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Past, Present, History:

The Meaning of the Contemporary in U. S. Literature and Culture

Hi, everybody. It is such a pleasure to be here. First off, I would like to thank the University and Dean Mitrea for the gracious hospitality and the generous introduction. I am also grateful to the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, the United States Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Department of State, and the U. S. Council for International Exchange of Scholars for the opportunity to visit with you.

This morning's lecture kicks off a series of seven talks and workshops at three Romanian higher-education institutions. The overall topic of these presentations is largely captured by today's title because, for the next two weeks, I will raise questions about contemporary American literature and culture, about what makes them "contemporary," and about what it takes to do justice to this contemporaneity critically. To get the ball rolling, for the following 25 minutes I will talk about time. Specifically, I will say a few things about *American time*, as a way of prefacing a discussion of the topic and of its relevance to your concerns and projects.

Let us, then, spend some time on time itself, "check the time" in and of post-Cold War American culture. In my tomorrow's lecture, I will tackle space—cultural, political, and territorial space and its mapping in recent American literature and critical theory. I will ask, on Wednesday, a basic question, which, I will insist, must be taken quite literally: *Where is American literature today?* It is then befitting that we get started by wondering about the

meaning of this “today.” For, it goes without saying, time and space are the two faces of the same coin—the currency history mints in its cultural workshop.

Funny word, instructive word, this “currency,” right? Etymologically, it designates what flows and circulates, sometimes giving rise to strong *currents*. It signifies, therefore, what is accepted (as “hard currency”) across vast geographies—hence the *con-current* implications, so to speak, of time and space, of that which is *of* the present due to its *spatial* scope. Of course, what we are ultimately talking about is value, assets, whether it is venture capital or cultural capital, money in your account or *Fifty Shades of Grey* on your Kindle: in this case, and with a bow to Bakhtin, at issue is the chronotopic structure of contemporary American literature.

To get the ball rolling, we have to scrutinize first the makeup, the constitution and aspect, the *cultural cosmetics* of this present. That is why, and quite simply at this point, the question I am raising is this: What time is it now in American culture?

I have asked this question before, in a book a few years ago, and I want to pose it again, but from a slightly different angle. Critically speaking, I calculate this angle while remaining mindful of the Nietzschean caveat in *Untimely Meditations*, a paradox variously reiterated by theorists from Roland Barthes to Giorgio Agamben: as Barthes tells his students at the Collège de France shortly before his death, you are contemporary *to your moment* to the extent you assume a distance from it, an *asynchrony* with respect to your historical context. If you are too “timely,” too much of an *enfant du siècle*, if you identify yourself with it, with its fixations and claims, you get too much entangled in their intellectual routine and cannot see your time’s essence, much as you cannot see a painting if your nose is stuck to the canvas. This is, in a nutshell, what Agamben points out in his 2008 essay *Che cos’è il contemporaneo*,

But his tactical “anachronism” is a bit misleading. At the very least, “anachronism” is the wrong word. You are not really anachronistic if your critique of a certain *cultural embodiment of time*, of the temporality embedded in the fantasies, images, lyrics, stories, fashion, and cuisine of an era, is premised, as it should be, on a demonstrable knowledge of that which you set out to critique. What is more, that knowledge entails—or, again, should entail—an awareness of the double bind of your *temporal inscription* into the texture of your historical juncture: you do not only “know” it; you also participate in it. You are *at the same time*, as it were, part of the solution *and* of the problem. You may “historicize” your epoch as much as you want, in Fredric Jameson’s critical sense, but your moment historicizes you as well. One way or another, we all are, says Manuel Castells, “embodied time.”

In dialogue with critics like Castells and their “network-society” view of the post-Cold War U. S. and world, in my previous book I stressed the following four issues:

one, the *velocity culture* taking shape in late modernity and postmodernity—the sheer pace of life has been increasing spectacularly; we need no examples here, because this has become a commonplace by now.

two, the *synchronous* vector of that culture. This is more worrisome. It is the tendency to bring a range of discourses, representations, and socioaesthetic practices—the multiplicity of the world—under the sway of a single, unifying temporality. It is the equivalent, in culture, of a de facto universalization of Greenwich Mean Time, which is also called, tellingly enough, Universal Time. Or, if you prefer a spatial analogy—which the time zone concept makes in fact inevitable—it is something like locating, for descriptive purposes, *all* world places along the Greenwich meridian regardless of their longitudes;

third, and equally troubling, the *homogenization risks* posed by such an epistemological geopositioning for the richness of expression, affect, and life ultimately;

and fourth, and more heartening, recent literature's *critical sensitivity* to such threats.

