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Irreal Temporality: André Aciman and a New Theory of Time

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I. Introduction

Homo Irrealis by André Aciman explores the writer's youth to characterise human experience as fundamentally dislocated from the present.¹ He draws from the work of Marcel Proust, which explores recollection in the form of a philosophical novel.² Aciman utilises Proust's epistemic technique to stylise his work, laying a fictional gloss over facts and conceptual takes. But Proust also influences the manner in which Aciman takes present experience to be "caught...between what happened and what won't".³ This unusual method of characterising temporality is the gnostic thread woven throughout an otherwise dissimilar set of essays. Aciman is the first to efface his work's academic credentials; claiming that the truth he seeks is not a formal one but instead a fictionalised and aesthetic version. Yet for all his modesty, these essays have untold intellectual value.

This article argues that we can construct a complex interpretation of time by linking Aciman's work to aspects of twentieth century philosophy and psychoanalysis. Briefly, it attempts to demonstrate the

¹ Aciman, A. *Homo Irrealis*.

² Proust, M. *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

³ Aciman, A. *Homo Irrealis*. p.7. See also p. 27, 51, 67, 143.

roles of dislocation, deferral, and Otherness in constituting human temporality. The essay begins by surmising the conceptual history of time, touching on key ideas put forward by Augustine and Bergson. The second section takes a psychoanalytic turn, after exploring *Homo Irrrealis*, to describe the significance of desire and fantasy. Thirdly, we develop a unique and temporal application of difference and deferral, building off of Deleuze and Derrida. The fourth section will consider how the psychoanalytic concept of the Other is inherited within time. We conclude that an Acimanic analysis of time is the means by which we can understand existence not as a series of moments, but a rich progression of dissimilitude and Otherness defined moreso by its lack of cohesion and directness of being than by a unified and self-identifying subject.

II. Augustine and Bergson: the Christian present and the *Durée*

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) was one of the first theologians to discuss time,⁴ setting up a theoretical account which reflected the ideological sub-structure of Christianity.⁵ Augustine distinguishes between real and unreal time, arguing that the category of reality only pertains to the moment of action in which one is immersed. Experiences of the past or future in which we may cognitively engage were thus fictitious. This instantiated the interaction of being with time as an infinitesimal node. By maintaining that the non-present is unreal, Augustine delegitimised partially removed experiences of time, creating a division between forms of temporal knowledge. The real versus unreal dichotomy seems to conflate immediacy with truth. Direct engagement with activity in the present is abruptly juxtaposed to the engagement we have with engagement with objects that occurs via recollection or the envisaging of the future. This conception of time is known as “presentist”, because of its focus on temporal immediacy, though many theories which diverge from Augustine’s conception are given similar appellation.⁶

Augustine exemplified his notion of time through the example of reciting a psalm from memory.⁷ Before the recitation occurs, it is in view via expectation. He believed that the expectative lens prevented the psalm from pertaining to the shared and external space of reality. Similarly, after recitation, the psalm would be stored in memory, and thus equally unreal. Recollection is, to Augustine, a reliving of the real through an unreal mode, an imaginary vivification of the past that deceives the participant into understanding that past as if it has come to life in the present. Here, the Christian view of humanity as deeply flawed conditions his view of temporal life. Human recollection and anticipation debase the psalm to Augustine. It is only through the immediate contact point of the present, in the moment between the future and past, that entities and even ourselves become reified. As each verse of the psalm is recited, one after another is transferred from future to past, and it is *during* this transfer that time can escape unreal condemnation.

Augustine’s is a deflationary theory of the present, in that it has limited applicability outside of the theory it explains. Whilst it is intuitive to think of the distant past and future as imaginary, this position is incoherent in view of human involvement in time outside the present. Pragmatically, Augustine’s presentism does not align with our perception of the past and the future, as real. Its hostility to anticipation neglects the fact that forecasting the actions of ourselves and others is a vital component

⁴ Husserl, E. *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of internal time*.

⁵ Dainton, B. *Temporal consciousness*.

⁶ Emery, N., Markosian, N., & Sullivan, M. *Time*. See also Gale, R. 1967, *The philosophy of time*. for broader context.

