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Aporetic experiences of time in anti-narrative art[†]

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Abstract

I present art as a potential source of aporetic temporal experiences. The experiences in question are aporetic by virtue of both their anti-narrative quality and their potential to disrupt or short-circuit dominant models of experiencing temporality. I argue that contemporary art shares with earlier artistic trends a critical attitude towards dominant narratives but has its own particular way of dealing with time. In the first section, I frame narratives and temporality within a critical approach in which our current culture is seen as imposing ways of living and thinking through narratives. The focus in this article is on artistic expressions that take a critical stance in this context. In the second section, I sketch a genealogy of anti-narrative artistic phenomena. I explain that while the Avant-gardes played a more experimental role, the art of the sixties was oriented, according to influential art critics and academics, to decoding dominant discourses. In the next section, I discuss current studies in narratives, which open the door to new kinds of narratives other than the classic ones. In Sections 4–6, I show the temporal and anthropological relevance of these new narratives through a rereading of Ricoeur's theory of the complementarity of time and narrative. Through a personal and original interpretation of the Ricoeurian aporetic of time, I argue that we can experience temporality and other aspects of our life—self-identity, moral values, and historical events—outside of consistent narratives, although the experience may be critical or disappointing. Finally, I illustrate this thesis by reference to two contemporary works of art, both shown at Documenta (13).



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Modern societies have developed powerful structures for imposing an order based on a concrete temporality that makes them more productive and secure. These structures apply to different human spheres, one of which, as Arendt and Foucault have shown, is the control of time in human lives. This biopolitical process of imposing a temporal structure leads to a subordination of human life to a wider *telos* or end determined by an ideal of progress, be it the purification of the race, economic growth, a social utopia, and so on.¹ According to some authors, technological progress has changed human experience² by abolishing the experience of presentness³ and history⁴ and developing new modes of temporal perception (slowing down, freezing, repetition, and serialisation), which were previously impossible or unusual. Other authors state that the latest technologies of real-time “eventisation” are killing time and, with it, our body presence.⁵

Complementary to this, narrative studies warn against the powerful new role of narratives in our society. Previous (psychological,⁶ anthropological,⁷ and philosophical⁸) approaches that presupposed a naïve relationship between narrative and identity are now viewed more critically. Van Peer and Chatman assert that:

narratives continue to play a central role in our societies. They play a crucial role in a number of social institutions, such as the press, the courts, the doctor’s office, corporate headquarters, and capital buildings.⁹

Salmon’s somewhat apocalyptic book *Storytelling* studies how storytelling techniques have been introduced into marketing, advertising, emotion management, economics, communication, politics, and even military training. As Salmon says,

Storytelling [...] relates reality in an artificial way, blocks exchanges, saturates the symbolic space with series and stories. It does not recount past experience, it traces behaviours and directs flows of emotions. Far from the ‘route of recognition’ that Paul Ricoeur deciphered in narrative activity, storytelling sets up narrative mechanisms by which people come to identify with models and conform to protocols.¹⁰

Ricoeur himself, much of whose work from the eighties onwards is devoted to demonstrating the role of narratives in the construction of personal and communitarian identities, had to recognise in

2004 that ideologies of power use narratives to manipulate personal identities:

Threats that attest the fragility of personal and collective identity are not illusory: it is remarkable that the ideologies of power undertake, with a disturbing success, to manipulate the fragile identities through symbolic mediations of action.¹¹

In this context of socially dominant narratives, in which subjectivities are *subjected* to predetermined social models of time, the lessons learned through the so-called narrative turn in different disciplines from the sixties onwards may now tell us more about narratives in the mass media and politics than about current artistic and literary production. If this is so, it seems appropriate to study anti-narrative trends in modern and contemporary art and their potential to subvert dominant discourses. Art may well develop as that intermediate zone that Keightley¹² believes necessary to learn to reconcile human life with the temporalities imposed by modern technologies and models of life. Art may well also break the absolutism of our eternal present without perspectives and offer real experiences of those utopic temporalities that Firth and Robinson philosophically and politically defend.¹³ In the next section, I will show that anti-narrative art has historically played a significant role as a challenge to institutionalised narratives by subverting the experience of time.

ANTI-NARRATIVE ART RETROSPECTIVELY

A genealogy of anti-narratives must focus on at least two important moments where art production clearly played a critical role in relation to social models of time, namely, the historical Avant-gardes and the artistic shift of the sixties and seventies.

Recent publications have shown how Avant-garde artistic experiments fought against a dominant model of time. This model, inherited from the Enlightenment, was one of linear progress. In the 19th and 20th centuries, it was imposed by the mechanical mode of production, the growth of cities, ever-faster transport, the mass media, and the new culture of consumerism and entertainment.

As an alternative to these models of time, the Avant-garde conducted many experiments with marginalised temporalities and created different

means of experience. Worthy popular examples of these are the German Expressionists and the Dadaists but, as Barreiro has shown in detail, more clearly anti-narrative expressions are a significant part of Avant-garde film of the twenties. Let us mention here *Cinema Eye* (1924) by Vertov, *Taris, roi de l'Eau* (1931) by Vigo, the moving abstract forms in *Opus I to IV* (1921–1925) by Ruttmann and the whirling disc with obscene puns in *Anémic Cinéma* (1926) by Duchamp. Barreiro's analysis shows that most of these films manipulate temporality at such an experimental level that they generally prevent the apprehension of any narrative and produce a temporal experience that lacks consistency. I would not dare to assert, as Barreiro does, that the most radical anti-narrative experiments, such as those quoted above, let the spectator construct a different model of time from the one based on progress; but I agree that they make the spectator experiment with time in order to escape from the dominant temporality of progress.¹⁴

The art of the Second Avant-garde produced a different kind of temporal experience. Although there are fewer monographs on the experience of time in the art of the sixties and seventies than are to be expected, the great challenges of this art are known to have to do with a reassessment of the category of time. From Andy Warhol, John Cage and Minimalism to performance art and early installation artworks such as those of J. Jonas, D. Graham, and Nam June Paik, Avant-garde art embodied new means to experience time in surprising and disturbing ways.

