

13

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**The Concept of Time in
Don DeLillo's *Point Omega***

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Temporality is one of the key aspects that contribute to the reshaping of the narrative tendencies of literary modernism, thus leading to the emergence of new narrative strategies associated with postmodern literature. The aim of this paper is to scrutinize its representation in postmodern literature and theory, focusing on one of the notable works that illustrate this phenomenon. Influenced by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's theory of the final aim of evolution, defined as the omega point, Don DeLillo's novel of the same name explores, in Peter Boxall's words, the formal balance between cinematic time, urban time, and desert time. In that sense, the paper is particularly concerned with the plurality of time, prevalent in literary postmodernism. In order to provide insight into this matter, it is also essential to shed light on how it is represented in the works of Jorge Luis Borges, who exerted significant influence on DeLillo's depiction of the concept of time in the contemporary world.

KEYWORDS

DeLillo, Point Omega, time, postmodernism, Borges

The concept of time, no matter how prominent in contemporary literature, has rarely been so thoroughly explored as in *Point Omega*, a thought-provoking novel written by one of the most influential authors of the 20th and 21st century, Don DeLillo. Prior to the analysis of his novel, some questions about the aforementioned writer ought to be addressed. What is quite frequently asked when discussing DeLillo and his work is *Where does he belong?* and *Is he a modernist or a postmodernist?* Looking at his oeuvre, it is difficult to assign him one of the two labels. Despite his repeated interest in modernist writers and his description of *Underworld*, one of his most notable works, as 'the last modernist gasp,' his awareness and depiction of the problems of the present time give him a special place in the postmodern literary universe. With subtle irony, he covers in his novels virtually all the themes pertinent to postmodernism. His characters face struggles of the modern man and they live in a hyper-real, media-saturated, dread-imbued world where everything seems to have lost its true meaning.

As the contemporary world changes, so does DeLillo's tone – he enters the 21st century as a prophet of our dystopian, pessimistic future. With all that happens, most notably 9/11 attacks, there comes a new conceptualisation of the world and also a new conceptualisation of time. As Peter Boxall (2012, 691), in his study *Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century*, put it, "DeLillo's novels of the new century forge a new style in which to express 21st century time, a new and different kind of sentence."

This is clearly seen in his latest novels such as *Cosmopolis*, *The Body Artist*, and the novel in question – *Point Omega*. What is needed in order to comprehend multiple functions of time in this book is to provide two theoretical perspectives from which this phenomenon can be observed. The first theoretical perspective concerns the representation of temporality in postmodern literature in general, while the second one is based on theories proposed by the author whose works open new possibilities of exploring the non-linear conceptualisation of time. The notions of circular time and the present as the only truly existing concept, which marked Jorge Luis Borges's oeuvre, are of utmost importance for analysing any postmodern novel that deals with this phenomenon. The analysis of *Point Omega* is thus divided into two parts, where the first one strives to illustrate the significance of cinematic time, while the second one explores the discrepancy between urban and desert time, providing a comparison to Borges's short story *The Garden of Forking Paths*.

One of the quotes that sums up the relation between postmodernism and time is Boxall's quote that says that the postmodern world is characterised by "historical completion or exhaustion that coexist with an experience of a present that is so young, so rapidly growing and changing, that it is difficult even to inhabit it (...)" (2012, 3). There is a sense of lateness; a sense of an ending which undeniably alters the understanding and representation of time in postmodern literature. We constantly feel that we are approaching finitude, a global endgame, the omega point, and it is in DeLillo's works that we see it most prominently. This is what Boxall (2006, 4) refers to in *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*, an extensive analysis of DeLillo's oeuvre, while discussing 'the endedness', which appears like a shadow in DeLillo's novels: "Again and again in DeLillo's novels we are confronted with a predicament in which the future is already here, in which the post-apocalyptic future that is darkly massing behind the flimsy boundary of the second millennium comes flooding in, to arrive 'ahead of schedule'."