In a somewhat similar vein, what I would like us to consider today is the possibility of scanning the works of authors such as Ruth Ozeki, Chang-rae Lee, Suki Kim, Azar Nafisi, Jhumpa Lahiri, Joseph O'Neill, and Don DeLillo for their "untimeliness," the *urgency*, perhaps, of reading them as a fictional and, to my mind, effective *critique* of the cultural temporality of network-society America. Dwelling primarily on DeLillo, I would submit to you that not only do these writers pinpoint the many problems of "monotemporality," but, through their art, they also break up this chronocultural monolith into contiguous, intersecting, yet discrepant and sometimes clashing temporalities, timelines, and histories. These temporalities do not mark out discrete ontologies, as Brian McHale argued apropos of earlier postmodernism. However, I would further contend, they do challenge the usual attempts to measure American time and, more generally, to take America's measure culturally, politically, and otherwise, to define its cultural time, its *present* as a venue of the "new," but also to do this new's genealogy and thus to write the history, including the *literary* history, of the country. No doubt, this is a tough challenge, but I think it bodes well for our profession. Students of American literature should welcome it.

Why? Because, perhaps more than in other national traditions, working in this field involves a keen sense, on one side, of *nowness as newness*, and, on the other side, of the complex, multipronged historical production of the new: of the novelty of literature itself, in the modern and then postmodern sense; of the *new world culture* that, whether we like it or not, the U. S. has been fostering—albeit not single-handedly—for a while now; and of the fast-changing

profession, of American literary scholarship, which renews itself, alongside the culture as a whole, at a pace unparalleled in other countries.

To no negligible degree, this renewal is a function of the object itself and its history. To clarify: if this history is multidirectional, and controversially so, that is because, for example, you can talk about how recent or new American literature is, about how it basically starts shaping world literature effectively after Ezra Pound and his generation introduced the modernist concept of creativity as a poetics of the new, and about how all this presupposes a certain temporal perspective, lack of historical inhibition, understanding of “tradition,” etc. But this chrono-epistemology, this intellectual ordering of things literary along the time axis, does not overlap with the temporal framework of, say, Native American literature, or *literatures*, rather, with *their* conceptualizations and practices of originality, and with how *they* answer the questions about how new (or old) American literature, or the nation, complete with its Indian Nations, is.

So we need to understand that the issue is pretty thorny from the get-go, but perhaps in a good way. At any rate, it helps that, in the post-World War II era—the period in which America’s presence in the world has expanded dramatically—major American writers wrestle with this problem, oftentimes over and against that which compounds it, namely, the leveling drive of a globalization that, to some, is synonymous with Americanization. To be sure, this is not the sole aspect of global processes. But it is bothersome enough to elicit some insightful glosses from DeLillo in his 1997 essay “The Power of History.” The novelist begins with the obsessive media coverage of a botched bank heist. I quote:

You’re watching a video-tape of hooded men emerging from a bank and they move with a certain choreographed flair, firing virtuoso bursts from automatic weapons, and you wonder if they are repeating a scene from a recent movie, the one that disappeared

overnight when the weekend gross was flat, and the tape is played and replayed, exhausting all reality stored in its magnetic pores, and then another tape replaces it, a car chase through a startled suburb, and the culture continues its drive to imitate itself endlessly—the rerun, the sequel, the theme park, the designer outlet—because this is the means it has devised to disremember the past.

Or you're staring at the inside of a convenience store on a humdrum night in July. This is a surveillance video with a digital display that marks off the tenths of seconds. Then you see a shuffling man with a handgun enter the frame. The commonplace homicide that ensues is transformed in the image-act of your own witness. It is bare, it is real, it is live, it is taped. It is compelling, it is numbing, it is digitally microtimed and therefore filled with incessant information. And if you view the tape often enough, it tends to transform you, to make you a passive variation of the armed robber in his warped act of consumption. It is another set of images for you to want and need and get sick of and need nonetheless, and it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside the tape.

Against these flashes, these lonely fleeting images, against the ritual arrangements of these serial replays, events and documents of the past have a clarity and intactness that amount to a moral burnish. A Matthew Brady photograph, a framed front page—"Men Walk on the Moon." These things represent moments of binding power. They draw people together in ways that only the most disastrous contemporary events can match.