⁷ Saint Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*, Book XI.

of thought. Even to prepare to recite the psalm, we must posit that it will happen in the future. A genuine belief in the unreality of the future would dissolve our potential for many kinds of engagement with the world. Furthermore, action often involves knowledge of and identification with the past – how can one prepare to recite the psalm without understanding or knowing what reciting a psalm entails? One cannot actually recite its verses, or reflect on their recitation, without opening up a connection to the past through memory. Augustine might interject that his real/unreal dichotomy pertains to the actual nature of reality; its construction a means of transubstantiating the limited abilities of the human mind to know and perceive into a temporal philosophy. But this does not dismiss the fact that his notion of reality reductively describes it as an atemporal point. Augustinian reality vanishes from the timeline, uninvolved with the past and future, and fails to properly account for the importance in the non-present in conditioning the present of human existence. It is temporally unextended, and in this sense, static.

One of the key issues with a temporal model which attributes an actual length of time to the present, even if this length is practically zero, is that acts of engagement with the world do not actually create a distinction between the “now” and “then”. Augustine takes the length of time required to recite each verse of the psalm as the present.⁸ This seems to lead us to the absurd conclusion that the arbitrary breaks between the verses mark the distinctions between future, past, and present. We might ask why the beginning of one verse should be the present, when the last line of the preceding verse is in the past? Or how a line I recited three seconds ago is not real, when I lack complete awareness of the line I am in the process of reciting either? Without a clear way to demarcate the distinctions between different parts of the timeline, the Augustinian conception falls flat.

Refining his argument may suggest that the present is the minimal instance of engagement with being, a theoretically imaginable temporal nil. This minimally extended nodal present is one in which it would not be intelligible for reflection to enter, as all processes of cognition occur over time. In the psalm, the imaginary unit of the present might have the temporal length of a letter or a word. But by reducing our present to a pragmatically inaccessible shorter length, we do not eliminate the problem, we merely move the goalposts. Much has been said in linguistics about the lack of clear division between where one sentence ends and another begins, let alone a word or a letter. These units are typically elided in speech, despite the fact that other forms of communication, like writing, present them discretely.⁹ This thinking is applicable to the temporality of other aspects of life, like the blurring of one step into another as we walk. Our experience of these things is rhythmic, fashioned out of ongoing acts of repetition and change.¹⁰ Unless we make a conscious effort to identify them, we are unaware of the components of their rhythms. To think of the present as so small a slice of life that we can only access it conceptually seems unnecessarily reductive.

Attempting to set up an immediate present in juxtaposition to an epistemically dubitable past and future makes it difficult to understand what lived experience actually is, and holding onto such distinctions becomes untenable. We might partition the timeline into past and future via reflection, interpret what is real or unreal through thought, but the present that we live does not feel like a movement across or with these divisions. If anything, prior to reflection there is a deep unity in time. A dichotomy of “now” and “then” cannot be found outside of a frame of reference which turns the

⁸ Dainton, B. *Temporal consciousness*.

⁹ Fromkin, V. *An introduction to language*, Chs. 6-7.

¹⁰ Lefebvre, H. *Rhythmanalysis*.

present abstract, where our “now” is intellectually constructed rather than received through direct sensation. The “present” as contrasted to an unreal past and future makes no sense beyond this frame.

Henri Bergson’s (1859-1941) theory of Duration radically inverts the Augustinian relationship between time and reality, centring his exploration on the conscious experience of time as a thing which is unified and world-building.¹¹ Bergson uses the term *Durée* (Duration) as the appellative for his theory to connote an expanded present, one which “lasts” rather than vanishes. Through its echo of *durable* (same in English), *Durée* also underscores the fact that Bergsonian time is part of the concrete. Time to him is a quasi-substance, affording the possibility of substance itself. This is because our impressions of an object are always limited: we need to recall many incomplete impressions to understand objects. Consequently, substance becomes something that is composed through time, requiring an unthinking process of anticipation and recollection to be understandable. The hidden facets of three-dimensional objects are posited rather than known, yet the postulation of the unseen is an integral part of our perception. A vase glanced from the side gets the figurative and literal depth of its being from acts of memory and guesswork that occur before cognition. Multiple impressions of the vase are layered over one another through this pre-reflective process to create our understanding of the vase in that instant. Thus, Bergson admits diverse properties of the vase into consciousness. Physical properties like shape, colour, and texture can coexist with emotional attachments, or cultural connotations brought forth by the design. This “multiplicity” of simultaneous perceptions is underpinned by the Duration in that “there is no consciousness without memory, and no continuation of a state without the addition, to the present feeling, of the memory of past moments”.¹² The timeline thus travels with the subject, rather than the subject travelling through the timeline.