As early as 1977, Douglas Crimp spoke of new artistic modes in terms of performativity and temporality. More recently, following the insight of Crimp and Derrida and Scholes (1979), Lee¹⁵ and Gere have shown how these art phenomena stood in opposition to their social and technological contexts. Because of this, I will first refer to Crimp's seminal article, "Pictures," published in 1979 in the journal *October*, which rewrites the ideas presented for the exhibition *Pictures*, held 2 years earlier.

All the works Crimp talks about have two features in common: the use of mixed media (photography, film, performance, etc.) and the category of time. Jack Goldstein's work *The Jump*,¹⁶ for instance, consists of a short-film loop of a person diving; its structure is one of continuous repetition. After analysing this work, Crimp concludes that:

the film's temporality as experienced does not reside in its actual duration, nor of course in anything like the synthetic time of narrative. Its temporal mode is the psychological one of anticipation. (...) a psychologised temporality is instituted: foreboding, premonition, suspicion, anxiety.¹⁷

Crimp observes in a footnote that all of the works discussed in his essay work with the conventions of different genres. They frustrate narrative expectations in order to draw attention to some of the conventions of the mass media. Another example is Brauntuch's work *Hitler Asleep in his Mercedes*. The artist reappropriated some images from 1934, blew them up and displayed them in a way that passed the point of recognition. As Crimp explains, such overused pictures build a distance from the historic events rather than a bridge to them.¹⁸ The installation dissociated the pictures from their historical narrative form and focused attention on how the meaning of pictures depends on their social context.

Two more examples will bring us closer to the concept of anti-narratives in the seventies. As shown in a recent study by Charlie Gere, the influence of TV on art production has been more than significant since the late sixties. With TV the synchronicity between the event and its reception obtained an incalculable social importance. For many artists, however, TV and video were, and still are, a means to experiment and also to criticise these socially dominant uses of TV. We will see two examples that play with and question the value of synchronicity.

Dan Graham's *Present Continuous Past* from 1974 played with the presence of the visitor and two sorts of representation: the reflection in the mirror in front of the visitor and the image played back on a video monitor with an 8-second delay. For our temporal perception, an interval of 8 seconds is at the limit of the immediate present, so the image on the monitor could still be understood as present; yet when seen in contrast to the reflection in the mirror, it becomes an image of the past. An amusing confusion arises between the image in the mirror and the image on the monitor, making the visitor aware of the lapse of time in which perceptual stimuli can be either still present or already past. Graham's second piece, *Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay* (1974), had yet another layer of depth, since it mixed the

images of the visitor with those of another person, thus deepening the confusion of identity.

Also in 1974, Joan Jonas articulated her previous experiments on time and presence in her shocking *Vertical Roll*, a performance with mirrors, video, and TV. In this very complex work, Jonas played with a delay among sound, image, and her presence. She dressed up different characters and mixed them, thus questioning certain perceptive schemas, and roles and symbols of female identity.¹⁹

As I have argued before, these practices used the same technological devices that were accused of being the means of ideological manipulation, that is, of spreading dominant narratives, but in a way that disturbed the temporal experience and prevented the construction of a common narrative *in* the work. They therefore clearly addressed a confrontation with dominant narratives *outside* the work. Due to the collapse of the representational and narrative modes, their anti-narrative character called into question the way dominant narratives were articulated.

SOME REMARKS ON ANTI-NARRATIVE THEORY

As we have seen in the previous examples, the implicit frame from which these artistic practices were read came from the semiological and deconstructivist approaches, which were very influential during these years. What Robert Scholes, following Derrida, said in 1980 about anti-narratives can be applied to the visual arts:

Anti-narratives are in this sense metafictional because they ultimately force us to draw our attention away from the construction of a diegesis according to our habitual interpretive processes. By frustrating this sort of closure, they bring the codes themselves to the foreground of our critical attention, requiring us to see them as codes rather than as aspects of human nature or the world. The function of anti-narrative is to problematize the entire process of narration and interpretation for us.²⁰

Similar to the anti-narratives to which Scholes refers, the artistic anti-narrative practices discussed above offered neither a representational nor a fictional experience of the human world, but a metafictional reflection on the codes through which language and experience are built. From a hermeneutical perspective, these approaches focused

less on the experience itself—through which art becomes representation and acquires meaning—than on the failure of the experience. In the seventies and eighties, this “frustration” was the epicentre of critical art theory,²¹ as it triggered the beholder’s awareness of and reflection on human issues, such as identity, morality, and the perception of reality in general.

I will now argue that more recent narrative theory, taking newer artistic expressions into account, combines a critical standpoint towards dominant narratives with a degree of acceptance of narrativity.

Two sorts of studies support my point of view. One of them is the newer approaches to art that deal with time. I am referring mainly to works such as Paflik-Huber’s, devoted to artistic practices from the seventies and eighties. From a phenomenological point of view, Paflik-Huber argues that most artworks that deal with time cannot be reduced to abstract reflections on communicative conventions. These artworks rather configure an experience of a particular model of time.²² In this experience of a particular temporality, relevant human issues are experienced disturbingly.

