

"A sense of being inside the moment": Individual Trauma and the Spatialized Psychological Time in Don DeLillo's Body Artist

"إحساس بالوجود داخل اللحظة": الصدمة الفردية والزمن النفسي المتفضل في رواية دون ديليلو "فنان الجسد"

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Abstract :

This paper sheds light on the spatialization of psychological time in postmodernism. It demonstrates that memory, as one aspect of the psychological time, is the main cause leading to the simultaneous juxtaposition of both past and present, and thus to the spatialization of time as manifested in Don DeLillo's The Body Artist. Particularly, this paper focuses on traumatic memory, whether it is cultural or individual, and how it compels the characters to immerse themselves in the spatialized psychological time. Furthermore, it finds out that memory, in postmodernism, becomes an involuntary voice of its own, interrupting the flow of events. Moreover, this paper provides the reader with a glimpse of the origins of psychological time, and at the power of memory to spatialize it. To understand this, this paper illustrates how traumatic memory causes a spatialization of psychological time, taking into consideration that its representation differs from one novel to another. It is marked as Don DeLillo's most intriguing works that choreograph the effects of traumatic memory on the individual and society. The character Lauren is trapped in a spatialized world where her traumatic memories still live involuntarily in her present in a form of a ghost, shaping her language, identity, behaviors and environment.

Keywords: Trauma, Ghost, Memory, Spatialization, Psychological time

الملخص:

تسلط هذه الورقة الضوء على التفضيل الزمني للزمن النفسي في ما بعد الحداثة. فهي تبين أن الذاكرة، كجانب من جوانب الزمن النفسي، هي السبب الرئيسي الذي يؤدي إلى التوازي المتزامن بين الماضي والحاضر، وبالتالي إلى تفضيل الزمن كما يتجلى في رواية دون ديليلو "فنان الجسد". وتتركز هذه الورقة بشكل خاص على الذاكرة الصدمية، سواء كانت ثقافية أو فردية، وكيف تجبر الشخصيات على غمر أنفسهم في الزمن النفسي المتفضل. كما تكتشف الورقة أن الذاكرة، في ما بعد الحداثة، تصبح صوتاً غير إرادي لذاقتها، مقاطعة تدفق الأحداث. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، توفر هذه الورقة للقارئ لمحة عن أصول الزمن النفسي، وقوة الذاكرة في تفضيله. ولفهم هذا، توضح الورقة كيف تسببت الذاكرة الصدمية في تفضيل الزمن النفسي المتفضل، مع مراعاة أن تمثيلها يختلف من رواية إلى أخرى. وتعتبر هذه الورقة واحدة من أكثر أعمال دون ديليلو إثارة للدهشة التي تصور تأثيرات الذاكرة الصدمية على الفرد والمجتمع. الشخصية لورين محاصرة في عالم متفضل حيث تعيش ذكرياتها الصدمية بشكل غير إرادي في حاضرها على شكل شبح، يشكل لغتها وهويتها وسلوكياتها وبيئتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة، الشبح، الذاكرة، التفضيل، الزمن النفسي

