that something was done, and it was a goodbye to my father and to that time. The book traces a time from that shock of early loss to a point when I realised that the grief had turned into love [...] the book traces that course of loss to acceptance.¹⁰⁶

Rather than enacting a secondary loss, writing marks for Macdonald a secondary solace in its move away from the past. Considered as such, Macdonald's relationship to writing accords with Kristevan theory, asserting the cathartic function that melancholia's literary representation provides. *H is for Hawk* enacts a semiotic communication of an 'affective reality' that has been 'dominated, set aside, vanquished'.¹⁰⁷ Demonstrating the scriptotherapy she attributes to White, Macdonald thus differs from Didion in wanting to leave her text behind.¹⁰⁸ Yet, whilst performative of the human tendency to 'make [things] sensible [...] by giving them meanings that shore up our own views of the world', Macdonald's text nonetheless achieves in its plurality a representation in which 'things' can be 'things in themselves' (p.275). Mixing genres of memoir, nature writing and biography in her authorship, Macdonald actively 'mimic[s] the ways in which grief shatters narratives'.¹⁰⁹ The polyvocality such intertextuality installs in *H is for Hawk* prohibits the closure of its form, and this leaves, James' reading of the text suggests,

¹⁰⁶ Moss, 'Interview'.

¹⁰⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p.22.

¹⁰⁸ Scriptotherapy, as Laura Marcus explains, extends the 'talking cure' of psychoanalysis to writing. It is a concept 'underpinned by the belief that the "writing out", and "writing through", of difficult or traumatic experiences, and the composition of an integrated life-story, will have powerful therapeutic effects'. Laura Marcus, *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.65

¹⁰⁹ Macdonald, "'Grief Shatters [...]'"

‘solace very much “suspended” rather than supremely achieved’.¹¹⁰ As James’ work more widely posits, solace is, in fact, achieved *in* its suspension. Whilst Macdonald is vocal in asserting the conclusion of her identification with Mabel, distancing herself from the ‘madness’ of her grief, the form of her memoir works against the analepsis of its narration. It maintains a connection with the absent in its literary enfolding of what exists beyond the borders of narrative time.

‘Timeless is this world we are making’: The representation of suspended time in autobiographical fictions of loss

The relationship that the experience of suspended time has to its representation is of common concern within the memoirs thus far explored, yet this relationship extends beyond the genres of autobiography, and strikes a different emphasis when authors opt to examine personal loss in fiction. Max Porter and Yiyun Li both choose to write in fiction, exploiting the unique temporality of the mode.

First published in 2015, *Grief is the Thing With Feathers* aligns the suspended time that loss induces with the imaginative capacity that grief entails. Portraying a father and his two sons after the sudden death of the boys’ mother, Porter’s text is a response to his own experience, having lost his father when he was a child. In a form that merges myth, poetry, and narrative fiction, Porter’s text considers the creative potential that grief instils, made manifest in the presence of Crow. Whether read as an alternate identity assumed by Dad or as a mythical intrusion into the lives of the family, Crow is a shared fiction, resisting temporalization and providing in his disjuncture a connective link between the living and the dead. It is through this character, and through the correlative

¹¹⁰ *Discrepant*, p.100.

fantasies of the boys' shared consciousness that fiction is considered as a suspension of time and as a space of solace, enabling a continuation of bonds with the absent when linear time is resumed at the end of the text, and rebounding in the temporal layering of its form.

The 'language game of ever-mourning' that is performed in Porter's text encapsulates too the project of Li's 2019 novel, *Where Reasons End*, in which grief's capacity to not only suspend time, but also create presence is made emphatic as autobiography and fiction explicitly engage.¹¹¹ In Li's novel the timelessness of grief is the timelessness of fiction, and, concurrently, that of representation itself. Its narrator is an author who, mourning the loss of her son to suicide at the age of sixteen, constructs a timeless world through language in order to maintain his presence. Free from futurity, fiction is a site of solace: a virtual space of non-time that is inhabited by both the present, in its author's self-characterization, and by the absent, in the ventriloquism she performs. The biography of Li corresponds to that of the subject she authors, with the connection both signalled and refused by the text in its obfuscation of form and content. Through metafiction Li engages with the temporality of the novel genre. Her work's fragile layering of timeless spaces contends with the linear progression of time that remains evident in both the text and its narrator. The contradiction is, however, itself provisional of solace – creative of a literary ekstasis.

In Porter's text, grief and time are inextricable. Considered as an event that destabilizes the temporality of presence, loss is, as in the memoirs of Riley, Didion, and Macdonald, examined in *Grief is the Thing* in relation to the transpersonal perspective, as an individual consciousness of time is transformed by the absence of the other with whom it had been shared. It is through a rewriting of the domestic space that grief's alteration

¹¹¹ 'Introduction', p.1.

of time-consciousness is evoked, as transforming into ‘a physical encyclopaedia of no-longer hers’, the family home becomes marked by temporal stasis.¹¹² The altered perception that Dad exhibits is revealed in his relation to the objects around him, which, removed of their past function, serve only as an inventory of absence:

She won’t ever use (make-up, turmeric, hairbrush, thesaurus).

She will never finish (Patricia Highsmith novel, peanut butter, lip balm).

And I will never shop for green Virago Classics for her birthday.

I will stop finding her hairs.

I will stop hearing her breathing (p.20).

As the objects observed are redefined, this passage highlights through its form the change in perception that it relates. The immediate negation of the future tense, alongside the grammatical shift in personal pronouns from ‘She’ to ‘I’ underline the loss of the other as that of a way of being that was transpersonal. This is conveyed too by the reduction in sentence length and rhythm, as the parenthetical examples offered at the outset of the passage become redundant in its final two lines which, succinct, mark the loss that they connote. The same two lines, however, suggest a continuation of temporal presence that disregards the physical absence of its subject. The final statement, ‘I will stop hearing her breathing’ indicates a fear of a secondary, psychic loss of presence that is so far yet to come.

Housing the absence of his wife, the stasis of the domestic space also indicates the diminished presence of Dad. Described as ‘an accidental remnant’, positioned at the epicentre of orbiting mourners, and producing work for a publishing house named

¹¹² Max Porter, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), p.20. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

‘Parenthesis Press’, Dad’s disjuncture from causality is made clear (p.10; p.27). He is relayed as having

the perpetual look and demeanour | of someone floating, turning in the beer-
| gold light of evening and being surprised | by the enduring warmth. A rolled-
over | shoulder half-squint half-smile. Caught | baffled by the perplexing
slow-release of | sadness for ever and ever and ever (pp.105-106).

In the physicality of its description ekstasis accrues spatial dimensions. The ‘enduring warmth’ that catches Dad by surprise parallels his experience of ‘sadness for ever and ever and ever’, evincing the habitability of time’s exteriority: the ‘being of grief’ that is recurrent throughout grief writing. Indeed, the altered ‘being’ that grief entails is examined by Porter in ways comparative to the writers so far considered. The impacts loss has on time are explored both in terms of sequence, through which meaning is habitually constructed, and in terms of rhythm, which is, as Riley posits, integral to the self. Both are made manifest in the alternate persona Dad assumes – which the text elegantly grounds in his wife’s absence and makes visible in the altered rhythm of its form.

Following an image of collapsed temporality, a ‘young dead fox’ which looks ‘more still-born than road killed’, Dad remembers an intimate exchange with his wife in which she gives him his birthday present early in celebration of his book proposal’s completion (p.35). He recalls,

It was the plastic crow. We made love and I kissed her shoulder blades and reminded her of the story of my parents lying to me about children growing wings and she said, ‘My body is not bird-like.’ (p.35).

In his desire to ‘be there again’, Dad repeats the narrative, but in doing so, its continuity breaks down:

I want to be held, I wanted to hold. It was the plastic crow.

We made love. The wing story. My body is not bird like.

Again.

The wings.

The love.

Bird-like (pp.35-36).

The juxtaposition of future desire ('I want to be held'), with the past tense ('I wanted to hold'), formally underlines the hope of its narrator to recapture the past, whilst rendering its impossibility. Marked by a failure of narrative temporalization, Dad's loss of sequence results in a confusion of identity in which both the language and the time of the self interweave with those of the others it imagines. Thus, with its subject becoming indistinct, his wife's refusal of the bird-like body comes to be spoken by the voice of Dad, before losing its subjective referent altogether, transforming into an affirmation as the stalled present, and the presence of Crow, are reasserted.