On the other hand, recent studies in narrativity look for a denser continuum among narratives, meta-narratives, and anti-narratives. This standpoint was already prefigured by Ricoeur in the conclusions of his *Time and Narrative*, where he referred to fictional narratives that scrutinise the limits of temporality.²³ More recently, Gary Saul Morson has criticised structuralist-friendly approaches that overlook narrativeness in narratives, in the sense that they transform the presentness and contingency of a narrative into an atemporal, systematic view articulated by determinism and necessity.²⁴ He pleads for more radical, process-focused alternatives that explore eventness and a more open, processual experience of time.

Prince asserts that there are many sorts of narratives, with different degrees of narrativeness and narrativehood: “Some narratives are more narrative than others; some non-narratives are more narrative than others; and some are even more narrative than narratives.”²⁵ In this sense, low-degree narratives could contradict one of the main conditions of narratives, namely, to be *consistent* in the “representation of at least two asynchronous events.”

With the technological revolution of the last few decades, the debate on narratives has gained a new and interesting field. In 2002, Lev Manovich proclaimed the loss of narrative's predominance and foresaw the generalisation of other temporal experiences. Manovich observed that many new media products do not articulate linear forms of narrative. Some of them, such as databases, spatialise time and distribute it on the screen. Others, such as videogames and early internet videos, use loops to make recurrent narratives.²⁶

Caroline Bassett, who takes developments in Web 2.0 media into account, argues that narrative is still very relevant in our culture thanks to its resilience and capacity to mutate. Based on an analysis of various cultural products (especially cinema), she agrees that linear narratives are not so much present in cultural forms, but claims that new forms of narrative, which also work with information databases, are appearing.²⁷ Rather than anti-narratives, she prefers to call them meta-narratives.²⁸

The differences between Manovich and Bassett are not so great. The elements that the Russian essayist thought of as constitutive of non-narrative forms of art that subvert the canonical model of narratives have now been developed in mainstream Web 2.0 culture media in more complex products. On the one hand, some of these products might extend critical thinking.²⁹ On the other hand, given the prosthetic potential of new media—that is, their potential to extend the human sensorium—they are creating new forms of (narrative) life.³⁰

The thesis I defend in this article develops some of these ideas. There are inconsistent narratives, that is, works of art that do not tell intelligible stories, at least not in the canonical way described by Ricoeur (as we will see). Because they do not tell stories, first they make us experience time in a different way and, second, they may also make us more critically aware of relevant human issues articulated through narratives. Departing from the deconstructivist approach and integrating the account of media as an extended human sensorium, I argue that these works of art offer an embodied experience.

To establish this, I will first retrieve Paul Ricoeur's idea of the complementarity of narrative and time. Then I will show, again following Ricoeur, how narratives configure the pragmatic world formed

by moral values, cognitive schemes, linguistic forms, and personal and social behaviours.

I realise that narratology has developed considerably since Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, but I will show that Ricoeur's analysis of Mimesis as the figuration, configuration, and refiguration of human action can be used to distinguish between narratives in a full sense and other sorts of representations of actions such as those outlined by Morson, Prince, and other academics.

After this, I will argue that temporal experiences also exist outside of full narratives, but that instead of matching a consistent model of experiencing time, they invite the beholder to perceive reality, to act and to be in alternative ways.

NARRATIVE AND ANTI-NARRATIVE IN RELATION TO TIME

Paul Ricoeur has thoroughly argued that the inherent relationship between narrative and temporality underpins our common experience of the world. Based on his both hermeneutical and pragmatic background, in *Time and Narrative* Ricoeur defends a complex model in which:

1. human experience of the world, understood as a pragmatic world, consists in a temporal experience articulated narratively.
2. conversely, narratives, that is, our common experience of our pragmatic world, are configured only through specific temporal structures.

As Ricoeur himself states, "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."³¹

Ricoeur argues that even the humblest narrative has a complex temporal structure, which includes a chronological and a non-chronological (yet temporal) dimension. In each narrative, Ricoeur differentiates three levels of the mimetic process: the pre-narrative level, which he calls Mimesis I or figuration; the literal story itself, called Mimesis II or configuration; and a post-narrative level, Mimesis III or refiguration, which considers the influence of the work on its beholder.

Mimesis I refers to the ethical order of a narrative. It consists in the pre-understanding of the world of action that any plot assumes from the

very beginning.³² In this pre-figurative order, the narrator considers concepts intrinsic to narratives, such as characters, actions, moral values, social and historical situations, the world of objects, and so on. Ricoeur has developed this point taking into account the theory of action. Thus, he argues that every story has agents (who perform actions), motives (which give rise to main and secondary actions), goals (which have to be reached), outcomes (expected or unexpected), and circumstances (which determine the action's success).

Every action has a symbolic meaning that articulates the experience and that has an inherent temporality because it relates past events to a present situation and future expectation.³³ This temporality is not yet a living temporality, that is, it does not have a chronological structure with a succession of instants and a duration; but it already brings a temporal order of what is first (motives and goals, for instance) and what comes afterwards (outcomes). The temporality apprehended on this pre-figurative level is, as one reader of Ricoeur puts it, "the way in which everyday activity orders past, present, and future in relation to each other."³⁴

Mimesis II is the level of the literal story and therefore embodies the elements of Mimesis I in a concrete, diegetic succession of events, an intelligible diachronic order. As the construction of a story and its telling by the narrator, Ricoeur calls this activity the operation of "emplotment." Regarding its temporal structure, the story has an "episodic dimension,"³⁵ which is the chain of actions that answers the question "what is next?" with a "then," "and then," and "and then."