Introduction

Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001) delineates the individual trauma of Lauren Hartke, who finds herself trapped in a painful state due to her husband's suicide. From that moment on, Lauren embarks on a journey through the wilderness of time that leads her to cope with the difficult process of grieving. Her companion on this journey a phantom-like creature, Mr. Tuttle, who appears immediately after Rey's suicide and then disappears at the end of the story. This man is taken to be an incarnation of Lauren's traumatic memory because he has witnessed their past conversations without their knowledge. Laura Di Prete discusses how the main character, Lauren Hartke, works through the traumatic loss of her husband by interacting with a phantom-like character who serves as a corporeal representation of the trauma. According to Di Prete(2005), *The Body Artist*, as a narrative that stages a scenario of traumatic loss and return through the phantasmatic figure of a madman in the attic, explores dynamics of psychic intrusion (of an unassimilable presence) and interconnectedness as the consequence of traumatic experience (87). Furthermore, Kavadlo (2003) argues that *The Body Artist* demonstrates how the body allows us to understand the inner workings of the human spirit (154). Another critic, Chiara Patrizi (2015), maintains that in DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, «time is not only a temporal distance but also a spatial one in the complicated process represented by grief. Time...separates Lauren from the rest of the world» (241). Here, the critic mentions that time, in this novel, is spatialized, but his critical view remains undeveloped. He does not provide the reader with the reasons behind the spatialization of time in *The Body Artist*, nor does he determine which type of time is spatialized. On the contrary, this study presents manifestations of the spatialized psychological psychological time. First, it maintains how Lauren's time shifts from linearity to spatialization through the resurrection of her memory in the form of a ghost. Then, it sheds light on her performance piece that reflects Lauren's spatialized psychological time. Finally, it shows how the spatialized psychological time is manifested in the corporeality of trauma, and how Lauren succeeds to come out of her mourning and perform a creative body art.

The Body Artist opens with a scene in which Lauren Hartke and her husband Rey Robles are at the breakfast table in their rented seaside house in an unnamed coastal town, performing an apparently familiar ritual. Rey, a sixty-four-year-old film director, leaves for New York and dies of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in his first wife's apartment. In fact, an obituary pointing to the ambiguous details of Rey's life ensues, in which Rey's history of depression is revealed. Lauren, the body artist of the title, returns to the isolated cottage by the sea to mourn her traumatic loss. When Lauren discovers a hair in her mouth, Rey jokes with her saying that —may be [she] had been carrying it since childhood (DeLillo, 2001, 11) Here, the hair probably symbolizes an early trauma because , after Rey's death, the narrator makes reference to the death of Lauren's mother when she was a little child (DeLillo, 2001, 124). Importantly, Lauren decides to stay alone by the sea in order to distance her present from her traumatic past, but memory succeeds to overwhelm her current moment, and thus —the effects of sea. . . and memory [are] all mixed in the air (DeLillo, 2001, 52). The past invades her present in the form of a ghost-like man whose language is disrupted. Such disruption echoes Lauren's displaced self after her husband's death. By listening to her own past words pronounced by the ghost-like man, Lauren unwillingly enters a direct communication with her past:

It was Rey's voice all right, it was her husband's tonal soul, but she didn't think the man was remembering. It is happening now. This is what she thought. She watched him struggle in his utterance and thought it was happening, somehow, now, in his frame, in his fractured time, and he is only reporting, helplessly, what they say (DeLillo, 2001, 93)

Here, one may notice that Mr. Tuttle is a corporeal embodiment of Lauren's memory. Her husband is —alive now in this man's mind, in his mouth and body (DeLillo, 2001, 93). Laura Di Prete (2005) argues that —Mr. Tuttle. . . mimics a dead man's words, renews and compulsively repeats in Lauren's psyche the trauma of an intolerable loss . . . the shifting from Rey's voice to Lauren's, places emphasis especially on the internal nature of this conflict (DeLillo, 2001, 488). Di Prete makes reference to Lauren's psychological struggle, showing how the arrival of the ghost renews her memories. However, she does not highlight the spatialized nature of Lauren's psychological time after

the involuntarily resurrection of her memory, which is the main focus of this section.

Demonstrably, the emergence of Mr. Tuttle helps to spatialize Lauren’s psychological time since his language resurrects her past experiences as if they are happening now in her present moment. The narrator mentions that Lauren —felt an easy alertness, a sense of being inside the moment‡ (DeLillo, 2001, 126). This attests to Lauren’s tendency to immerse herself in a spatialized time after the death of her husband. She lives inside a present moment of grief in which the voice of her past coexists with her present. In *Spectres of Marx* Jacques Derrida(1993), contends that « we come into the configuration of ourselves —only from the other and by death » (xviii). To understand this, one « must learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship since they haunt the living with unspeakable secrets sealed in the psychic vault » (xvii). Here, this principle can be applied to Lauren who is involuntarily compelled to live with a ghost embodying the voice of her dead husband. Only by confronting the ghost who carries the unspeakable secrets of her previous life with Rey, she becomes able to reconfigure her displaced self.