'the nowness [...] of storytelling': The shared ekstasis of imagination

In the figure of Crow suspended time becomes embodied, and grief itself is shown to be a mode of solace. As the 'thing with feathers' that the text envisions, Crow provides a dual embodiment of both grief and hope through the intertextuality of the title that describes him. Invoking Emily Dickinson's poem, 'Hope is the thing with feathers', the linguistic substitution performed by Porter's text works to attest to the beauty, productivity, and inconclusiveness of grief. Read as synonymous with hope, grief, residing in the soul, 'never stops', provides consolation, 'keep[ing] so many warm', and is framed as a gift – never seeking of return.¹¹³ Echoed in Crow's assertion that '[i]t is everything. It is the fabric of selfhood, and beautifully chaotic', this portrayal of grief aligns also with Porter's own experience of it (p.104). His autobiographical essay, 'When

¹¹³ Emily Dickinson, 'Hope is the Thing with Feathers', in *Emily Dickinson*, ed.by. Helen McNeil (London: Everyman, 1997), pp.11-12.

I Lost My Father, I Lost His Voice Too’, considers the depths of memory as ‘where joy and pain seem to [be] huddled together around the shifty character of [...] loss’.¹¹⁴

Crow is a manifestation of grief and, disjunct from time, his resistance to linear progression is made explicit. His list of fears, for example, includes both ‘Plot’ and ‘Keith Sagar’, the literary critic who provided a conclusion to Ted Hughes’ unfinished ‘Crow’ collection from drafts of the poet’s writing. Indeed, Crow’s own intertextuality is significant in his narrative evasion. Comparable to Macdonald’s identification with the hawk, Porter embeds Crow’s liminality within the bird’s symbolic history, referencing the myriad cultural, mythological, and literary traditions in which the figure is portrayed.¹¹⁵ As an animal spirit, the crow is viewed as an omen of change and messenger of death, and thus shares with the hawk the ability to transgress the boundary between living and dead. Residing in the void, however, the bird also exists beyond time, and is capable of an omnitemporal perception, a quality that Porter exploits in the polytemporality of his work.¹¹⁶

Such symbolism is extended in the literary intertexts that Crow evokes, as though not based on his characterization, Porter draws on similar narratives to Hughes in his contemporary mythopoesis. Dominant within these narratives is the crow’s figuration as

¹¹⁴ Max Porter, ‘When I Lost My Father, I Lost His Voice Too’, *BuzzFeed*, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/maxporter/the-voice-of-my-father-is-unfinished-everywhere?utm_term=.gyVdYRDN4#.fabGjzqMA> [accessed 07 May 2019].

¹¹⁵ Porter’s use of Crow further compares to Macdonald’s writing in its indication of the greater scale and temporality of the natural world. This is, however, more greatly invoked in Porter’s 2019 text *Lanny*, in which the mythic presence of Dead Papa Toothwort provides an ecocritical perspective in the atemporality he inhabits. Max Porter, *Lanny* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019).

¹¹⁶ The contradictory symbolism of the crow as both a sign of death and an ethereal figure is outlined by Thomas C. Gannon, who examines its representation within Western ideology alongside Native American traditions, in which the crow’s ecological role as a recycler is considered. See ‘The Eagle and the Crow: *Avian Returns in Native American Literature*’, in *Skylark Meets Meadowlark: Reimagining the Bird in British Romantic and Contemporary Native American Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) pp.200-239.

the Trickster, who according to Hughes, is ‘never properly tragic’ because, ‘repetitive and indestructible [...] he refuses to let sufferings or death detain him’.¹¹⁷ Instead, the Trickster symbolizes ‘an all-out commitment to salvaging life against the odds’.¹¹⁸ This generative, creative capacity of Crow, and of grief, is evident in the vitality that the character inserts into Porter’s text, influencing the form and shape of its narrative, as well as directing the character trajectories of its plot. Yet it is the temporality of myth, ‘repetitive and indestructible’ like Hughes’ Crow, that is significant. In its oral tradition and social function, myth is a literary mode without fixed temporal referent, constantly mutating as it is reformed, but it also enables a mode of thinking beyond temporal boundaries. As Karen Armstrong states, ‘all mythology speaks of another plane that exists alongside our own world, and that in some sense supports it’.¹¹⁹ ‘[N]early always rooted in the experience of death’, the (re)creation of myth enables in grief a way of going beyond established modes of thinking.¹²⁰ As ‘a game that transfigures our fragmented, tragic world, and helps us to glimpse new possibilities by asking ‘what if?’’, it is a genre naturally employed in loss in search of consolation.¹²¹ Correlative to the ‘*What if*’ of Didion’s magical thinking and the ‘logic of myths and dreams’ of Macdonald’s grief, myth enables in its temporal remove a thinking beyond ‘actual’ experience, and it is this imaginative capacity that Porter’s text foregrounds. Crow knowingly exists as ‘a template [...] A myth to be slipped in. Slip up into’, and it is as such that he provides his care (p.15). Existing outside of time he makes accessible to ‘grieving humans’ an affective

¹¹⁷ Ted Hughes, ‘Crow on the Beach’, in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp.239-243, (p.241).

¹¹⁸ ‘Crow on the Beach’, p.240.

¹¹⁹ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2005), p.4.

¹²⁰ Armstrong, *A Short*, p.3.

¹²¹ Armstrong, *A Short*, pp.8-9.

mode of being that, like myth itself, is usually disregarded (p.15). As Crow asserts, 'I have to defend my position, because my position is sentimental' (p.15).

Whether read as an identity assumed by Dad, or as a vision produced by his reading of Hughes, Crow is a manifestation of fiction. Whilst most prominently associated with Dad, the presence of Crow is sustained also by the boys, both in relation with, and separate to their dad's involvement. A product of collective imagination Crow is, in this way, indicative of the *shared* a-temporality of both fiction and of loss, connecting those present in their mourning, as well as extending to the absent one they mourn. Evasive of physical, temporal, and narrative categorization, Crow's disjuncture is directly linked to his role as caregiver, and thus also to his provision of consolation. Dad notes that

There is a fascinating constant exchange between Crow's natural self and his civilised self, between the scavenger and the philosopher, the goddess of complete being and the black stain, between Crow and his birdness. It seems to me to be the self-same exchange between mourning and living, then and now. I could learn a lot from him (p.22).

It is Crow's ability to fluctuate between temporalities that, in his grief, Dad longs to emulate, as inhabiting the disjuncture between 'then and now' such temporal binaries become obscured. Crow makes possible a connection between the bereaved and the loved one they have lost, as, believing in 'the therapeutic method', his inhabitation of the virtual space of time's suspension enables the temporal intertwining he enacts (p.12). Thus, sitting 'as still as I have ever seen an un-stuffed animal sit. Dead still', Crow shares with Dad a knowledge of his wife's childhood, assuredly determining it to be the time to which, as a ghost, she will have regressed (p.69). He provides a connection between past and present, absent and present, dead and living, giving consolation to Dad, who underlines the sincerity of his gratitude as he realizes that he is 'grinning' (p.70).

The disjunctive site of shared imaginary that Crow portrays as a figure of myth and fiction, is repeated in the fantasies that the boys, in their combined subjectivity, construct.

Discussing in his introduction to *Time Lived* the inestimable value of the continued connection that Riley evokes, Porter identifies as a ‘central conceit’ of *Grief is the Thing* ‘that two siblings who had lost a parent would speak in one voice, for each other, against each other, in a state of play’, underlining the temporal evasion of such authorship.¹²² He describes it as

A language game of ever-mourning. For them, time was unfixed. Their childhoods, their growing into teenagers then adults, their notional futures as parents and as dead men themselves, this was all present in the nowness of their storytelling.¹²³

The boys’ reaction to loss stems from Porter’s own biography, as he continues to relate in his introduction to Riley’s essay that,

I had been trying to find a way of writing about what it is like to lose a parent. About growing up in cahoots with my time-travelling co-conspirator (my brother) along our illusory and twisting lateral axis, backwards and make-believe-forwards, about what seemed like a distinct way we had of seeing other people, granted to us by the absence. To us it seemed as if we had our own time and our own sight, defined by what we shared.¹²⁴

Absence, as in the writing of Smith, informs both time and vision and Porter indicates the ways in which imagination’s liminality provides solace. The creativity that loss is shown to produce in Didion’s ‘magical thinking’ and Macdonald’s anamorphic identification, becomes, in *Grief is the Thing*, specific to language. Losing their mother at ‘the best possible time’, ‘[b]efore language was a trap, when it was a maze’, the boys in Porter’s text negotiate loss through fantasy (p.67). In successive narratives that begin ‘[o]nce upon a time’, they displace themselves from the progressive present in their authorship, sharing in the temporal disjuncture of both Crow and their mother (p.71; p.77).