However, Mimesis II also has a non-chronological dimension, called the configurational dimension. The configurational dimension has two important features: first, every narrative is read as a "significant whole"³⁶; second, the unity of the narrative is organic, in that the plot is structured not as a contingent series of events but as a chain of episodes with a "sense of an ending."³⁷ Accordingly, a story does not only configure a chronological series of events; it also inverts the conception of time as an arrow, when events are understood as having been ordered in relation to their end. The pleasure of following well-known stories lies in apprehending the end as being implicit in the beginning and the episodes as leading to the end. "By reading the end in the beginning

and the beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backwards."³⁸ While not every representation of actions in time configures a narration, narrations offer a chronological experience that is both specific and multidimensional.

Finally, the third level, Mimesis III, is that of the beholder and points to the meaning that narratives have for human beings. Hermeneutics and the theory of reception have defined this level as the act of melding the horizon of the work with that of the beholder. Ricoeur discusses this moment of the hermeneutic experience in *The Rule of Metaphor*, where he describes the three main elements of influence: first, narratives, be they fictional or historical, open up a horizon of experiences; second, they bring order to major linguistic unities; and, finally, they influence the configuration of our temporal structures.

Summarising the three levels of Mimesis, we could say, first, that the act of telling stories, understood as Mimesis I, figures the human world in action, that is, it provides "a map" of the social intersubjective world in a sort of "logical temporality." On a second level of Mimesis, the narrative world, both historical and fictional, is the enactment of the human world in a succession of events that are typical of the physical world but that are apprehended in a particular, though complex, temporality. Third, narratives can symbolically, linguistically, and structurally (structures of time, for instance) consolidate or enrich our world.³⁹ This means that narratives perform in the explicit dimension of meanings (moral values, concepts of the world) as much as in the implicit dimension of structures (cognitive schemes, linguistic forms, personal and social behaviours). Concluding with Ricoeur's words, "making a narrative [*le faire narratif*] resignifies the world in its temporal dimension." I will come back to this idea in Section 6 and illustrate it with examples in Section 7.⁴⁰

According to Ricoeur's phenomenological analysis of time and narrative, humans only have consistent experiences of time when those experiences are narratively constructed. Even the act of thinking of time abstractly, that is, theorising about time, is only possible by virtue of first having experienced time narratively: "there can be no thought about time without narrated time."⁴¹

This might imply that time could also be experienced inconsistently outside of narrative. And this should not sound surprising to Ricoeur. In the

conclusions of *Time and Narrative*, he finally acknowledged that some novels scrutinise the experience of time beyond the narrative structure and, therefore, operate with an ecstatic model of time. He also mentioned poetry and essay as genres with a very specific non-narrative temporality.⁴²

My working hypothesis from now on, therefore, will be that there are non-consistent experiences of time. I shall call these experiences aporetic experiences of time because they activate the parameters of different models of time but are incapable of integrating the different models in a single, consistent experience.

That there are aporetic experiences of time has already been suggested by the examples quoted previously. If we apply the Ricoeurian concepts on narrativity to those examples, we will also understand how they transgress the human world as a pragmatic world.

THE SUBVERSIVE POWER OF ANTI-NARRATIVES AND THEIR TEMPORAL EXPERIENCES

In a popular scene in Vertov's film *Cinema Eye*, the narrator says he will bring a cow back to life. We are used to the "rewind" effect, where actions are displayed in reverse order, so we are not surprised to see the cow jump to its feet in the slaughterhouse and find its way back to the countryside. However, the anti-narrative sense of the scene breaks the most basic rules of nature: coming back to life and going back in time. This subversion of the natural order (Mimesis II) confronts us with the order of *telos* and causes of our pragmatic world (Mimesis I) and prompts us to question the factual relationship between human and nature. The possibility of a change (Mimesis III) depends only on how seriously we take this simple fiction and its aporetic temporality.

Through the juxtaposition of different scenes of Olympic swimmer Taris, Jean Vigo's film *Taris. Le roi de l'eau* (1931) disrupts the temporal succession of any swimming activity and so prevents the articulation of a narrative (Mimesis II). The film does not let the viewer figure out any kind of subjective intention (Mimesis I) and transmits, among other things, a rather playful and ironic view of the heroic prototypes of athletes that were to be so popular in ideological films such as

Riefenthal's famous *Olympic Games*, made only 5 years later (Mimesis III).

Turning briefly to the other examples, Jack Goldstein's *The Jump* plays with repetition and variety, while the Brauntuch installation plays with the relationship between any image and its historic reference, memory. Both isolate elements of a story (Mimesis II), so as to make the story unintelligible and produce a disorientating temporal experience that prompts a necessary reflection on the uses and morality of images (Mimesis I and III).

Graham's *Present Continuous Past* and Jonas' *Vertical Roll*, as we have already explained, frustrate any attempt to build an argument (Mimesis II) by disturbing the logic of actions (Mimesis I and II). In doing so, they undermine the usual identifications with personal identity (Graham) and female roles (Jonas).

As we have shown, Ricoeur's categories of narrativity are an appropriate model to understand why some representations of action in artworks are anti-narrative and which kind of narrative-based concepts these representations tend to subvert. Ricoeur's thesis of the complementarity of time and narrative also explains why, when narrativity fails, we experience the temporal factor in the artwork in such a problematic, conscious, and explicit manner.