Furthermore, *The Body Artist* is inaugurated by an enigmatic statement, « [t]he world . . .[is] unrolling into moments »(DeLillo, 2001, 3), that reflects its timeless state. Its world unrolls into moments that can be moments of her past related to her traumatic memory; of her present that is colonized by grief and mourning, and of her future that is imbued with creativity and healing. All these moments intersect in her present time, which causes the spatialization of her psychological time. The novel moves inside Lauren’s area of time, moment after moment. The word ‘moment’ becomes a recurrent motif in this novel. It occurs many times on different pages like: pages 3, 46, 62, 66, 78, 79, 83, 101, 126, and 129. For instance, on page 78, the reference to the importance of the moment appears clearly in Mr. Tuttle’s fractured language: « I am with the moment, I will leave the moment. Chair, table, wall, hall all for the moment, in the moment. It has come to me. Here and near. From the moment I am gone, am left, am leaving. I will leave the moment from the moment. » Accordingly, the focus on the moment as the main timescape of this text indicates that DeLillo embraces the spatialization of time as a way to make the reader perceive Lauren’s internal life where her traumatic past lives in her present. Lauren finds him sitting on the edge of the bed, in his underwear. She looks at him and

accepts his presence immediately. This ghost has always been living inside the house walls, as the narrator explains: « [i]n the first seconds she thought he was inevitable. She felt her way back in time to the earlier indications that there was someone in the house and she arrived at this instant, unerringly, with her perceptions all sorted and endorsed » (DeLillo, 2001, 41). It is now that he shows up because this is the time when Lauren needs to make him real in order to confront her own trauma.

In *The Body Artist*, if the ghost Mr. Tuttle had not existed, Lauren would not have been able to create her performance piece « Body Time », and, more significantly, she would have been unable to re-shape her existence at last. In addition to this, the word phantom⁶ is suitable to describe Mr. Tuttle because one may discover in him some of the characteristics typical to phantom, illustrated by Nicolas Abraham(1987) who argues that the phantom is an invention of the living in order to fill the gap produced by the absence of a loved one. It is, therefore, a meta-psychological phenomenon since —what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of other⁷ (287). Mr. Tuttle is likely the creation of Lauren’s imagination in order to cover the hole in which Rey has left her to live. Since Mr. Tuttle embodies her own memory, she wants to take care of him, and by doing so, she is, in fact, taking care of her memory in order to make it safe and healthy. Like a mother, Lauren gives him the name he is unable to give to himself. She stands by his door at night listening to his breath in sleep (DeLillo, 2001, 56) to be sure that he is safe. She prepares him breakfast, buys him clothes and tries to teach him how to speak. He is a creature of hers, and she should take care of him carefully if she wants him to develop. She wants to possess Mr. Tuttle in order to repossess her previous life. Just like the day when Rey, in that same house, told her “I regain possession of myself through you” (DeLillo, 2001,65). So, Lauren now slowly regains possession of herself through Mr. Tuttle who embodies her past memories.

Mr Tuttle’s ability to imitate Lauren’s and Rey’s voices defies her sense of the irreversibility of time by reenacting the past moments she spent with her husband. Not only does Lauren think that —maybe he lived in a kind of time that had no narrative quality⁸ (DeLillo, 2001, 68), she also perceives that he lives in « a kind of time that is simply and overwhelmingly. ..unoccurring » (DeLillo, 2001, 81). It seems that his time is spatialized since his future and past are —simultaneous, somehow, with the present . . . they are equally accessible,

perhaps, if only in his mind. Moreover, DeLillo illustrates the shift from linear to spatialized time by pointing to the intrusion of Mr. Turtle’s time on Lauren’s time. He writes « maybe he falls, he slides, if that is a useful world, from his experience of an objective world, the deepest description of space-time, where he does not feel a sense of future direction-he slides into her experience . . . the standard sun-kissed chronology of events » (DeLillo, 2001, 88) Here, the narrator admits that Mr. Turtle originally arrives from a universe measured by space-time parameters where time is fractured, and slides into Lauren’s chronological time.