The boys themselves remain ageless throughout Porter’s text, and the narrative voice they share emerges from numerous temporal settings, moving back and forth

¹²² Porter, ‘Introduction’, p.1.

¹²³ ‘Introduction’, p.1.

¹²⁴ ‘Introduction’, pp.1-2.

between childhood and adulthood, narrative present and future, in an evasion of chronology. In its alignment with the creative and affective potential of fiction, Porter's text presents grief not only as inciting atemporality, but also as itself atemporal. Outside of time, grief eludes conclusion, yet time in Porter's text does nonetheless resume, and narrative, however discordant to chronology, is formed. That both these eventualities are possible underlines the way in which Porter's text considers grief not simply a psychic, but also as an imaginative response to loss. In its subjects' incorporation of the timeless, grief installs a new consciousness of time.

'Long live imagined animals, the need, the capacity'

The collective imagining of Crow's presence is produced in time's suspension, and it is, therefore, replaced as time resumes – succeeded by the incorporated presence of the lost. Having enabled this transition, Crow's departure marks the temporal teleology of the pause, and this is underlined in his revelation that he had been working to a deadline. Yet, whilst 'proper time' is thus resumed, the consciousness of it is altered (p.109). The experience of suspended time, and the affective perception it enables are, in Porter's text, constitutive of an opening of temporality in which time's heterogeneity, (Smith's *ways* of seeing and Riley's *ways* of being), is revealed.

The temporal progression which concludes Porter's text is prefigured by the incorporation of both the future tense, and the restoration of rhythm within the time-consciousness of Dad. In the section already explored for the temporal interlinking Crow enables, in which he relates to Dad the regression of his wife into the past of her childhood, this return of rhythm is indicated in form. Significantly sitting '[d]ead still' to start his relation, Crow's speech begins in gibberish, which he instructs his listener to 'ignore' (p.69). Within this gibberish, however, is a significant temporal term,

‘paradiddle’, a fundamental drumming rhythm which follows the sequence ‘LRLl’ or ‘RLRR’ (where ‘L’ and ‘R’ signify the left- and right- hand respectively). This sequence is subsequently reiterated in Crow’s use of alliteration, ‘Playdates! Red Cross building, parquet floor, plirmsolls’, before being mirrored in Dad’s own language. Having been allowed to share the temporality of his wife through the temporally disjunct Crow, Dad relates that ‘I believe him. I absolutely blissfully believe him and it feels very familiar’ (p.69; p.70). It is through his inhabitation of suspension that Dad is ultimately restored to rhythm, which, correlating with Riley’s Hegelian reading of the self, returns him to his own identity, unified but altered in its enfolding of his wife’s. Identified as ‘a long-term project’, grief itself becomes futural (p.99).

In ‘When I Lost’, Porter relates that he has learnt to

consider possible ways of communicating, ways of missing [...] that can’t be factored in to any conventional notions of happy and sad, grieving and recovered. These binaries are nonsense, bullshit by-products of a sham happiness industry that seeks to bulldoze over nuance.¹²⁵

Frustrated by the ‘sham happiness industry’ of contemporary culture and the affective distance that it produces, Porter challenges the binaries that inform the ‘conventional’ conceptualization of mourning as a narrative of recovery and his assertion of the need for nuance is a common feature within current grief writing. Echoing the statement of his protagonist that, ‘moving on, as a concept, is for stupid people’, Porter, like all the authors explored in this chapter of my thesis, underlines the multiplicity of time through the open-endedness of grief (p.99). The shared atemporality offered by time’s suspension reveals the *ways* in which time can be lived, and it is productive of a new form of transpersonal temporality as the causality of time-consciousness resumes. Continuing to share their

¹²⁵ ‘When I Lost’.

consciousness of time, both Dad and Boys construct and actively incorporate the loved one they have lost, as the imagined presence of their wife or mother replaces that of Crow.

After a dialogue between ‘Man’ and ‘Bird’ presented in the form of a session of therapy, or psychoanalysis, Dad relates his feeling that, ‘if my wife’s ghost had ever haunted me, now would be the time she’d start whispering, “You need to ask Crow to leave.”’ (p.104). Crow, of course, does not require asking, but it is significant that his departure is initiated by the imagined presence of the dead. In placing this transition directly after an overt performance of psychoanalysis, Porter playfully signals the essentiality of melancholia’s internalization to any mourning that could be considered ‘successful’. Marking the end of suspended time and its consolatory ekstasis, Crow’s exit, rather than resulting in the conclusion of the psychic connection he enabled, instead generates its continuance, as the dead become incorporated within the temporal progression of the living. This internalization is made emphatic in the consciousness of the boys, as they form in imagination a temporal presence of their mother which evolves and ages as they do. Relating that ‘[w]e used to think we would both die at the same age she had. | We used to think she could see us through mirrors’, the boys’ fantasies shift into the past tense, whilst their mother gains futurity (p.96). Her identity continues to develop alongside that of their father in their consciousness:

We were careful to age her, never to trap her.

Careful to name her Granny, when Dad

became Grandpa.

We hope she likes us (p.96).

The transition into the present tense with which this passage ends signifies a continuation of presence that extends beyond the time of narrative to that of its readership instead. Dynamic as it changes in response to and alongside its subject, grief promises, through

storytelling, to remain '[u]nfinished'. Porter's choice to represent his experience of loss through fiction, in a text that has no fixed temporal setting and is immersed in polyphony highlights grief not as a means of creation, but as itself a creative mode.

Making 'time irrelevant': the suspended time of fiction in Yiyun Li's *Where Reasons End*

In *Where Reasons End*, the disjuncture from time that loss incites is not simply conferred upon an individual in mourning: it is actively constructed by them. The text's narrator is an author of fiction who following the death of her teenage son, consciously creates a 'timeless' world through language in order to maintain a dialogue with him. Construed in spatial terms, this linguistic world outside of time is made inhabitable. Fiction, as in *Grief is the Thing*, is lived in by its author, and it connects present and absent in the alternate mode of temporal being that it evokes.

More explicitly authored than in Porter's text, the ekstasis from time that fiction permits is underlined in *Where Reasons End* by an extended exploration of the virtual site's positionality, as the novel's narrator/author tries to locate the exteriority she inhabits in relation to referents of place. Whilst on initial impulse this may be read as an effort to actualize presence, it is, in fact, less an attempt to reify than to understand and communicate the site of connection that fiction houses. The narrator explains:

Here, as I watched my neighbour leave, a box of fresh-baked chocolate cookies in my hands, was a place called nowhere. The rule is, somewhere tomorrow and somewhere yesterday – but never somewhere today.¹²⁶

In this passage Li's narrator transcribes absence into presence, employing the signifiers of 'here' and 'place', to portray 'nowhere' as a virtual space beyond the physical bounds

¹²⁶ Yiyun Li, *Where Reasons End* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), p.5. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

ordinarily categorized by such terms. However, the physicality of ‘here’ through which place is established, rather than relocating ‘nowhere’ within the ‘actual’ world, works to resist ‘somewhere’ instead, and the site remains grounded within fiction in the use of intertextuality in its portrayal. The narrator’s syntax directly references that of The White Queen in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass and what Alice found there*, a repeated intertext within Li’s novel. The Queen’s rule of ‘jam tomorrow and jam yesterday – but never jam today’ is a play by Carroll on the Latin word *iam*, which, translating as ‘at this time’, is used only in the future or past tense.¹²⁷ The present moment is never experienced in the present, its preservation is impossible, and the substitution of ‘somewhere’ into Lewis’ phrase underlines in Li’s novel its narrator’s experience of not only spatial, but also temporal displacement.