Bergson’s thesis is embedded within a philosophical debate about the perception and reality. The theory of Duration is centred around conscious experience and is in part a response to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant hypothesized that consciousness exists outside of time and space and created events and causation through its interactions with the world.¹³ Bergson wanted to establish a theory of consciousness that also privileged perception, whilst situating the human mind within both time and space.¹⁴ He thus interprets time as something that enters into conscious experience rather than existing just outside of it. Bergsonian time makes up the subject’s world and gives it form, rather than receding and disappearing as a timeline.

Bergson’s theory may seem esoteric, but from a theologically conscious standpoint only represents a return to non-linear time. The forward progression of history denoted by the real/unreal timeline is an idea rooted in how religious societies have understood human existence. The institutions of faith played a dominant role in civilisation and the formation of ideas for thousands of years. Our understandings of morality and death condition our conceptualisations of things like reality and human value, which can have downstream consequences for how we treat thought and perception.

Augustine was a Christian monk, but his interpretation rests on the notion of human agency first developed by the Zoroastrians. According to Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion, humanity is the fulcrum around which a constant battle between good and evil is fought in the universe. This

¹¹ Bergson, H. *Time and free will*.

¹² Bergson, H. *An introduction to metaphysics*.

¹³ Kant, I. *Critique of pure reason*.

¹⁴ Lawlor, L. & Moulard-Leonard, V. *Henri Bergson*.

cosmological battle was said to ultimately end in the triumph of the good.¹⁵ The anthropic centring of the good/evil dichotomy, and its introduction of eschatology or endpoint, informed the sense of human agency within Church doctrine. The idea that people are morally culpable for their actions, and that their decisions can impact their fate, provides both a destination to travel to and a means of travelling.¹⁶ Thus, time is affected by how we see the conditions of our death – evitable or inevitable, temporary or permanent – and whether we have the ability to avoid the occurrence of events, like post-mortem suffering.

By positing the future as unknowable, presentism delegitimises the role of anticipation in producing time and thus opens the way for radical, even moral change. According to Christian theology, mortal understanding of the past and future is obscured by our limited faculties. We are said not even to have comprehensive access to the present, in that we can never know the proper implications of our actions within God’s predetermined plan. Slavoj Žižek (b. 1949) uses the term *Christian Atheism* to describe the tacit reproduction of pious conceptual structures elsewhere,¹⁷ and here we can relate it to the real/unreal interpolation of chronology, which in theological terms, motivates moral action. In moving away from this distinction, Bergson actually strengthens the concept of time, and is able to deploy it to explain conscious experience, rather than parading a chronology in fact enslaved to the end.

III. Aciman and Psychoanalytics

André Aciman is best known as writer of *Call Me By Your Name* (2007), a novel and later film (2017) concerned with the romantic adventures of an adolescent boy amidst a timeless Italian summer;¹⁸ and the nascent temporality that inhabits the work, a subtle feeling of dislocation from causal sequences, later developed into his notion of the “irreal mood”. This mood thematises his book of essays, *Homo Irrealis* (2021), which uses a fiction-like style and exemplars from Aciman’s past to populate an experiential pastiche, drawn together by a singular philosophical tenet.