The term Space-time goes back to Einstein’s idea that time becomes one of the fourth dimensions of space, which is the main factor behind the rise of the spatialization of time. Therefore, ‘space-time’ is a connotation of the spatialized time where all moments are juxtaposed simultaneously in the present existing instant. Accordingly, one may say that Mr. Tuttle’s time is spatial. Though Lauren recognizes Rey’s words in Tuttle’s mouth, "she didn't think the man was remembering. It is happening now...in his fracted time, and he is only reporting, helplessly, what they say." (93) Importantly, Mr. Tuttle lives in a spatialized time, not only in his speech, but also in his elusive physical existence as a duplicate of both Rey and Lauren. Respectively, the narrator states that: « [t]here was something elusive in his aspect. . . He sat with his legs awkwardly crossed, one trouser leg riding up his calf, and she could see that he’d knotted a length of string around the top of his sock to keep it from sagging. It made her think of someone, of Rey » (46). Furthermore, Mr. Turtle’s language ruptures time and creates atemporal consistency that stands for his subjectlessness. As a matter of fact, Mr. Tuttle’s sense of subjectlessness is intensified by the fact that Mr. Tuttle is not « made out of time . . . that defines [her] existence » (92). He has no language of his own and, therefore, no subjectivity, he is « like a man anonymous to himself » (95). It is Lauren Hartke who names him because « she thought it would make him easier to see » (48). Besides, Mr. Tuttle responds to Lauren with an adeictic language. Lauren asks Mr. Turtle about Rey: « . . . When did you know him?[he replies the following]I know him where he was... [Lauren says again] then and now. Is that what you’re saying? . . . » (62). Lauren attempts to make sense of his involuted speech as it is « trapped in tenses and inflections, in singsong conjugations and she became aware that she was describing what he said to some third person in her mind . . . » (DeLillo, 2001, 63).

Tenses are considered as deictic elements, situating the event indicated by the predicate (verb, etc.) in the temporal axis. But, in *The Body Artist*, all deictic elements turn to be hollow signs. Mr. Tuttle's inconsistent verb tenses signify that he lives in more than one moment simultaneously. For instance, he observes that "it rained very much" when he means that it is going to rain (DeLillo, 2001, 44). At first, Lauren takes the burden of correcting him, but she abstains from doing that after she realizes that "this man experiences another kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after" (DeLillo, 2001, 68). Indeed, the events of *The Body Artist* happen without a beginning and an end, just as Mr. Tuttle lacks a beginning and an end. He exists in medias res, not being anchored by any temporal specificity. He arrives to share Rey's and Lauren's subjectivities, inter-connecting them in the same memory. He comes and goes without the possibility of tracing his origins and without witnessing his end. The narrator emphasizes Lauren's displaced self by inserting the recorded past events in her present moment, like the words pronounced months before and reproduced again mechanically by the human tape-recorder that is Mr. Tuttle. Hence, the house by the sea becomes a stage on which « [s]omething is happening. It has happened. It will happen » (DeLillo, 2001, 106).