‘[T]he death of a child does not grow a minute older’, and in fiction, time is ‘made [...] irrelevant’ (p.154; p.4). The temporal trajectory of past-present-future is replaced by the ‘now and now and now and now’ of an ekstasis in which the presence of the absent is maintained (p.154). The inhabitation of fiction is, moreover, shown to be reciprocal. Li’s narrator parallels her invocation of her son with her own absence from the external world in which she lives. This is again achieved in an inversion of the linguistic signifiers of place, made evident in a dialogue that reads:

Here is where you are, not where I am. I am in fiction, he said. I am fiction now.

Then where you are is there, which is also where I live (p.168).

¹²⁷ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and what Alice found there*, in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1992), p.232. Gillian Beer’s essay ‘*Alice in Time*’ provides an illuminative overview of the representation of time within the *Alice* books, examining the discourses that influenced their writing. Exploring Carroll’s background as a logician and mathematician, Beer asserts that ‘temporality is fundamental both to logic and to possible worlds’ – a foundation which Li’s novel struggles with and contends in an ardent portrayal of fiction’s timeless logic. See Beer, ‘*Alice in Time*’, *The Modern Language Review*, 106.4 (October 2011), xxvii-xxxviii, (p.xxviii).

The fictional world created is inhabited not only by Nikolai (not, it is noted, ‘his real name, but a name he had given himself’), but also by the narrator, as she converses with her son not as his mother, but as a character, describing herself as ‘a runaway bunny like you’ who, freed from time, could exist at any age in self-narration (p.6; p.4). As in Riley’s essay, the transpersonal consciousness of time that has been formed through the maternal relationship is transformed after the loss of the child into a sharing of ‘liminal’ atemporality. Thus, whilst in relating that ‘all I could think about was the newest release of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, which he would never read now’, Li’s narrator temporally marks her loss, this closure of time is immediately challenged by the voice of Nikolai (p.27). The interpersonal time-consciousness continues in the narrator’s ventriloquism of her son, who indicates the possibility of another way of being in time as he asks: ‘What’s the big deal if it’s never again?’ (p.27).

The solace of suspended time that such interactions underline is encapsulated in the novel’s dialogic form. Whilst the narrator recognizes that it is her voice that provides both sides of the conversation, it is, nonetheless, through the temporal ekstasis of its production that the connection to her son can be sustained. Following Nikolai’s assertion that nothing lasts, Li’s narrator thus responds that,

There are a few things that do.

Like what? Don’t say love.

Our present conversation.

I noticed that you used an adjective, he said. Not our past conversations, or future conversations?

The word future is unnecessary if this conversation lasts, I said. Don’t you think in this case futureless is not a bleak word at all? (p.97).

Correlating with Porter’s exploration of grief’s linguistic creativity in *Grief is the Thing*, Li’s novel exploits the ‘unfixed’ time of the boys’ ‘language game’ in a construction of

suspended time that is achieved specifically through writing. In Li's portrayal of grief, language sustains presence in its independence from causal time, and the consolation of the 'futureless' existence it enables lies in its reciprocity.

The simultaneous suspension of Nikolai and his mother prevents a temporal progression that would assert their separation in its discrimination between presence and absence. Instead, the connection between presence and absence allowed by fiction aligns with Riley's evocation of 'liminal' time, relating a displacement from time that makes the communication between times possible. This interpersonal and intertemporal connection is realizable due to the atemporality of identity, underlined in the novel as its narrator considers that,

one can stop being alive, but one's self does not stop being itself. Even death cannot change that [...]

Now is the time we have to be exact with verb tenses. Do I have a self? Did I? Will I?

A self is timeless, I said. Tenseless (p.78).

Whilst for Riley, the self, constructed through rhythm, is suspended by grief's refusal of sequence and futurity, in Li's novel the self is by its very nature disjunct from all forms of temporality, and is therefore unaffected by death. The two approaches, however, work to the same effect, uniting present and absent within discourse. For Li's narrator, it is language, and the very possibility of tenselessness, that enables the shared inhabitation of suspension. She relates that,

Queries had been made, and advice given, regarding in what tense I spoke about Nikolai. Yet what makes *was* different from *is*, *has been* from *will be*? Timeless is this world we are making, tenseless its language (p.12, emphasis original).

Contesting Riley's relation that '[e]ven the plainest "he died" is a strange sentence, since there's no longer a human subject to sustain that "he"', Li's narrator considers the self to be distinct from corporeality (*TL*, p.54). She aligns her son with the fiction she authors and portrays both to be transcendent of time. In *Where Reasons End* presence is generated

through language not in the ‘lean towards the future’ that its grammar dictates, but in the suspension of the fiction it constructs.

‘Another world you have to live in’: the ekstasis of the novel form

The suspension that Li’s narrator relates is, like Riley’s, induced by a maternal sharing of time – its interpersonality. Nikolai’s timelessness produces her own. It is a suspension, however, consistently aware of its own temporality, never fully inhabited by the narrator, who, forced to ‘live in days’ exhibits the dual consciousness of time common throughout the texts this chapter has explored (p.19).¹²⁸ Questioning, in the final chapter of the novel, how long the conversation that it comprises can last, the narrative of Li’s text turns in upon itself, to consider the capacity of its form.

Li has disclosed in an interview that she doesn’t believe her life ‘to have a narrative arc’, and this estrangement from causation is both represented and performed throughout her autobiographical writing in a coalignment of literature and thought.¹²⁹ Having disowned Chinese, into which she refuses to have her work translated, the English language offers for Li access to the ‘psychological space’.¹³⁰ This space is accessed too through the ‘fluidity’ of time in fiction – defined not by ‘physicality and time’, but by the ‘timelessness of the interior landscape of the characters’ minds’.¹³¹ Writing constitutes for Li a habitable suspension from time.

¹²⁸ Li’s narrator considers her existence in days through Philip Larkin’s poem ‘Days’, the first stanza of which she quotes directly (p.18).

¹²⁹ Paul Laity, ‘Yiyun Li: “I used to say that I was not an autobiographical writer – that was a lie”’, *Guardian*, 24 February 2017, < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/24/yiyun-li-interview-dear-friend-from-my-life-i-write-to-you-in-your-life>> [28 June 2021].

¹³⁰ Laity, ‘Yiyun Li’.

¹³¹ Noelle Brada-Williams, ‘An Unfinished Conversation: An Interview with Yiyun Li’, *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies*, 8 (2017), 1-4 (p.3).

This conceptualization of fiction as ekstasis is elucidated by Li's previous memoir, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, published in 2017. Comparative to *Where Reasons End* in its paralleling of autobiography with an exploration of literature (both its writing and its reading), *Dear Friend* relates a period in which Li was twice hospitalized due to struggles with her mental health that included an attempt at suicide, whilst it also considers the dialogic foundation that any literary representation entails. Reading texts written exclusively by authors who are no longer alive, Li explores how she converses with the absent, reflecting on the role of the text in forming and accommodating the interdependent relationships of author, character, and reader in her analysis.

Dear Friend thus relates and performs the invocation that writing entails. Explaining that '[o]ne writes about what haunts one', Li progresses to combine spatial and temporal interpretations of nostalgia.¹³² She comments that

When we feel haunted, it is the pull of our old home we're experiencing, but a more upsetting possibility is that the past has become homeless, and we are offering it a place to inhabit in the present (p.82).

The 'psychological space' of the text is inhabited by the absent, but in writing not only of the dead, but of herself, Li too occupies the memoir, as authorship becomes a self-absenting act. The invisibility that both Didion and Macdonald identify with bereavement is found by Li in writing. Shared by present and past, living and dead, the form of *Dear Friend* prefigures the subsequent exploration of loss that *Where Reasons End* completes. But in the reciprocity of the imagined relationships that writing houses, the ethical encounter that fiction, specifically enables, becomes key.

¹³² Li, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (Great Britain: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), p.101. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. For a greater discussion of nostalgia's spatial and temporal implications, see Svetlana Boyn, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

Conceptualizing reading as a conversation with writers, Li establishes in *Dear Friend* a dialogue that accords with the ethical imperative of Levinasian discourse. Noting that feelings cannot be understood from a position of externality, that ‘A REAL PERSON, open-ended, can only be approached as a hypothesis’, Li acknowledges and maintains the alterity of the other with whom she speaks (p.126, emphasis original). ‘A character in fiction’, by contrast, ‘is demanded to be accountable’, and *Dear Friend* thus posits the writing of character as a totalization of identity. Existing within fiction, the self must not be ‘open-ended’ but known, its explication made possible by the closure of narrative (p.126).