The so-called 'directionlessness of time' is often said to have started with Beckett and, despite the fact that one can find more differences than similarities between the two writers, this characteristic can be perceived in both the early and the late phase of DeLillo's writing, from *Americana* to *Point Omega* (Boxall 2006). What's more, at the end of the 20th century, we witness the merging of space and time, i.e. time being measured through space. One of the pioneers of postmodernist theory, Fredric Jameson, talks about the end of temporality by saying that its (postmodern) dominant is space and that it reaches its pinnacle in the experience of the city itself, i.e. the post-urban city (Jameson 2003). This is confirmed by one of the characters in *Players* who, talking about New York, states, "It's unbelievably late. I've never seen it so late. It's really late out there. You should see. (...) The district, outwardly, is like the end of organized time. (...) There's nothing out there" (DeLillo 2016, 71-72).

However, what happens in the 21st century is that this finitude turns into 'finality without end' or 'intensive present' (Boxall 2006, Boxall 2012), which is manifested in DeLillo's late works. In the opening sequence of *The Body Artist* (DeLillo 2001, 1) – "Time seems to pass" – lies all the uncertainty about the 21st century time: Is it passing, and, if it is, is it taking us anywhere? This is again related to the previously mentioned lack of direction. Its consequence, i.e. our inability to speak of time as a simple concept, is DeLillo's main concern in the novel previously mentioned, *The Body Artist*, but most explicitly in the more recent one, *Point Omega*.

Jorge Luis Borges, the ingenious author whose works are characterised by the exploration of multiple realities, provides a substantial theoretical background for analysing the concept that was previously described as 'intensive present,' since both his philosophical and fictional works are based on the idea of the present as the only existing concept. The theories concerning time and eternity exemplified in Borges' works offer two points of view from which we can observe these phenomena. The first one is, of course, the conventional passage of time as we know it, i.e. perceiving time in a linear manner from the past to the present to the future. The second perspective, on the other hand, stresses eternity as the ubiquity of time, thus leading to the conclusion that the past, the present and the future are virtually non-existent and that, therefore, everything that is happening, is happening 'right now', in one timeless moment. Hence, it is not hard to conclude that the whole Borges' oeuvre is based on the latter. The ideas concerning the complexity of time were thoroughly explored in his book *A History of Eternity*, where he states that time cannot be observed without the notion of eternity, which is "an image wrought in the substance of time" (Borges 1936, 123). Moreover, for Borges, the history of eternity is not one-dimensional: it is rather a history of two successive theories about eternity, where one seeks to determine 'still archetypes of all creatures', while the other denies the truth of archetypes and thus strives to gather up all the details of the universe in a single second (Borges 1936). By the same token, the term itself becomes ambiguous, and hence what we call 'eternal' in ordinary language in order to denote 'everlasting existence' is sometimes termed 'sempiternal' in philosophy, while the adjective 'eternal' denotes timelessness (Bossart 2003). It is exactly this concept of 'timeless present' that is in the core of Borges' oeuvre and also dominant in DeLillo's novel. Similar to Borges' stories, *Point Omega* represents the idea of the present moment as the only existing one, enveloping both the past and the future moments. Thus, the interpretation of DeLillo's novel, based on the perspectives proposed by Borges, can start from two statements that sum up his observations concerning the past and the future. When describing the notion of the past, Borges says that, "We gather up all the delights of a given past in a single image" (1936, 136), and describing the future he states that, "We perceive real events and image those that are possible" (1936, 134).

Borges goes even deeper into describing the aforementioned phenomena by adding the chapter on 'Circular Time', which represents the idea that the human history is repeating itself, having reached the final point. In a similar manner, DeLillo's novel was inspired by the theory about the Omega Point, which represents the final goal of evolution after which everything returns to its original source. Hence, these ideas support the theory of the present moment as the only temporal concept that

actually exists and manifests itself in a circular manner, thus leading to the denial of the existence of the past and future. Having researched the representation of this phenomenon in Western philosophy, Borges here relies on Schopenhauer's (1909, 360) statement that,

[Real] objects are only in the present; the past and the future contain only conceptions and fancies, therefore the present is the essential form of the phenomenon of the will, and inseparable from it. The present alone is that which always exists and remains immovable.

However, Schopenhauer is not the only philosopher in whose works Borges finds a suitable starting point for exploring and extending the complexity of the topic he tackles. Some ten years after *A History of Eternity*, Borges published the essay *A New Refutation of Time*, where he states that the ideas proposed by George Berkeley and David Hume can also be extended to the concept of time. As Berkeley denied matter by denying that there was an object behind the sense impressions, and Hume denied spirit by stating that there was no subject behind the perception of changes, Borges (1947, 329) is free to deny time.