Mr. Tuttle's temporal displacement begins to affect Lauren's state of mind. One may witness her willingness to live in the perpetual present or spatialized time, especially when « she spends —hours at the computer screen looking at a live-streaming video feed from the edge of a two-lane road in a city in Finland.. . It was interesting to her because it was happening now, as she sat here » (DeLillo, 2001, 37). In fact, computer hardware draws the user's attention to the present time through the rapid succession of micro-events. The computer time generates a —new social environment that has come to be called the « nanosecond culture » A nanosecond is the normal rhythm at which a device in the computer's microprocessor sends instructions throughout the system (Heise, 1997, 44).. Writers embrace a nanosecond culture in order to lengthen the present time of their characters. Ursula K. Heise makes reference to William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) in which one of the so-called console cowboys lives three days and nights in cyber time, while in normal time he lies on the floor for five minutes only (Heise, 1997, 44) . As a matter of fact, Kotka, that is a city in Finland, is a non-place suspended in non-time, collapsing the past, present and future in a continuum. Referring to this, David Cowart (2003) points to the spatialized time in Kotka: « Kotka is the spatial emblem. . . of time in

which past and future. . . converge from different directions on the present » (207). Significantly, Mr. Tuttle seems to occupy the same zone that Lauren confronts in the Internet images of Kotka, defying any determinate parameters in space and time. Lauren believes that he is from Kotka because his system is made up of coalesced moments that shuffle time dimensions. Mr. Tuttle has come « from cyberspace, a man who’d emerged from her computer screen in the dead of night » (DeLillo, 2001, 45). He seems to occupy a spot in which time experience is different from the time of daily routine. In other words, his time is as spatialized as Kotka.

The opening chapter, where Rey and Lauren chat over breakfast, is narrated in linear time. On an ordinary day, they have been stirring coffee, reading the newspaper, pouring orange juice or milk from the carton, waiting for the toast, and exchanging brief and distracted remarks. Here, time stretches and seems to pass chronologically in order to portray the couple’s daily routine, but later, time becomes spatialized, it freezes and squeezes in the moment. The death of Rey transforms Lauren’s relation to time and to the world around her. Mr. Tuttle who embodies the memory of her husband seems to shred to pieces the concept of linear time, juxtaposing the past, present and future in the present moment. Lauren’s spatialized psychological time takes place in her body work. So, this novel highlights the way corporeal trauma contributes to create a spatialization of psychological time. *The Body Artist* demonstrates how the body knows about a traumatic experience before the mind can process it. Lauren experiences an emotional void left by Rey’s death, and she —miss[es] him in her body (DeLillo, 2001, 49). In analyzing this phenomenon, Di Prete (2006) maintains that —a body that knows about loss before the mind does is a foreign body, a body the traumatic experience has taken away (101). This is exactly what happens to Lauren when she comes back to the rented house, alienated from her traumatic reality and unable to recognize herself. Her body absorbs the trauma of her husband’s death and therefore « [feels] different . . . Tight, framed, she didn’t know exactly. Slightly foreign and unfamiliar » (DeLillo, 2001, 33). Her ‘foreign’ body becomes more apparent when —[s]he looked at face in the bathroom mirror and tried to understand why it looked different (DeLillo, 2001, 67).

After all, in this house, she attempts to reconstruct her identity as an artist. All the movements and exercises that constitute what she calls « her bodywork » are now to be performed carefully and slowly in order to let them

be faithful to the self-knowledge she painfully achieves. In this form of work, the body represents a site of all cognition, including the sense of identity and the sense of time. David Cowart (2003) has stressed this conjunction of time and body, stating that —DeLillo emphasizes Lauren’s view of time as a bodily experience (207). Lauren's mourning does produce a piece of art, which is her latest performance, *Body Time*. One may think that Lauren suggests *Body Time* as a title for her performance in order to force the viewers, who live in a linear time, to experience the disrupted traumatic temporality that shapes her body. In line with this, Mariella, Lauren’s friend mentions that Lauren « wanted her audience to feel time go by, viscerally, even painfully » (DeLillo, 2001, 110). Indeed, the disrupted temporality her body performs derives from putting onstage a distillation of all that has passed between her and Mr. Tuttle. In her performance act, she adopts a body of a naked man, stripped of recognizable language and culture. This figure wants to tell the audience something, but language fails him. This figure implicitly refers to Mr. Tuttle who possesses the same characteristics as has been dealt with above. Then, « her body starts to jump in a series of motions, and —flails out of control, whipping and spinning appallingly. » (DeLillo, 2001, 114) Mariella describes Lauren’s body, in such an act, as moving from reality into another. One may suggest that by doing such motions, Lauren wants to express Mr. Tuttle’s spatialized time.