In *Where Reasons End*, this relationship to fiction changes, as the text transforms two ‘real’ identities into characters that, far from being made accountable, are unknowable and open to change. Rather than enforcing temporalization, fiction is a timeless world, retaining the habitability that *Dear Friend* identifies, but accommodating selves that are unbound from linear narrative. The text thus challenges Li’s own assertion that ‘[a] writer’s cruelty is to exile a real person to fiction’, as, instead of being ‘forced to give up [his] unknowability’, Nikolai remains beyond his author’s cognitive grasp (*DF*, p.130). In the narrator’s writing of her son the singularity of presence is transformed into the multiplicity of absence in an opening of conclusion in which potentiality thrives. Indeed, *Where Reasons End* exploits the ‘psychological space’ of fiction, in which characters occupy not only the sites in which they are ‘physically’ present, but those in which they could have been present had the narrative taken an alternate course. Li explains in *Dear Friend* that,

That this character has left Beijing does not change the fact that there is a space for her there. She may refuse to occupy it but it cannot be filled by others (p.197).

No longer, as Culler deems, ‘about what happened next’, fiction becomes in *Where Reasons End* defined by the time of discourse, as Nikolai’s presence is maintained within the spaces of the text.¹³³ Finding solace in the ‘continuing present of apostrophic address’, Li, like Riley, installs the time of lyric in her writing.¹³⁴ Her novel, like those considered in the preceding chapters of this thesis, shows the properties of lyric that Culler identifies to extend beyond (and with) the genre he explores.

Apostrophe is, Culler explains, ‘a sign of fiction which knows its own fictive nature’, and it is as such that its optative character is underlined.¹³⁵ The suspension from time that Li shares with her son, like that of her narrator, is not only aware of, but dependent upon the fiction of her writing. As its narrator relates to her son that she has resumed work on a novel she had previously abandoned, Li’s text, through metafiction, asserts its fictionality. The content of the narrator’s novel relates

a woman [who] lost her child to suicide when she was forty-four. I had not known the same thing would happen to me when I was forty-four [...]

Agh, now people will blame me, Nikolai said. When you publish the novel people will think you’ve given the woman the story because of me.

People can think what they want (p.169).

Perhaps the one we read, but perhaps not, the concept of this novel’s narrative predates the loss experienced by its author, whilst its incompleteness indicates the refusal of closure to which Li herself commits. That Li’s text maintains its fictionality is a necessity, for it is through the temporal evasion that fiction permits that the connection between living and dead can be maintained. Subtitled ‘a novel’, *Where Reasons End* elides its form with its content, and whilst its autobiographical details are, in this way, acknowledged, the connection between the identities of Li and her narrator remains obscure – repeatedly

¹³³ *Theory*, p.226.

¹³⁴ *Theory*, p.226.

¹³⁵ *Theory*, p.161.

shown to be the inference of the reader, whose ‘cruelty is to return writers to characters’ (*DF*, p.131).

This tension between the discrete temporalities of authorship and of fiction is reasserted in the novel’s form. The sixteen chapters of Li’s text reflect the age of Nikolai at his death, and they work at once to accommodate his presence in their structure, and to affirm his absence in the boundaries they impose. Similarly, whilst grammar’s redundancy is avowed by the text’s narrator, it also reasserts the division between living and dead. Nikolai, exterior to time, takes joy in his use of adjectives, implying his ability to modify actuality. The narrator remains, in contrast, bound to her objective surroundings, domiciled within nouns which proclaim her stasis within time (countering its verbal progression), but not her freedom from it. Indeed, the precarity of Nikolai’s fictional presence gains particular significance when the implications of narrative conclusion are considered. Li’s text seeks to undermine its end, relating that

Time points only in one direction. A mind goes in many directions. How far digressed are we allowed to be on a one-way road before we are called lost? And if one is not lost, can one be found again? (pp.169-170).

Denoting, according to the OED, a departure or ‘deviat[ion] from the subject in discourse or writing’, the use of the word ‘digressed’ here is significant.¹³⁶ It situates the placelessness of language within a temporal disjuncture, the limits of which are unknown and yet defined. Absent but not lost, Li’s narrator questions the temporality of the timelessness she constructs, suggesting a limitation to her agency. It is a contradiction that remains unresolved, and it thus opens the time of narrative in the mode of meaning making that the text itself demands. For the reader of Li’s novel, as for its narrator, ‘[a]nswers don’t fly around like words [...] Questions do’ (p.170).

¹³⁶ ‘digress, v.’. *OED Online*, Oxford University Press <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/52670?redirectedFrom=digressed#eid>> [accessed 29 June 2021].

Conclusion: ‘I | Hear by the way I speak to you’

In ‘When We Were Happy We Had Other Names’, a short story written by Li in 2018, the narrator, mourning the loss of her child, considers how ‘[t]hinking, like remembering, was an action of retrospect’.¹³⁷ Underlining the narrativization of time habitually enacted in an individual’s intuition and inhabitation of the present, this understanding of consciousness is challenged throughout current grief writing in its representation of suspended time. In each text this chapter has considered, temporalizations of self, mourning, and writing are disrupted and forced open by the affect of grief and the temporal ekstasis of its ‘being’.

In an interview discussing her short-story, Li relates how in grief’s ‘all-encompassing present, feelings can take as much air as there is and suffocate thinking’, explaining her strong belief that

thoughts are equally important as emotions in a story, if not more important. Jiayu realizes, at one point in the story, ‘Thinking, like remembering, was an action of retrospect.’ And that action of retrospect is almost an antidote to the deepest grief, so the story takes a turn to the past, looking for clarity.¹³⁸

In ‘When We Were Happy’, as in each of the texts this chapter has explored, feeling is thought through in its writing, as affect becomes the subject of critique. ‘[A]n antidote to the deepest grief’, it is the *thinking* of feeling that provides the narrator solace, and this is framed by Li as a stalling of time. Considering the ‘fundamental question’ with which her story begins, Li portrays critique as beneficial in its disruption of her mourner’s self-

¹³⁷ Yiyun Li, ‘When We Were Happy We Had Other Names’, *New Yorker*, 24 September 2018, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/when-we-were-happy-we-had-other-names>> [10 October 2021].

¹³⁸ Cressida Leyshon, ‘Yiyun Li on Grief and Memory’, *New Yorker*, 24 September 2018, <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/this-week-in-fiction/yiyun-li-10-01-18>> [10 October 2021].

protective routine progression.¹³⁹ The question – ‘What is grief?’ – is an interruption that serves ‘to abolish that autopilot mode and to stop time’ in the consciousness it impels.¹⁴⁰ Encapsulating the consolatory potential of criticism that James outlines within the elegiac forms of twenty-first century literature, Li’s analysis of her text encapsulates also how the writing of grief employs suspended time to deny narrative temporalization and defer the closure that narrative impels.

Staging what James calls ‘consolation’s own acknowledgement of incompleteness’, grief writing’s interrogation of feeling relies upon an ekstasis from time in which an affective consciousness of its interpersonality can be approached.¹⁴¹ Indicated in Riley’s aim to ‘communicate’, Didion’s hope to ‘make sense’ and in the ways of seeing that Macdonald examines, the critique of affect that suspended time incites allows for the adoption of a broader consciousness of time. Invited by the genres of essay and of memoir, this thinking of feeling is, however, combined with a feeling of thought, as an affective mode of critique is installed in the imagination of encounter. The lyric present of Riley’s apostrophic address and the stalled time that representation provides for Didion and Macdonald indicate the solace that literature’s maternal enfolding, or melancholic internalization, of the absent provides, and this literary power reaches full force in the fiction of Porter and Li, in texts forged ‘of [...] and for’ grief’s creativity.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant aligns the suspension of time with a perception of the ‘affective infrastructure of the ordinary’.¹⁴² She asserts that affect theory

can provide a way to assess the disciplines of normativity in relation to the disorganized and disorganizing processes of labor, longing, memory, fantasy, grief, acting out, and sheer psychic creativity through which people constantly

¹³⁹ Leyshon, ‘Yiyun Li’.