Irreal moods are essentially dislocated senses of time brought forth by desire. “Caught between the *no more* and the *not yet*, between *maybe* and *already*”,¹⁹ they cannot be equated to the make-believe, as it is not clear that the objects of these desires lie outside of reality. An irreal mood is not an escape, because it is unclear where the boundaries lie “between what *is* and what *isn’t*”.²⁰ Furthermore, their possibility of reification is always tantalisingly close, “between *never* and *always*”,²¹ whether talking about returning to an idyllic past, or a speculative future. A fourth difficulty in the formulation is that we cannot simply reduce the mood to a desire of something that is not there. It is a means of instantiating desire within a set place, a process of giving form to emotion rather than establishing needs, evidenced by the fact that one can fear the irreal event may never happen, and yet “sometimes [wish] it wouldn’t happen just yet.”²²

¹⁵ Watson, P. *Ideas: A history from fire to Freud*, Ch. 5.

¹⁶ Banks, S. *Dying to be*.

¹⁷ Žižek, S. Christian atheism.

¹⁸ Aciman, A. *Call me by your name*.

¹⁹ Aciman, A. *Homo Irrealis*. p. 27.

²⁰ *Homo Irrealis*. p. 7.

²¹ *Homo Irrealis*. p. 27.

²² *Homo Irrealis*. p. 6.

Aciman uses his remembrance of Paris and Alexandria to exemplify how irreal moods make up his experiences of reality:

“When I remember Alexandria, it's not only Alexandria I remember. When I remember Alexandria, I remember a place from which I liked to imagine being already elsewhere. To remember Alexandria without remembering myself longing for Paris in Alexandria is to remember wrongly. Being in Egypt was an endless process of pretending I was already out of Egypt.”²³

It seems that to Aciman, desire is constituted by a productive lack within reality. The lack stalks him wherever he travels, refuting concrete interpretation. By positing a destination, it creates an impetus, substantiating reasons for action and movement. Yet simultaneously, the lack is not counterposed to his being. The remembrance of another place does not rid oneself of being in the present, but rather constitutes it, paradoxically making up the being of the place in which he in fact is.

Aciman develops a Janusian (two-faced) interpretation of time, in which past informs present and future, present is founded on future and past, and future is projection of past, manifested in the present. There is never a singular, progressive motion to time. Instead, it is a dynamic system, whereby even the present is not wholly immediate. Aciman's example works particularly well because it demonstrates how something like nostalgia, typically considered to be a reliving of the past, does in fact have two temporal aspects. By yearning for a mythical past, we fashion that past as if it is a future we might hope to progress to. Likewise, it admits that the future is not all forward-facing. We write the past into forward vision, because anticipation is necessarily conditioned upon experience.

What one might call forward return and archaic projection are also found in *Call Me By Your Name*, as the salvage of Etruscan Greek statues prompts the introduction of deuteragonist Oliver into protagonist Elio's life.²⁴ The enlivening of history manufactures a romantic future, the being of which is in turn fashioned out of fantasies that dwell partly in the past. Even the romance itself is a dualistic striation, a bounce between pasts and futures to make the present. Elio envisages a hypothetical future with Oliver, an older man who owns a past that Elio cannot live through except vicariously. He desires that past and what it has made of the man Oliver is today, yet the want he feels establishes a realm of possibility that is ultimately in the future.

The corollary of what André Aciman expresses in both the fiction and *Homo Irrealis* is that myth sustains the way in which we live. Sexuality and romance are a fantastic avenue by which to understand the irreal mood, most obviously because they are a strong manifestation of desire. Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-81) argues that the intercalation of experience with the categories of real and unreal improperly orients the relationship between perception and reality. The Cartesian characterisation of reality as beset with epistemological difficulty incorrectly posits that there is always a fundamental essential layer which man has incomplete access to.²⁵ Such a tenet thus logically

²³ *Homo Irrealis*. p. 6.

²⁴ Aciman, A. *Call me by your name*.