To complete my argument about aporetic experiences of time, I will now provide a taxonomy of such experiences and their relationship to specific conceptions of morality, identity, and nature. To do this, I have drawn on the aporetic of time developed by Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*. Yet, we should not forget that for Ricoeur this aporetic is merely the result of a closed analysis of certain philosophers' theories, whereas my analysis of these aporias is intended to show that they are present in the field of experience, whether existential or aesthetic.⁴³

APORETIC EXPERIENCES OF TIME

The first aporia: the cosmological and the phenomenological perspective

The first aporia arises with the comparison of two types of temporal experience: the experience of time linked to external nature and the experience of time in relation to our inner world.

Through our body we feel we are part of nature, whose temporality appears immense, unfathomable, and regular. In nature, we see movement and change and so we articulate a temporality defined as a succession of states. Time, as Aristotle teaches in his *Physics*, is the measure of motion. Already in very ancient cultures, the perception of repetitive movements in natural phenomena gave rise to the conception of cyclical time. Aristotle added to this view the metaphor of time as a line, in which each state of a phenomenon occupies a point and each point represents a moment, in relation to which we place a before and an after. This understanding of time, which is derived from the so-called cosmological perspective, provides various aspects of the model of time that underlies classical and modern physics.

In opposition to the cosmological experience of time, we are constantly aware of another temporal dimension. Through close observation of our own perceptions and consciousness, we realise that everything that happens to us and all our thoughts occur in the present. Present time is always our present or, at least, the present of a subjectivity. This present extends in two directions: the past that has gone and the future that has not yet arrived. Our own consciousness seems to “distend” (as Augustine of Hippo famously argued in *Confessions* XI) into the past and the future, losing intensity as it reaches into the past through memory and into the future through expectation. This present time is no longer experienced as succession, but as duration.

This second model of time is what Ricoeur calls phenomenological time. It helps us understand certain important elements of time that are lacking in the cosmological perspective. For example, in the ineluctable march of nature, phenomena are not ranked in order of significance. That is because subjectivity plays no role in the cosmological perspective and the notions of present, past, and future have no real basis.⁴⁴

There are other problems not verbalised by Ricoeur. Without a subjective scale, it is impossible to say how long an instant lasts, whether a second, a day, a year, or hundreds of years. Consequently, it is impossible to determine the pace or tempo of succession. This is certainly a common experience of time, one that includes the acceleration of life over the years, the change in pace between the countryside and the city, the different temporal-

ities experienced in artworks and music, and so on. Finally, the cosmological perspective hardly provides a convincing solution to the assumption that there is an identity underlying the changes that humans undergo over the years.

However, while the cosmological understanding of time precludes the experience of certain elements inherent in the phenomenological perspective, the reverse also applies. If it is the soul that compares different lapses of time past, it is not easy to understand how the mind can measure time without an external reference.⁴⁵ It is even possible to objectively experience equal durations as different. Another experience that cannot be apprehended from the perspective of the cosmological model is the experience of living in a three-fold temporality (as Augustine shows). This feeling arises in every action but is even clearer when reading a text or singing a song, where we focus on what has already been read, what is being read and the expectation of what is to come. For a cosmological approach, however, it is not easy to accept that personal identity can spread in three different directions.

As we have said before, Ricoeur’s central thesis is that narratives articulate these contradictory models in a pragmatic and consistent experience. Narratives articulate human events, whether collective or individual, in a common time anchored in socially acknowledged cosmological phenomena. They make up a time in which different tempi are possible, but all of them in a shared objective frame. Ricoeur argues also that narrativity offers a solution to the problem concerning the concept of personal identity, which was spread out in different temporal dimensions. According to him, the idea of an identity that tells and retells itself captures the notion of the diversification of emotions, cognitions, memories, and volitions of the self in a unity.

In contrast, a work of art that does not articulate its actions or representations in a narrative will leave its temporal aspects unarticulated and so will produce an aporetic experience. The identity or other values of what is represented will then remain problematic.

Second aporia: one or several times

The second aporia results from the unity and the plurality of times, that is, the contrast between our

usual way of thinking and talking about time as one and unique and the radical difference among our experiences of the past, the present, and the future. Regarding these three dimensions of time (which Ricoeur calls the three ecstasies of time), we can observe that immediate experience of the past is only possible through memory, whereas our experience of present time is generated by perception and that of the future, by expectation. How can time be one if our experience of time covers three types of structurally different times?

This aporia is at the root of ontological problems such as the continuity and discontinuity of instants in Aristotle (and most classical philosophy) or Augustine's threefold present. Husserl argues that there is a continuity among protentions (expectations of a coming time), present perceptions, and retentions (immediate past), as protentions are transformed into present perceptions, which are then transformed into retentions, without a break in the flow. Following Ricoeur, however, Husserl acknowledges that such continuity cannot provide the basis for a unitary concept of time as flow and so fails to derive a unified notion of time from its plurality.

There are other interesting problems, relating to the aporia of the singularity and plurality of time, that we often encounter in everyday life. Where is the boundary between present and past, or between present and future? Our immediate perception of present time extends from 1 to 8 seconds, depending on the circumstances (see also the work by D. Graham mentioned earlier). But in a conversation about social issues, for example, a reference to present time may cover an interval of a day, a month, or a year, leaving the border between present and past, or present and future, indeterminate.

A more urgent problem than determining the border between the three ecstasies of time is deciding which of the three should have more weight in characterising an event. Regarding social events, for instance, there may be reasons for valuing one of the three aspects (history, sociology, or the expected future) over the others. The problem again consists in articulating the three temporal views in a coherent approach.

Finally, this second aporia also emerges in relation to the different temporalities that can be experienced in an objective lapse of time. Are longer or shorter experiences of an action (analogous to slow motion and fast-forward in cinematic images)

really reducible to the normal *tempus* of chronological time?