However, with the continuities of matter and spirit denied, with space denied, I do not know by what right we retain that continuity which is time. Outside each perception (real or conjectural), matter does not exist; outside each mental state, spirit does not exist; neither then must time exist outside each present moment.

Conclusive as this excerpt might seem, it only represents one dimension of Borges's essay. As the reading of Borges's essay progresses, we encounter the sense of uncertainty the author is filled with, and that, as it is going to be shown, makes him even closer to DeLillo's depiction of useless efforts both to define the postmodern conceptualisation of time and to deny it. The final passage of *A New Refutation of Time* exemplifies the deepest, and, at the same time, the most humane description of what an individual feels like when confronted with the idea that they can neither accept nor refute temporal succession.

And yet, and yet... To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, appear to be acts of desperation and are secret consolations. Our destiny (...) is not terrifying because it is unreal; it is terrifying because it is irreversible and iron-bound. Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges. (Borges 1947, 332)

4. ANALYSIS OF *POINT OMEGA*

4.1. CINEMATIC TIME

Keeping in mind that both the opening and the closing section of *Point Omega* focus on the screening of a film, it is apparent that cinematic time plays a significant role in the novel. In the Museum of Modern Art in New York, we see an anonymous man obsessively watching the film *24 Hour Psycho*, Douglas Gordon's experimental decelerated version of Hitchcock's 1960 classic film. What is shown to us through his eyes is a string of frames, of images, which extend the running time to 24 hours, thus making it very different from a normal flow of time. This corresponds to Bergson's theory, which says time is not perceived by spatial means, but that humans perceive it through pictures, although the whole picture is never fully discerned and understood due to the individual ability of perception (Ćurčić 2015, 511), "Real time, therefore, can only be experienced through intuition or imagination, which is why the observer finds cinema as the perfect medium to create an ideal world in his mind, in his inner-self."

The question that is frequently posed in analyses of cinematic time in the novel relates the purpose of deceleration and its significance to the story. This is probably best explained by DeLillo himself, who said in an interview that seeing this exhibition numerous times inspired him to write about "the idea of time and motion and what we see and what we miss seeing at normal speeds that we can see at much slower speeds" (BBC Radio 2010). Thus, watching the film at its slowed-down pace stirs contemplation, it makes the narrator think about space and time. In doing so, he concludes that "it takes close attention to see what is happening in front of you" and that "[i]t takes work, pious effort to see what you're looking at" (DeLillo 2010, 14). Slow pace requires him to stop, study it and ponder. What is actually implied by this is the fact that slowing down makes us focus on reality and thus allows us to see things which are imperceptible to us by mere seeing. Therefore, when temporality is altered, we are able to see what is real.

The less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw. This was the point. To see what's here, finally to look and to know you're looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion. (DeLillo 2010, 10)

What the narrator realises is that the relationship between this decelerated version and the original film is the same as the one between the original film and real experience, which leads him to the conclusion that "the original movie [is] fiction" and that "this [is] real" (DeLillo 2010, 14). As Ćurčić

(2015, 518) points out, "What the observer sees on screen in *24 Hour Psycho* changes the temporal experience so deep that he achieves the mystical enlightenment that makes him question the observable reality." This takes us back to DeLillo's idea that slowing down provides insight into what is otherwise invisible to us and leads us to the main story of the book where time is given another, yet undoubtedly related, meaning.

4.2. DESERT TIME VS. URBAN TIME

The main story of the novel is set in a Californian desert far away from urban surroundings. The narrator is Jim Finley, a filmmaker who comes to an isolated desert property in order to make a film about his host Richard Elster, a 73-year-old academic and a former Pentagon adviser who participated in the conceptualisation of the Iraq war. The narration in this part of the novel is also characterised by a slowed-down pace and the surroundings also create an isolated atmosphere. However, while the first and the last part of the novel are focused on cinematic time, the middle part concerns the discrepancy between the urban environment, which represents the temporal reality as a social construct, and the desert, where time literally stops passing. This is best described in Elster's words, "It's all about time, dimwit time, inferior time, people checking watches and other devices, other reminders. This is time draining out of our lives. Cities were built to measure time, to remove time from nature. There's an endless counting down, he said" (DeLillo 2010, 28). Thus, it is this part of the novel that is reminiscent of Borges' theories concerning time. In order to illustrate those similarities, DeLillo's novel and Borges' famous short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* will be compared on three levels.