¹⁴⁰ Li, ‘When We Were Happy’; Leyshon, ‘Yiyun Li’.

¹⁴¹ ‘Critical Solace’, p.501.

¹⁴² *Cruel*, p.49.

(consciously, unconsciously, dynamically) renegotiate the terms of reciprocity that contour their historical situation.¹⁴³

‘[S]panning what’s internal and external to subjectivity’, affect denotes for Berlant a relationship to a present in permanent crisis, constituting a psychic renegotiation that continues in perpetual renewal.¹⁴⁴ Grief, as one of a plethora of ‘disorganized and disorganizing processes’, initiates a response of ‘psychic creativity’, as the loss of another with and through whom the world has been perceived, incites a reimagination of reciprocity. The suspended time of grief both inaugurates and contends the narrative time on which its writing depends.

Indeed, whilst ‘affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary’, the texts considered in this chapter each show intersubjectivity after loss to be imagined by, and within a singular consciousness.¹⁴⁵ For Berlant absence is prerequisite for a subject’s extension, and this is underlined by the mechanics of apostrophe, which, she contends, ‘works best when [the addressed] are absent and you are affectively and mentally in sovereign control over the ways that they are “in” you’.¹⁴⁶ Resident within the ‘ever-present’ of discourse, apostrophe is ‘an indirect, unstable, physically impossible but phenomenologically vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space as others’.¹⁴⁷ Deemed cruel in its impossibility, the logic of apostrophe, as not only a renegotiation but a reimagination of reciprocity, is optimistic in the shared suspension it allows.

¹⁴³ *Cruel*, p.53.

¹⁴⁴ *Cruel*, p.15.

¹⁴⁵ *Cruel*, p.15.

¹⁴⁶ *Cruel*, p.252.

¹⁴⁷ *Cruel*, p.26.

In the invocations imagined within grief writing response is impossible, yet it is found in the mode of address each text performs. The ‘ever-present’ temporality of apostrophe marks a renegotiation of reciprocity that, crystallized in the epigraph that W. S. Graham provides to Riley’s *Say Something Back* moreover directs the imaginations of recovery that Didion and Macdonald enact, and the dialogic fictions of both Porter and Li. Heard by the way in which they are spoken to, the absent other is maintained. Intersubjectivity may be literally impossible after loss, but its imagination provides solace for the bereaved, enabling an alternate way of sharing time. Indeed, the sovereignty that Berlant highlights in apostrophe is rarely professed within contemporary grief writing, which instead questions the possibility and the ethics of invocation. ‘[A]ttachment’s open temporality’ remains open, according more closely with the Levinasian ethics of encounter, and the critical solace that James explores.¹⁴⁸ The limitations of apostrophe do not mark failure or an appropriation of voice, but a reaching out that accommodates the alterity and unknowability of the other. Suspended time, rather than distilling presence, or making it ‘accountable’ is portrayed as a psychic space of multiplicity and possibility. It allows the dead to be carried and to change alongside the living in whose consciousness of time they are maintained.

The time of discourse that such imagination comprises becomes manifest within writing, which itself maintains a connection between the living and the dead as it reproduces the invocation of its author’s inner-representation in a textual and formal enfolding of the timeless. In the correspondence between authorial consciousness and text, the temporal aporias that absence creates within content prove inextricable from the structures that contain them, and this is reiterated in the formal absences, intertextuality, and linguistic play that authors employ to resist the narrative framing that analepsis tends

¹⁴⁸ *Cruel*, p.86.

towards. In the contradictions that the writing of loss houses, the narrative temporalization habitual to culture and literature alike is displaced by an affective mode of meaning-making that remains open and unfinished, suspending the reader too within the psychic space of text. Indeed, if the writing of grief, like that of lyric, creates what Culler terms a ““now” in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur’, then it is not only through the text that a connection to the absent is sustained.¹⁴⁹ It is also in the suspended time of reading that a ‘literature of consolation’ can be formed.

¹⁴⁹ *Theory*, p.226.

Conclusion:**'the strange duration of the literary': the suspended times of contemporary readership**

Attending to the ways in which meaning is made, writers of the twenty-first century expose and destabilize the narrativization of time that is habitual to both consciousness and literature. Rather than constructed through the 'shaping ends' of causal sequence, meaning is recognized to be contingent, and it is, my thesis has argued, through suspended time that the renewal of time-consciousness is achieved. Encountered by characters within a text, and by readers through it, suspended time reveals time's relativity. Refusing closure, it promotes a mode of interpretation in which the distance of critique cedes to the entanglement of affect, as thought and feeling interact and are shown to be conjoined.

As discussed in my first chapter through the works of Don DeLillo, Tom McCarthy, and Ben Lerner, suspended time is employed by contemporary authors to affirm the ontological and epistemological necessity of mystery and the inexplicable. Refusing to uphold the reductive distinction between realism and experimentalism, these authors use metafictional strategies with sincerity in order to examine the habitualized modes of literary representation, and to make readers reflect on those they too employ. Cast outside of time, characters, texts, and readers become attentive to time's interception, and this attention upon the time-consciousness of the individual concomitantly makes those of others visible. It is through suspended time that time's heterogeneity is asserted, and this, as discussed in my second chapter, launches an affective ethics through which past, present, and future, real, imagined and represented, combine. Deferring conclusion in the meaning-making it portrays, and in that which it incites, Ali Smith's fiction installs within it an affective ethics of suspension through which judgement is withheld as the

possibility of the other is encountered. Building on the interpersonality gestured towards by DeLillo, McCarthy, and Lerner, Smith indicates the ethical potential of a temporal relationality – a potential explored on an individual level in my thesis’ final chapter. In the works of Denise Riley, the memoirs of Joan Didion and Helen Macdonald, and the fiction of Max Porter and Yiyun Li, the sharing of time is underlined in the cohabitation of its suspension. Revealing a different way of being in time through the textuality of writing, these writers demand an affective temporal intuition, and an affective approach to narrative itself.

As the habitual narrativization of time becomes destabilized, questions of how to attend to and make sense of time emerge, and it is for this reason that in contemporary literature, contemporaneity becomes key. As has already been suggested in this thesis in Ben Cranfield’s reading of Mazzetti, approached etymologically, ‘the contemporary’ denotes both a being in time with the current period, and a being in time with another. However, the etymology of ‘the contemporary’ moreover expresses a being with time in general, and thus a coevality of temporality itself. As Pedro Erber lucidly explains, ‘the same word names today the historical period in which we supposedly live and the very impossibility of historical periodization’.¹ ‘The contemporary’ defines not only the historical present, but also the relationality of time, and as the affective turn of academic criticism suggests in the continuities that it examines, literature of the twenty-first century demonstrates and actively celebrates the polysemy of the term. In this conclusion, I will consider contemporaneity in relation to suspended time in order to propose an additional affinity between the contemporary and the literary; an interdependence that makes accessible new ways of approaching meaning, and that thus promotes an affective

¹ Pedro Erber, ‘Contemporaneity and Its Discontents’, *Diacritics*, 41.1 (2013), 28-48 (p.44).

consciousness of time.

‘a peculiar relationship’: writing a contemporary ekstasis

In Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy, suspended time is a condition of contemporaneity. His 2002 essay, ‘What is the Contemporary?’, determines contemporaneity to be

a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*.²

Disjuncture makes possible the contemporary’s critical perception of the time to which he, she, or they ‘nevertheless irrevocably belongs’.³ Positioned within ‘dys-chrony’ – a virtual site in between, and thus both in and out of time – the contemporary is granted a view of the present that reveals the other times with which the present is interconnected.

Agamben argues that

Those who have tried to think about contemporariness have been able to do so only by splitting it up into several times, by introducing into time an essential dishomogeneity. Those who say ‘*my time*’ actually divide time – they inscribe into it a caesura and a discontinuity. But precisely by means of this caesura, this interpolation of the present into the inert homogeneity of linear time, the contemporary puts to work a special relationship between the different times.⁴

Ekstasis enables the present to be made sense of in its capacity to bring different times together in relation. The suspension from time is the vital means by which connections can be made. But whilst, in Agamben’s analysis, the present is made mutable in the vision of the contemporary, the conceptualization of time that his essay relates is nonetheless narratively informed. The same contradiction that suspended time has been embroiled in

² Giorgio Agamben, ‘What is the Contemporary?’, in *What Is An Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp.39-54 (p.41, emphasis original).