Di Prete (2006) explains the role art can play with trauma victims: « Art can bring out this transformation: It externalizes what is internal, opens it to public consumption and to witnessing, and brings it back, once shared, as something one can re-appropriate and safely place within the self » (DeLillo, 2001, 107). Particularly, body art externalizes what only the body knows, and insists upon a contingent relationship between the artist and witness. In this context, Mariella concludes that the performance piece —is about you and me. What begins in solitary otherness becomes familiar (DeLillo, 2001, 109-110). It is worth mentioning that body art helps Lauren to erase her former self, by becoming « a blankness, a body slate erased of every past resemblance » (DeLillo, 2001, 84). She pushes the limits of the human by becoming « colorless, bloodless and ageless » (DeLillo, 2001, 103). She discards human traits in order to survive Rey’s death, and embraces the world of sensations, no longer human but « snake-shaped and flower-bent » (DeLillo, 2001, 57). Here, Lauren subverts Heidegger’s concept *‘being-towards-death’* which indicates that what distinguishes us from other living beings is that our

entire existence is informed by the fact that we are mortal. Heidegger (2000) believes that time does not find its meaning in eternity (eternal now) but in death (295). Thus, in order to overcome death, Lauren’s body discards human traits and thus immerses herself in the perpetual present or eternity.

The show, sequentially narrated by Mariella, is a portrayal of Lauren’s traumatic experience and of her attempt to cope with it. Di Prete (2005) suggests that « Lauren’s creative piece recapitulates her body memories, —bringing her experience to the social realm » (505), and thus transforming the audience and the reader into the ultimate witnesses of her trauma. In a way, just like Mr. Tuttle’s wordless voice helps Lauren to reenact the moment before Rey’s death, body art helps her to reenact her traumatic experience. At last, Lauren has produced something alive out of the world of despair she has been thrown into. She has concentrated all her efforts into bringing back to life her inner-self, with the help of her body, which is also the main instrument of her art. Thus, her final performance seems to give voice to the unspeakable of the human experience, and offers room for —the process of . . . exploring some root identity‖ (DeLillo, 2001, 111).

The two main events of the text, the suicide of Rey and the body artist performance of Lauren remain out of sight, represented only through the mediation of outsiders’ words. Those two passages, Rey’s obituary and the account of Lauren’s onstage performance by Mariella Chapman are respectively to be found after the introductory chapter and before the final one. These two formally written parts, which mute the narrative voice for a while, seem to structure the text into some form of symmetry and linearity. The reader too undergoes a process of transformation; he is lost between the structured regularities highlighted in the first chapter of the novel, wholly devoted to a mundane breakfast scene with Rey and Lauren on the one hand, and the unpredictable happenings on the other hand. Only when intrusions in the narrative happen, in the form of the obituary or the press article, does the reader have access to fact. They help the reader to bridge the gap between these divergent narrative events.

Though Lauren intends to distance herself from her surroundings after her husband’s death, memory follows her up. It develops a voice of its own, and coexists with her in the form of a phantom-like figure who keeps reiterating the same words said by her and her husband. The existence of that phantom-like man helps to make the psychological time of Lauren spatialized, for her past and

present become a simultaneous entity in her own consciousness. The reader may notice how much Lauren's time becomes as spatial as that of the phantom Mr. Tuttle. This figure experiences atemporal consistency, and time, for him, has become a perpetual present. His existence changes the novel's course of events. At the beginning, time seems to pass, but at last, it becomes a question of « fitting [oneself] to the moment » (DeLillo, 2001, 129). Lauren's psychological time enables her to confront her own trauma and thus reconstruct a positive, creative and trauma-free life. The disappearance of Mr. Tuttle at the end of the novel is a symbolic freeing of Lauren from the shackles of her trauma.

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