Following Ricoeur, narrativity can provide only an incomplete solution to the aporia of the unity of the three ecstasies of time: the idea of a unique time is the idea of a universal history that also leads to a foreseeable future. However, this Hegelian utopian idea has been impugned by current historiography and philosophy of history and can only be stated as a regulative idea.

Third aporia: thinking time out of time

The third aporia concerns the possibility of thinking and representing time. It arises from the acknowledgement that any attempt to think and represent time is itself determined by time. Any consciousness that tries to grasp time is already constituted by time itself; and the prejudices (in a hermeneutical sense) on the basis of which a person in a given culture reflects on time are also historically determined. Our thoughts and metaphors about time carry a previous history as well as archaic meanings.

Aristotle, for example, is influenced by the ancient Greek concept of time as something that surrounds everything. Augustine thinks about time in contrast to the notion of the divine eternity and also inherits from Hebrew the multiplicity of its names. Kant and Husserl, with their transcendental method, try to avoid archaisms but in the end both conclude in an instance of mind that should constitute time yet seems to be constituted by it. In Husserl, for instance, the problem arises of whether consciousness is the basis of the flow of sensations or the flow of sensations is the basis of consciousness.⁴⁶

Ricoeur, discussing the solutions that narratives offer to the aporias, wonders whether it even makes any sense to ask whether narratives may respond to the inscrutability of time, that is to say, whether narratives as representations of time might show the impossibility of representing time. Ricoeur suggests that novels such as *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Der Zauberberg*, at certain very specific points, show the limits of representing time when they try to figure a sort of atemporal, ecstatic experience.

In my opinion, Ricoeur's analysis reaches its limits in assimilating these experiences to non-temporal experiences, that is, to metaphors of eternity.

It would be more fruitful to think of them as possible aporetic temporal experiences. In this section, I have shown that these aporias that art can offer have their correlate in possible, if unusual, life experiences. These rare aporetic experiences of time are usually set aside, but sometimes they can cause our narrative understanding of the world to collapse and, in so doing, as I have shown in Section 4, bring to light certain conflicts regarding our moral, personal, and ontological structures.

TWO EXAMPLES OF APORETIC TEMPORAL EXPERIENCES IN ART

In this section, I will try to illustrate some of these emerging conflicts in contemporary works of art. I have picked out two examples, taken from Documenta (13) in Kassel, which play with narrative elements without themselves having a narrative structure. Both offer different experiences of time and thus a reflection on the nature of time, the will to control it and history.

William Kentridge's *The Refusal of Time* is an installation with a surplus of means and ideas, yet they are very suggestive ideas (Figure 1). The installation is composed of five screens, very well-scored music and a big machine like an accordion that seems to breathe. As in other works by Kentridge, different scenes are combined, alternated,

and confronted, without our being able to piece them together in a clear whole. Manovich's idea that new media art articulates different temporal products, such as short looped actions and fragmented stories, in a heterogeneous whole fits this installation well.

Some scenes allude to objective time. The first, for example, shows a metronome; and there are some comic scenes with astronomers watching the stars, big public clocks such as the one at Greenwich, and a man wearing a bouncy-inflated suit dancing with a woman. A looped scene in which the artist walks over a chair alludes to repetition and cyclic models of time. Other scenes, such as the parody of a woman having an affair just after her husband has left home, could allude to velocity or lack of time. Near the end, everything turns off except an off-voice, which talks about modern science and the technology of time and, significantly, about the age when great colonial powers such as France and the United Kingdom were investing great effort to establish a global system of chronological time.⁴⁷

Only at this point do these final statements let the beholder guess that the topic of the work might be the ascendancy and hegemony of time as measured time, of time as *chronos*. As mentioned, however, this model of time is counterbalanced by some more humanised, funny, and subjective scenes.

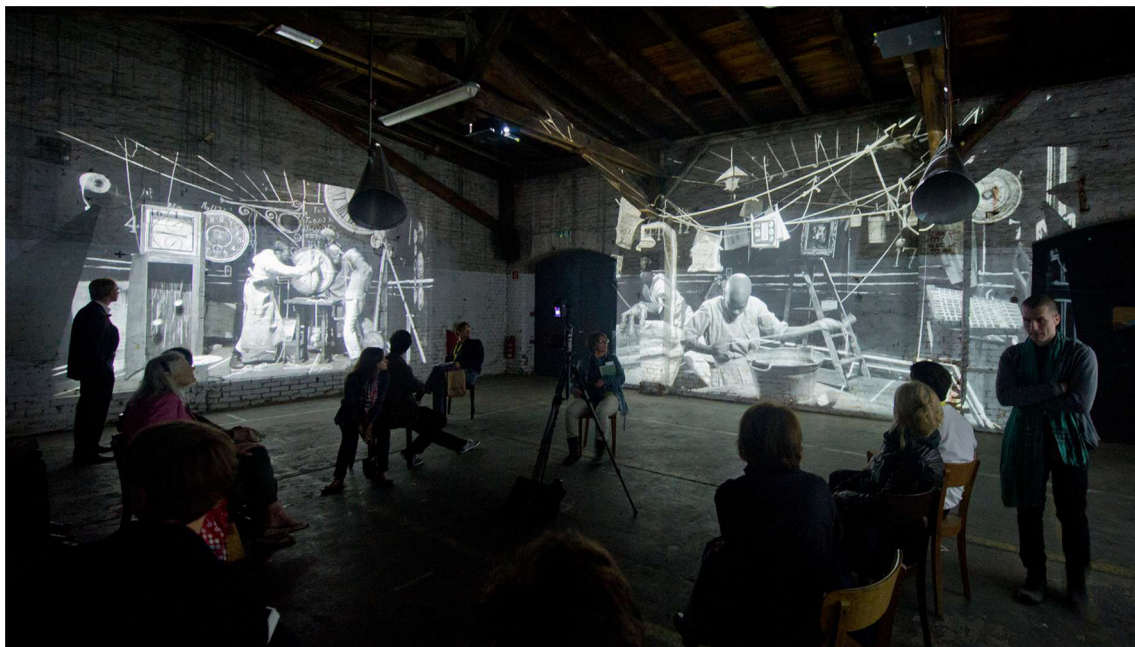


Figure 1. William Kentridge, *The Refusal of Time*, 2012. www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/william-kentridge