³ ‘What is the Contemporary?’, p.41.

⁴ ‘What is the Contemporary?’, p.52, emphasis original.

throughout this thesis underlines the exteriority that Agamben's text unveils. Untimeliness or anachronism, 'working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms' time, but chronology is soon re-established, as prioritizing the present, the contemporary sutures together the temporal break in which they reside.⁵

Agamben's study of the contemporary illustrates and, in many ways, directs the extensive examination of the concept within philosophy and critical thought of the twenty-first century. Indeed, the use of his essay in recent criticism indicates the relevance of its discussion for contemporary literature, with critics exploring not only portrayals of contemporaneity in fiction, but also the fiction of contemporaneity itself. One such example is the work of Peter Osborne, which, examined in the introduction of this thesis for its explication of ekstasis in relation to narrativization, has more recently posited the phenomenon in relation to an alternate mode of time's cognition. Warning against the dangers of using 'the contemporary' as a periodizing term, Osborne relates that

the changing temporal quality of the historical present over the last few decades is best expressed through the distinctive conceptual grammar of contemporaneity, a coming together not simply 'in' time, but *of* times: we do not just live or exist together 'in time' with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together – but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different, but equally 'present'* temporalities or 'times', a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*.⁶

Extending his previous exploration of temporalization's 'existential structure', Osborne's philosophy of contemporary art similarly discusses both a perception and projection of contemporariness in terms of a 'fictive co-presentness of a multiplicity of times'.⁷

⁵ 'What is the Contemporary?', p.47.

⁶ Peter Osborne, 'Temporalization as Transcendental Aesthetics: *Avant-Garde, Modern, Contemporary*', *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 44-45 (2012-2013), 28-49 (p.44, emphasis original).

⁷ Peter Osborne, 'The fiction of the contemporary', in *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), pp.15-35 (p.24).

Coevality is imagined in a consciousness of time that better responds to the multiplicity of its experience, and within art the fiction is made visible. The contemporary marks for Osborne, ‘both the moment of disjunction (and hence antagonism) within the disjunctive unity of the historical present and the existential unity of the disjunctiveness of presentness itself’.⁸

Like Agamben, Osborne explores an ekstasis that results in re-temporalization – the reinstatement of time’s inevitable threefold structure. Yet in the fiction of co-presentness that his work discusses, he also indicates the alternative conceptualization of narrative time that my thesis has considered. In literature of the twenty-first century, it is the suspended time of narrative – and time’s own literariness – by which the condition of contemporaneity is best explored.

‘in and out of the minds of others, backwards and forwards in time’: a testament to the literary

My use of the term ‘contemporary’ has throughout this thesis been periodizing, indicative of the twenty-first century in which, and to which, I respond. Yet, in agreement with the recent theorization of the contemporary, it is as a marker of temporal exteriority and connection that the term proves most conducive to the authors and the topic I have discussed. As Cranfield comments, ‘[t]he with-ness implied by the “con” of contemporary necessarily lends a spatiality to a concern for temporal belonging’ and it is this sense of belonging that suspended time configures as it is housed within literature’s textual form.⁹ In its lyric suspension from time, twenty-first century writing shows contemporariness to work not only amongst those present in a single time, but across

⁸ ‘The fiction of the contemporary’, pp.24-25.

⁹ ‘On (Not Being with)’, p.128.

innumerable temporalities, creating, in Osborne's terms, 'a *disjunctive unity of present times*' that incorporates those both actual and virtual.

In his use of Agamben's text in relation to the writing of Ben Lerner, Ben Davies contemplates how 'the contemporary text itself' can be considered

a type of caesura, a time and space of pause, rupture and meeting, bringing together, whilst also holding apart, its own temporalities, the temporalities of that which it takes to represent, and those of the reader as well. It thereby takes up the paradoxical task of shattering and welding time: it is itself temporal, but can, through its modes of representation and the 'intimate obscurity' it creates with its reader, also check and impede time and create discontinuity within homogenous, linear time.¹⁰

Contemporary writers, should, it follows, be defined not as those who exist within the same historical period, but as those 'that mark contemporary relationality', allowing 'contemporary relations between writers from different periods' to be formed.¹¹ One way in which such relations are achieved, Davies asserts, is through intertextuality and citation, which, irredeemable to chronology, 'pulse within the text' making its temporality 'neither simply linear nor singular'.¹² Clearly visible throughout the works that my thesis has discussed, the pluralizing effects of intertextuality bridge content and form. Depicting acts of interpretation and creation, every writer I have explored places representation at the heart of the worlds that they portray, but they also, and often simultaneously, use intertextuality as a formal strategy, suspending their texts in dialogue with others. Whether it is artistic, literary, or cultural references that are made, literature's power of convergence is asserted, and the polyphony that it produces displaces narrative in the alternate mode of making meaning that it suggests. Although too easily overlooked, the affective investment of intertextuality is in fact significant, indicated by Sophie Ratcliffe,

¹⁰ Ben Davies, 'The darkness-within-the-light of contemporary fiction: Agamben's missing reader and Ben Lerner's *10:04*', *Textual Practice*, 34.10 (2020), 1729-1749, pp.1733-1734.

¹¹ 'The darkness-within-the-light', p.1741; p.1742.

¹² 'The darkness-within-the-light', p.1740.

who, likening it to ‘the difficulty of understanding others’, comments that ‘allusions allow us to see the ideals and the fractured actualities of feeling and understanding’.¹³ As a process of re-inflection, allusion joins together times, extending a text beyond its temporality. Suspending narrative, it asserts the textuality of literature, and the connective disjuncture of the literary itself.

Contemporary literature is increasingly considered not only as that which is written in our historical present, but also as that which joins multiple presents in the ‘disjunctive unity’ that Osborne outlines. Yet this approach to contemporaneity is still too limited. Conjoining narrative to its suspension, form to formlessness, every text examined in my thesis welcomes into the structures of causality not only other times but also the inexplicable or other. Whether examining the ‘feel of thinking’ (Chapter 1), or thinking what is felt (Chapter 3), reason and affect interact and converge. Contemporariness is not simply a question of making meaning of one’s own time, nor even of the temporalities to which it is connected. It is also, as a form of sympathy, an opening of meaning to other ways of feeling and understanding. Twenty-first century literature is, as the INS demands, made ‘open, ongoing, and [...] contestable’, as its ekstasis permits a convergence not only between times, but also between myriad temporal perspectives.¹⁴

Jonathan Culler contends that ‘the replacement of a narrative temporality with temporality of the poetic event’ contributes to ‘the evocation of poetic power’, and it is, I argue, through a similar replacement of narrative temporality that in contemporary writing the power of the literary is affirmed.¹⁵ Questioned in the texts I have considered for its political ineffectuality, its mimetic failure, and for the insufficiency of its

¹³ *On Sympathy*, p.3.

¹⁴ INS, 2010.

¹⁵ *Theory*, p.229.

invocation, the literary possesses no actual, or direct, efficacy in the world. But in highlighting these limitations, authors only make stronger their voiced belief in the power that the literary holds: its affective potential to make accessible new modes of thinking and feeling, and its concomitant recognition of meaning's contingency – its susceptibility to change. Whilst, as Lauren Berlant comments, 'lives are not novels', novels themselves have an affective power by which narrative time can be disrupted as the possibility of difference is imagined.¹⁶ As Berlant explains, affect promotes a mode of making meaning that does not 'seek to lock in the will-have-been of future anteriority', but offers instead an open temporality in the network of connections it unveils.¹⁷ Indeed, productive of 'self-extension' rather than 'self-continuity', affect obfuscates the temporal boundaries by which form is normally defined. It seeds, in the 'selves' of thought and text, 'a state of potentiality' that meanders (in Smith's sense of the word) causality's route towards conclusion.¹⁸ Whether framed through Riley and Porter as a space of consolation, or through Lerner as 'a place for the genuine, whatever that might mean', it is through the co-presentness, and thus through the contemporaneity, and the suspended time of fiction that the literary claims its specificity.