The first parallel relies on both characters' urge to leave everything in order to devote themselves to pure time, which can be felt only in isolated places far away from other people. In *The Garden of Forking Paths*, we follow the story of a Chinese professor and also a spy for the German Empire during The First World War, who, while running away from a military intelligence agent, visits the house of an eminent sinologist who tells him a story about his ancestor Ts'ui Pen. We soon realize that Ts'ui Pen left all the luxury that was offered to him in order to create a book and a labyrinth, which are both a representation of the multiplicity of temporal realities.

"A strange destiny," said Stephen Albert, "that of Ts'ui Pen – Governor of his native province, learned in astronomy, in astrology and tireless in the interpretation of the canonical books, a chess player, a famous poet and a calligrapher. Yet he abandoned all to make a book and a labyrinth." (Borges 1941, 5)

Later on, Stephen Albert explains that Ts'ui Pen's labyrinth of symbols is actually a book that attempts to envelop and portray all the possible outcomes of a single event, metaphorically represented as a garden whose paths multiply and fork ad *infinitum*. Similarly, Richard Elster is said to have exchanged his old life for time and space.

He sat at a table in a secure conference room with the strategic planners and military analysts. (...) He was cleared to read classified cables and restricted transcripts, he said, and he listened to the chatter of the resident experts, the metaphysicians in the intelligence agencies, the fantasists in the Pentagon. (...) He'd exchanged all that for space and time. These were things he seemed to absorb through his pores. There were the distances that enfolded every feature of the landscape and there was the force of geologic time, out there somewhere, the string grids of excavators searching for weathered bone. (DeLillo 2010, 16)

The second important parallel between the two stories is the aforementioned importance of the present moment. In *The Garden of Forking Paths*, this is best represented in the inner monologue of the protagonist, who reflects that, "[ALL] things happen, happen to one, precisely now. Century follows century, and things happen only in the present" (Borges 1941, 1). In a similar manner, the middle part of *Point Omega* starts as follows: "The true life takes place when we're alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly selfaware, the submicroscopic moments" (DeLillo 2010, 15).

Finally, both works epitomize Borges' idea that we constantly imagine the possible futures and thus, everything that really happens, happens in the minds of their protagonists. Hence, Borges' protagonist, chased by an agent who was sent to kill him, considers himself an already dead man, thinking that, "Whosoever would undertake some atrocious enterprise should act as if it were already accomplished, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past" (Borges 1941, 3). In the same way, Jim Finley keeps trying to predict the future, especially in his interaction with Elster's daughter Jessie. This quote is one of the numerous examples:

If I said something, she would know I was standing. The source of the voice would indicate I was standing and she would wonder why and then turn and look at me. This would tell me what she wanted, the way she turned, the look on her face, or what I wanted. Because I had to be smart, be careful. (DeLillo 2010, 42)

This perspective also explains why Jim Finley never actually finishes his film about Elster: since it has already been finished in his head, the objective reality does not really matter to him.

5. CONCLUSION

Having analysed the complexity of time represented in Don DeLillo's novel *Point Omega*, we can conclude that the exploration of postmodern time requires multiple perspectives. Applying those perspectives to the novel has shown that it perfectly embodies the idea of intensive present, prominent both in postmodern literary theory and in Borges's works. From the decelerated version of the famous movie classic to the juxtaposition of the desert and the urban environment, every aspect of this novel points out to the fact that one can reach a better understanding of temporality only in complete isolation, far away from the city which was built "to remove time from nature" (DeLillo 2010, 28). Moreover, the strong connection with the works of Jorge Luis Borges suggests that, even though temporal succession cannot be refuted, there is a plethora of theories which open numerous possibilities for a more comprehensive perception of this intriguing phenomenon. Through Don DeLillo's novels, we can perceive that time in the new century seems to be flowing in a different way and thus requires that we stop for a moment in order to obtain a better understanding of its complexity. Every novel written by Don DeLillo shows, in a typically covert way, his preoccupation with time and its intricate nature. From present-to-past and past-to-present journeys in *Americana*, to the trespassing of future into present in *Body Artist*, time and temporality have been experimented with differently in DeLillo's novels, and yet, have remained a mystery. This leads us to the conclusion that the new century requires new approaches to the concept of time.

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