Taking this into account, the installation seems to dramatise a dialectic or confrontation between different models of time and the experience that corresponds to each one. The complexity of the work forces the beholder to switch constantly from one time conception to another. We can contrast these experiences in terms of our first two aporias: some scenes present the experience of an objective, ruled, repetitive time, while others show a more spontaneous, unpredictable, subjective march of events. Ultimately, since many fragments of the work could be assembled in a different order, it does not seem possible to put them in a chronological succession and establish a plot (Mimesis II). In the absence of a narrative, there is no possibility of configuring a particular experience of time, that is, of melding horizons as explained in Mimesis III.

After the monologue about the dominance of chronological time and an ecstatic, wild procession in which all the previous characters perform a final dance, the work ends. A black hole seems to have

swallowed up all other times and their conflicts. When the lights come back on, we are left with more questions than answers; all we have is the certainty that, as in the installation itself, all these conflicts between times will re-emerge incessantly.

My last example is Cardiff and Miller's *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, also at Documenta (13). This is the first of these two Canadian artists' guided walks to include video experience (Figure 2). While all the previous walks immersed the visitor in an amplified 3D perceived space through high-quality-recorded sound, this one invites the wanderer, guided by the images displayed on his iPod, to mix the platonic "flickering shadows on the screen"⁴⁸ with those of real life. From the outset, Cardiff's voice becomes so intimate that one sometimes forgets it is the voice of another person. Reality and fiction meld in an experience in which audience members freely give up their agency and submit themselves to another person's will (the artists' instructions) and in which they experience "a gap between self-will and bodily activities."⁴⁹



Figure 2. J. Cardiff & G. B. Miller, *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk*, 2012. www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/alterbahnhof_video.html

Janet Cardiff's voice guides the visitor in a journey through the station. However, the starting and ending points do not mark any meaningful stages. There is no plot to summarise (no Mimesis II). But the immersion produced by the prosthetic quality of the interface makes all aural and visual representations into inner experiences. Thus, the physical itinerary is overlapped by visual events and lifelike aural experiences that make the wanderer jump into other times and dimensions. Cardiff's memories become my memories and the past she talks about becomes present through images (second aporia). The stages of this journey go through site-specific historical incidents from the Second World War, real-life personal stories, and artists' subjective sensations and fantasies.

However, not all the journey promotes a loss of self-consciousness. In a couple of cases, the identification with a subjectivity is disjointed, frustrating any attempt to solve the first aporia through a narrative identity. At one point Cardiff commands the wanderer to look at a tram, and at that moment the iPod shows her getting into the tram. At another point, shortly after explaining a definitive break-up in a relationship, she abandons the visitor in a station hall, leaving him to contemplate a dance performance. Here and at other moments, time seems to be suspended and critical awareness arises. Cardiff guides the wanderer to the first floor and makes him look out of the window: it is like stepping outside the visit, stopping time, taking a reflexive perspective on the actions of others and asking oneself, are they in a simulacral experience or do they have a real presence? The work guides the visitor through a subjective temporal journey that incorporates shadows from different past ages and transforms bodily presences into shadows. And yet it constantly slaps him awake with intense, inconsistent sensations and forces him to be aware of the configuration of these different levels of lived reality.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can see how both works play with different temporalities (present, past, and future) and different models of time. They both include minimal narrative elements but deny the possibility of building a whole, consistent narrative.

Unable to unify the different temporal experiences into an organic whole, the beholder is made aware of an aporetic temporality and a problematisation of certain moral values, cognitive schemes, and social and historical events. Through its ambiguity, Kentridge's *The Refusal of Time* stipulates more specific elements through which the beholder can understand contradictory modes of understanding time. I would say it leaves the beholder with a wide range of potential narratives that she can decide to close up. Cardiff and Miller's video walk, even though it is a kind of journey, is more disturbing: temporalities are mixed rather than juxtaposed. Although the temporalities are framed in the flow of our subjective experience, the unity of the subjectivity is broken into different characters, memories, and intentionalities.

These works of art can also be taken as significant symptoms of contemporary art's relationship with narratives. The Avant-gardes developed a more experimental approach to time, offering a break with the temporal mode of progress. The video art of the sixties and seventies mounted a deconstructive attack on dominant discourses. Based on the contemporary artworks discussed here, we could say that contemporary art is more comfortable with narratives. It even invites the beholder to identify with a historical or personal narrative, and immersive technology increases this appeal. But the fact that ultimately there is no narrative leaves the beholder in an ambiguous position. He can experiment with narratives and identities, but they will never soothe the unsatisfactory experience of disorganised time and a disorganised self.⁵⁰

In an age in which our lives are so determined by socially imposed narratives and time schedules, in which individual and collective stories are so harshly manipulated, these experiences call for a less humanised time; and yet they still induce the beholder to pursue an embodied experience and try to re-appropriate time in new forms.

Notes

1. I follow here Kathrin Braun's, "Biopolitics and Temporality in Arendt and Foucault", *Time & Society* 16, no. 1 (2007): 5–23.
2. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, especially §XVIII (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008).