In Emily Mackie's 2014 novel *In Search of Solace* the 'real power' of the literary is attested to through a textual temporality which, as the quote of the above subtitle suggests, boasts an ability to move between subjects and times. Like the 'nowhere' that Li, in *Where Reasons End*, constructs, Mackie's novel establishes through literature an 'elsewhere', in which affect is the leading creative force. As Mackie's narrator explains:

Elsewhere, dear reader. 'Elsewhere'. It is an interesting concept. Have you ever stopped to wonder what the world is made up of? Only two things. There is 'Here' and there is 'Elsewhere'. Elsewhere is the far more interesting of the two. Elsewhere is where *everything* happens all at once. It has endless

¹⁶ *Cruel*, p.99.

¹⁷ *Cruel*, p.99.

¹⁸ *Cruel*, p.99.

possibilities. ‘Here’ is tiny in comparison with its limitations of the present; it contains but a thimbleful of actions. But Here is a truism. Elsewhere speculation.

‘Nothing is real unless it’s observed [...]’.¹⁹

Fulfilling her protagonist’s desire to write a novel ‘that subverts the damn institutionalized “narrative arc” of a story and its all-too-specific order of events’, Mackie’s novel testifies to literature’s power to suspend narrative and to thereby make other narratives visible.²⁰

The last line of the above passage can be read in two ways: either observation makes reality in its actualization, or the virtuality of ‘Nothing’ is real *until* it is observed – totalized and temporalized by meaning. The two readings are not unifiable, but neither are they mutually exclusive, and it is the tension between them that contemporary literature both examines and upholds. Not confined to the ‘limitations of the present’, literature’s capacity to imagine difference destabilizes the precedence of the actual, as readers are encouraged to reflect upon their habitual modes of making meaning and the narrativization of time that meaning involves. What Lerner calls ‘the strange duration of the literary’ is, as Smith evokes, ‘the place where reality and the imagination meet’, and it is literature’s ekstasis from time that enables the convergence.²¹ Literature not only accommodates, but also depends upon its readers for the ‘disjunctive unity’ of perspectives that it holds.

‘a new way to see the world’: the detemporalization of the contemporary reader

Culler’s theory of the lyric places emphasis on the reader. Rather than directing critics to interpret the meaning of the poem or to reconstruct the experience of its author,

¹⁹ Emily Mackie, *In Search of Solace* (London: Sceptre, 2014), pp.65-66, emphasis original.

²⁰ *In Search of*, p.213.

²¹ Lerner, *10:04*, p.34; Smith, *Artful*, p.188.

it asserts the need for an attention to ‘experiencing the poem itself as an event’.²² A reading of lyric involves an ‘attending to [...] attention’, but whilst generating the reader’s reflection, lyric too depends upon that act of attention.²³ For Culler, ‘[t]he duration of a reading is the lyric event’ as text and reader are together suspended, and it is this that, as my thesis has explored, contemporary literature reconfigures within prose.²⁴ In the metafictional strategies employed by DeLillo, McCarthy, and Lerner, the ekphrases of DeLillo, Lerner, and Smith, and the invocations of grief writing, contemporary literature draws attention to its acts of representation. The aim of its reflexivity is not distance, but connection, and this desire for connection extends texts to their readers, through whose interpretation the closure of meaning is deferred.

Rebecca Solnit states that ‘the object we call a book is not the real book, but its potential [...] It exists fully only in the act of being read’.²⁵ As Rita Felski explains, all ‘[a]rtworks must be *activated* to exist’; to be remade by art, ‘we must also co-make it’.²⁶ Indeed, Felski argues that ‘[c]ritique and interpretation are not opposed to attachment; they are built upon it’, and it is, I believe, this knowledge that contemporary literature – no matter when it is written – possesses.²⁷ Arguing for an approach to criticism that is led by Actor Network Theory (ANT), Felski’s recent work, *Hooked*, traces the ways in which any work of art exists within a complex web of connections. Felski asserts that

Any knowledge is circumscribed by parameters that are already given. And yet a work of art has the potential to alter what we know and how we know it. There is not just a disorientation but a reorientation, a shifting of affective, perceptual, or mental coordinates [...] we can learn to be affected by literature

²² *Theory*, p.350.

²³ *Theory*, p.352.

²⁴ *Theory*, p.353.

²⁵ Quoted by Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p.7.

²⁶ *Hooked*, p.7, emphasis original; p.147.

²⁷ *Hooked*, p.127.

if we engage with it in certain ways. To ‘learn to be affected’ is something other than critical knowingness or mindless absorption.²⁸

Contesting interpretation’s conventional distance, the mode of reading sought by Felski testifies to the power that art has to make accessible new modes of knowledge, as affect becomes the focus of interpretation. The critical possibilities of Felski’s ‘learn[ing] to be affected’ correspond directly to Culler’s desire for lyric to be experienced as an event, read by ‘attending to our pleasure while also gaining confidence in our ability to appreciate what secured our attention’.²⁹ Combining thought and feeling, it is this affective mode of interpretation that contemporary literature promotes in its representation of suspended time, and of the intertemporal and interpersonal connections that suspended time reveals.³⁰

In each chapter of my thesis, literature has employed suspended time to expose time’s narrativization and to disrupt its dominance within the consciousness of meaning. Overtly staging acts of creation, interpretation, and theory, the authors I have considered use self-reflexive techniques not to bemoan the limitations of representation but to affirm the power of a representation in which such limitations are acknowledged. The mode of meaning-making that this writing practice produces is both reflective and affective, and it is repeated in that which its readers are encouraged to employ, as criticism too becomes reflexive. Indeed, in the twenty-first century, ‘the reading of fictional narratives’ should not be considered as Mark Currie determines, ‘a kind of preparation for and repetition of the continuous anticipation that takes place in non-fictional life’ but approached instead

²⁸ *Hooked*, pp.152-153.

²⁹ *Theory*, p.352.

³⁰ This mode of reading corresponds to that which Kathleen Stewart uncovers in her exploration of affect, which, she explains, ‘work not through “meanings” per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds’. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007), p.3.

as a means by which such temporal relations can be questioned.³¹ Made aware of their tendency towards judgement and conclusion and newly alert to their immersion and entanglement, readers of contemporary literature become affected and moved 'elsewhere'. In suspending narrative to make reading the event, texts temporally suspend their readers, and in doing so they make those readers contemporary to what is read.

Agamben's essay on contemporaneity opens with the assertion that since

we shall have occasion to read texts whose authors are many centuries removed from us, as well as others that are more recent, or even very recent [...] it is essential that we manage to be in some way contemporaries of these texts.³²

Yet as critics such as Davies and Erber explicate, Agamben soon dismisses the question of the reader's relationship to the text, to consider instead that of the individual to the present. Twenty-first century writing demands a return to the initial question. Any act of reading is a making contemporary, for in the literary encounter the reader is made disjunct from time. As Davies comments,

The reader [...] will be within a textual fracture – the vertebrae between her and the text, and that between represented time and representational time [...] a contemporary text would be one that creates and emphasises a certain positionality and relation with its own time and the reader through the tension between proximity and distance, non-coincidence, 'dys-chrony'.³³

As a meeting of times that occurs within a temporal exteriority, the positionality of the contemporary is one of ekstasis, and in the suspended time of the literary, 'dys-chrony' is reified.

Interacting with literature not simply as the narrative of another, but as a lyric suspension of time in which narrative is held open, the contemporary reader is removed from and made tangential to causal time. Forced to become attentive to their own habitual

³¹ *About Time*, p.6.

³² 'What is the Contemporary?', p.39.

³³ 'The darkness-within-the-light', p.1734.

modes of making meaning and faced with the intertemporality and interpersonality of time, readers are encouraged to adopt a stance of interpretation correspondent to the affective attachment that Felski outlines. Contemporary both in the periodizing sense, and for its fictive coequality, twenty-first century writing seeks the detemporalization of text and reader, allowing for connections across and between times actual and virtual. Exposed to the relativity of time, meaning is extended, as new ways of being in and being with time are imagined, and are, moreover, imaginatively shared. Directed not towards, nor by the end, but rather aiming elsewhere, the representation of suspended time and the suspended time of representation inaugurate and perpetuate the affective ethics of the contemporary, maintaining the possibility of the literary, whilst denying the temporalization of its form.

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