DeLillo's essay is usually read alongside his 1997 novel *Underworld*, in my view the best book in English since Thomas Pynchon's 1973 *Gravity's Rainbow*. These passages break down the media mechanisms responsible for the flattening of cultural times into a single temporal dimension of replays, reruns, and their consumption. For, as a viewer, I gorge on visual junk. I take in all these repetitions, and therefore I participate in the proliferation of sameness within and without the tube, across the media networks and the media-saturated America, inside and outside national boundaries. But the bank robbers themselves are consumers too. They do not produce anything new but *anew*. They are not new but *news*, in and through the recurring spectacle of violence, which is repetitive insofar as their holdup reenacts, as DeLillo implies, movie episodes. What is more, the culture disremembers its past both in the footage, in what we watch, and as we watch it, for both the images and their viewing unfold in the endless, flat present of repetitiveness. This hysterical recursiveness, this curse of recursiveness, is catastrophic on two accounts: first, because it feeds on lethal violence; and second, because, in the *representation* of violence, in its *serialization*, we catch a glimpse of the disaster that is the contemporary itself, of the awful things happening to it as its reality is squeezed, and "exhausted," says DeLillo, into a formal scheme—repetition itself—jarringly at odds with modern culture's foremost brief, namely, the production of the genuinely new.

The *past*, then, becomes the artist's recourse. This is another paradox, if there ever was one, for writers like DeLillo fall back on the past because, it turns out, it is the past that spawns novelty. But this is not a case of nostalgia. What we are dealing with is *historicized postmodernism*. And this is not your run-of-the-mill anti-media crusade either; after all, DeLillo refers to old photography and magazine covers. Finally, this is not "just" postmodernism, but postmodernism's becoming something else, more "worlded," more capacious, as *Underworld's*

fictional chronography unpacks the times, stories and histories, lives and deaths crushed, folded, disfigured, and thus reprised in what Castells calls “timeless time.”

This time, the critic maintains in volume I of *The Rise of the Network Society*, is “the dominant temporality of our society.” However, it is not the only one. We can call this time *chronophage* for it has gobbled up a host of temporalities *and* the expressive possibilities they are built into, ingesting and compressing them into cultural indistinctiveness much like DeLillo’s famous trash compactor in his 1985 novel *White Noise*. But they are still there, crammed inside our uniform presentness and present uniformity.

I find it encouraging, in this context, that some of the best recent U. S. literature has taken upon itself to wrestle with the culture’s temporal predicament and undo the monotony sometimes so visible, so aggravating, in popular fiction, music, film, and TV. To acquit itself of this task, it has attempted a *reverse temporal engineering of culture*. Those of us who are not familiar with the not-so-legal manufacturing practice of reverse engineering can think, for instance, of a bunch of technicians who take apart a car, iPhone, or umbrella not of their making to figure out its design and ultimately produce the object without giving much thought to patent infringement.

This would be, and is, theft, unethical reproduction. Instead, DeLillo’s narrative reverse engineering is ethical. And it is productive too. *Chrono-genetic*, its time writing expands compacted, streamlined time, and the domain of the possible within it. If indeed “time is the only narrative that matters,” as he writes in his 2001 novel *The Body Artist*, then our takeaway as his readers should be the restoration of multiple temporalities—and of a “heteróchronous,” culturally manifold America—by his work’s narrative apparatus. “[T]he idea is to think time differently,” says a character in *The Body Artist*. “Stop time,” she goes on, “or stretch it out, or open it up.”

This critical rethinking of time occurs especially in DeLillo’s post-*White Noise* books.

Back to the kitchen compactor, to leftovers, candy wrappers, magazine covers, ruins, Edgar J. Hoover's garbage cans, old photos, baseballs, baseball-shaped plutonium cores of A-bombs, and so on: this is the postmodern cultural sublime; this is the historical landfill *Underworld* and other DeLillo novels excavate and sort out to undo the serialized time of consumption so as to retrieve the muffled, alternate narratives fighting for air in the bulging belly of timelessness.

Obviously, there is an ecological dimension to this narrative waste management, but what Amy Elias describes as "time ecologies" goes beyond the environment in an ecocritical sense. What we are dealing with is *cultural environment* or environments, and the many histories, the plural America *Underworld* locates in them: Italian-American America; Cold-War America; the American of the digital age, more present in the world than ever; inner-city America, hostage to a time quite different from the temporality of the American suburb; the apocalypse of Pieter Bruegel's 16th-century painting "The Triumph of Death," both fictional and real, outside and inside historical time, prior to Hoover and to Eisenstein's "lost movie," *Unterwelt*, and simultaneously *after them*, in the specter of the nuclear holocaust, at once in the New York ballpark and in the wider world, in the Kazakhstan nuclear tests' victims and underground atomic waste disposal later in the 1990s; America of the Bronx and America of the Arizona desert, where another kind of recycling is going on. Whether it is the campy repainting of Cold-War era bombers or *Underworld* as a whole, this critical-aesthetic recycling, along with the opening up of time it sets in train, captures a main feature of the contemporary aesthetic.