3. Paul Virilio, "The Speed of the Transport Only Multiplies the Absence", in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 101.
4. "The paradox is that we still harbour high-tech fantasies for the future, but the very organisation of this high-tech world threatens to make categories like past and future, experience and expectation, memory and anticipation themselves obsolete", Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 9.
5. Charlie Gere, *Art, Time, and Technology. Histories of the Disappearing Body* (New York: Berg, 2006), 21.
6. Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories, Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
7. Peter Collins, "Storying Self and Others. The Construction of Narrative Identity", *Journal of Language and Politics* 2, no. 2 (2003): 243–64.
8. Daniel Dennett, *Times Literary Supplement*, (1988): 16.22 September. I take this reference from Galen Strawson (2008, 1). See also Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2004).
9. Willie Van Peer and Seymour B. Chatman, eds., "Introduction", in *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), 1.
10. Christian Salmon, *Storytelling. Bewitching the Modern Mind* (New York: Verso Books, 2010). Translated from the French edition *Storytelling. La machine à fabriquer les histoires et à formater les esprits* (Paris: Éditions la Récouberte, 2007), 17.
11. Paul Ricoeur. I self-translate this quote from Christian Salmon, "Le nouvelle ordre narrative", <http://www.Lekti-écriture.com>
12. Emily Keightley, "From Immediacy to Intermediacy: The Mediation of Lived Time", *Time & Society*, 22, no. 1 (2013): 55–75.
13. Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson, "For the Past Yet to Come: Utopian Conceptions of Time and Becoming", *Time & Society*, 23, no. 3 (2013): 380–401.
14. Maria S. Barreiro, *La mirada obsesiva: Imágenes del tiempo en el cine de Vanguardia europeo de los años 20* (Doctoral thesis, Barcelona: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2011), 13.
15. Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960's* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).
16. Goldstein: *The Jump*, 1977. A fragment of what was screened in the installation can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqwIXyqwZZg>. Last view on September, 2015.
17. Douglas Crimp, "Pictures", *October* 8 (1979 Spring): 75–88.
18. Crimp, "Pictures", 83–84.
19. Pol Capdevila, "Joan Jonas. Lateral Perception, Performance and Video", *Lápiz. International Art Magazine*, May 2007, 2008, No. 240–41, 128–45.
20. Robert Scholes, "Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative", *Critical Inquiry*, 7, no. 1 (1980): 204–12.
21. This is really a deep gnoseological debate in aesthetics from the seventies onwards. Influential contributions are Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) and *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (1991, first German ed.) by Christoph Menke, one of Adorno's followers.
22. Hannelore Paflik-Huber, *Kunst und Zeit, Zeitmodelle in der Gegenwartkunst* (Munich: Scaneg, 1997), 272–5.
23. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).
24. Gary S. Morson, "Narrativeness", *New Literary History* 34, no. 1 (2003): 59–73. *Inquiries into Ethics and Narratives*, 70.
25. Gerald Prince, "Narrativehood, Narrativeness, Narrativity, Narratability", in *Theorizing Narrativity*, eds. John Pier and Jose Angel García Landa (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 19–27.
26. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 317–26.
27. Caroline Bassett, "Anti-Narrative: Games, Blogs & Other Non-Linear Forms" (*CP3 Conference 2005: Critical Workshops*, August 4, 2015).
28. Caroline Bassett, "New Maps for Old?: The Cultural Stakes of 2.0", *Fibreculture Journal*, 13 (2008). Last view on August 4th, 2015, <http://thirteen.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-088-new-maps-for-old-the-cultural-stakes-of-2-0/>
29. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 326; and Bassett, "Anti-Narrative: Games, Blogs".
30. Bassett, "New Maps for Old?".
31. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52.
32. To imitate or represent actions is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality", Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, 64.
33. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, 58.
34. Robert Goldthorpe, "Ricoeur, Proust and the Aporias of Time", in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. D. Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), 84–101.
35. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time", *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 169–90.
36. Ibid.
37. Ricoeur takes here Kermode's fortunate expression, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, 67.
38. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, 67–8.
39. Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity", in *Real Materialism and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship, 2008), 1–27, has strongly contested the thesis that identifies personal identity with biographic narratives. He argues that, even if the majority might understand itself in a narrative form, this is neither a psychological nor an ethical principle. I partly share this insight since I argue here

that art helps us break free from the identification of the self with narratives.

40. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, 81.
41. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, 241.
42. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, 271–3.
43. Ricoeur’s analysis of the aporias is found in the first part of volume III of *Time and Narrative* and in the “Epilogue”. No other analysis of the aporias of time by Ricoeur can be found in accessible bibliography. I hope this discussion of the aporias, however brief, will be useful to other scholars interested in them.
44. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, 15.
45. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, 22–3.
46. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, 267–8.
47. More information can be found in Margaret K. Koerner, “Death, Time, Soup: A Conversation with William Kentridge and Peter Galison”, *The New York Review of Books*. <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/jun/30/kentridge-galison-refusal-of-time/>
48. Quoted from Janet Cardiff’s off-voice in the video. Video documentation: http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/alterbahnhof_video.html
49. Karl E. Jirgens, in his interesting paper “Digital Mediations: Janet Cardiff and George Büres Miller’s Schizo-Phenomenologies”, *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*, 9, no. 1 (2015) has described Cardiff and Miller’s installations as analogous to schizophrenic experiences. Web. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this reference. Last view on August 4th, 2015.
50. I share here Caroline A. Jones’s thesis in “The Mediated Sensorium”, in *Sensorium. Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 38–43.