Now, when I went to college, the contemporary was simply the time lapsed since World War II. Obviously, seventy years after the war, the historical signposts must be moved. And some American critics have moved them around another epoch-setting event: the "true" end of the Second World War, 1989. To be sure, the demolition of the Berlin Wall was a genuine event,

an “event-world” (*événement-monde*, as French critics call it) in the strongest sense of the term. This development was unique, far from predictable, and a-serial, as post-Heideggerian thinkers of eventfulness from Michel Foucault to Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, and Ernesto Laclau have theorized it. But, in the same vein, it is also world-eventful—an *Ereignis* (event) and an *Anfang* (new beginning) in the world. Where a history—not Francis Fukuyama’s History, but a specific kind of history—ends, another gets under way worldwide under the auspices of this occurrence. “Regional” or localized (better still, “localizable”) as it originally was in space and time (in former East Germany’s Berlin and in a certain November 1989), the Berlin Wall’s fall had the typical, worldwide impact of a “universal singular.” As such, it marked a radical break with the past all over the world: it proved not only capable of *re-eventing* the world as a set of sequential events but also of re-inventing, re-worlding it into a new world culture.

In closing, I want to suggest two things about this culture, to which the U. S. has been so instrumental. One has to do with world culture’s temporal span and hegemonic logic; the other, with the counter-logics, with the counter-temporalities challenging this hegemony *from within*, from literature, poetry, the arts, and so forth.

First, and at the risk of painting the last one hundred years or so of cultural history with some exceedingly é[e]pochal, broad brushstrokes, I propose that this period has coalesced around three pivotal moments or paradigms, in the U. S. but not only. The initial one was the modern, which extended into the early 1960s; then came the postmodern, which lasted, in its strongest and best-marked configuration, for the next thirty odd years and past its *années folles* (the 1970s and 1980s); and, third, the postmodern was—or, better still, *is being*—succeeded by the cultural or paradigmatic dominant on the rise since 1989 and picking up speed more saliently after 9/11. We do not need to put a name on this dominant; I have done so myself, but this is less important.

What matters here is its major temporal logic, which DeLillo describes in his essay. This logic is contemporary twice: *historically*, insofar as it defines the main temporal workings of a *certain time period*, namely, post-1989 America; and *structurally or culturally*, in that this modus operandi tends to reduce this interval's temporal focus to itself, to the contemporary and its de-historicized, equalizing, and thus culturally homogenizing presentness.

The second aspect can be summed up as the *insurgent temporalities* opened up, within and against this flat time, by fictional counter-chronographies such as DeLillo's. These measure another time—the time of the other. It is along these lines that anthropologist Johannes Fabian conceptualizes time in his book *Time and the Other* as a “carrier of significance, a form through which we define the content of relations between the Self and the Other.” Elsewhere, I defined the above-mentioned dominant as revolving around relatedness. To reiterate, contemporary American culture, and more and more world culture as well, *obtains as it engages with the now inevitable, and inevitably defining, problematics of otherness*. Writers' chrono-imagination bears witness to this truth as they develop, against the synchronous drive of globalization, what Terry Smith labels “asynchronous temporalities.”

Thus, the contemporary is *our* time only to the extent we can all relate, say, to a historical period known as the Cold War's aftermath. Beyond that, things get really complicated. There is the flat present of advertising and consumption, and then there is what Wai Chee Dimock dubs “deep time,” the many centuries African American novelist Charles Johnson weaves together in his book *Middle Passage*; there is “presentism,” as a sociocultural and literary approach, or there is “nativism,” apropos of Native American literature, and then there is post-indigenous time, in Chang-rae Lee's latest novel, *On Such a Full Sea*, where the natives—the “originals,” as they are identified in the book—are Chinese immigrants who “colonize” Baltimore in a not too remote

future; there is the local time, quite parochial, actually, of the American classics, with their clichés and tired readings, and then there is another time, in another space, Iran, for example. In Iran, according to Nafisi's account in her 2014 book *The Republic of Imagination*, Mark Twain's work acquires, after the Islamic Revolution, the urgency, the *presence*, and perhaps the *present* it has lost in its home country—a reading time, by an other, elsewhere, that becomes as important as the time of writing.

KEYWORDS: network society; time; timelessness; history; new/news; media; representation; repetition; chronophagy; reverse (cultural) engineering; temporal ecology; fiction as temporal critique; monochrony vs. heterochrony; fluid contemporaneity; event; modernity; postmodernity; contemporaneity / (“worlded”) postmodernity