²⁵ René Descartes was famously known for his *cogito ergo sum* (“I think therefore I am”), which established mind as the primordial substance of being and counterposed reality to the internal sphere thus begetting an epistemic separation between what one knows of oneself and what one knows of reality. Such scepticism was also adopted earlier by the Greek Sceptics.

manufactures the need for direct perception, a mode of epistemic access which typically takes up scientism in order to adopt progressively more refined modes of systematic inquiry. Lacan's reformulation places fantasy in front of the real as the very means of access to knowledge; rather than laying the real and unreal side by side and blaming perceptual inefficacy for failures to differentiate between the two. Fantasy, to Lacan, opens up the avenue through which the real may flow, producing coherence in the world precisely through its break from reality.²⁶ These indirect manifestations are not an obstruction of the real, but rather the very means by which humans are able to be in touch with it. The real is like a horrific but unavoidable thing.²⁷ Contained within a complex web of deferral, citation, and connotation, it must always be captured within exogenous structure, as it does not have a self-sustaining scaffold of its own. If it were impossible for Aciman to mythologise Paris, by bringing together diffuse sentiments toward the city each with a foot in both fiction and fact, there would be no basis upon which to found his experience of Paris, in person or in the mind. There would be no idyllic thoughts of Montmartre to occupy his mind in Egypt, nor a comparative basis for understanding and comprehending his experience of Alexandria. The irreal is a romanticisation of the unknown, and a deferral to a next best alternative which is always better, yet this dreamlike concept, if taken seriously, represents a philosophical revolution.

IV. Deleuze, Derrida, and Difference

Dislocation from the present is the most crucial component of the irreal mood, and to understand it better, we may turn toward 20th century philosophy. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), known for his textual analysis and phenomenology-inspired writings,²⁸ elaborated a theory of meaning whose basic premise is replicated in irreal temporality. *Différance*, connoting both difference and deferral in French, interprets the relationship between text and meaning as a constant movement away from the concrete. The signifier – say, the word – cannot be connected to what it signifies directly. Instead, a broad process of contextualisation occurs when we investigate meaning that encircles what the word *is not quite* in order to reveal what it is.²⁹ Thus we refer to synonyms and antonyms, to context and example, and by placing the word within a web of other signifiers that each have their own deferred meaning, we hopefully grasp what is signified.

By distilling Derrida's notion of *différance* to the phrase "the signifier *is not* the signified", we reveal its broader philosophical salience. The signifier and the signified have a tricky relationship, conceived together and yet not exactly coinciding. The negation that connects the two also puts tension between them, rejecting that meaning is reducible to a set of signs whilst affirming that the production of meaning comes from disjunction and separation. We could construe the relation between object and interpretation, or additionally appearance and reality, in a similar mode of productive negation. The link between the two contains difference, and yet it is a connection so intimate that it refutes direct scrutiny. Instead, difference must be used to find out what the link is not in a process of identifying what it is. Recognising where reality is left out of appearance, or where appearance mutinies against

²⁶ Žižek, S. *The function of fantasy in the Lacanian real*.

²⁷ Žižek, S. *How to read Lacan*.

²⁸ Phenomenology is the study of things exactly as they appear to us, rather than attempting to determine the essential properties of what they are.

²⁹ Derrida, J. (1963). *Cogito et histoire de la folie*.; Derrida, J. (1982). *Différance*; Derrida, J. (1967). *La Voix et le Phénomène*; Derrida, J. (1973). *Positions*; Derrida, J. (1978). *L'écriture et la différence*.

reality, is part of this process. Likewise, the space between object and interpretation is opened up when interpretation falters or the object disappears.

The placement of the human subject in time can be understood in this differential and deferral sense. The temporal being of a person is deferred much like the word according to Derrida. Rather than coinciding with ourselves, our reflective capacity directly invested in the present, the self is constituted through a reflexivity that loops through the future and past. It is inconceivable to think of ourselves without a history, yet this history is not static but a lived experience of recollection. Identifying with modes of perception and semantic construction that are contingent upon the unreal of that which is not the present, we are in fact as Aciman says, caught between the no more and not yet. We thus lead temporally irreal lives, oscillating between reality and unreality in order to constitute our being.

The work of Giles Deleuze (1925-95) places a break between the self and present by separating the temporality of the “now” into multiple, inter-constitutive layers. Deleuze’s seminal work *Difference and Repetition* unfolded a philosophy of difference which informed this perspective. He argued that studies of reality have traditionally taken difference to be comparative, a second-order concept which arises spontaneously when two entities are, figuratively speaking, placed side by side. But Deleuze wanted us to place the qualities of difference, and its complement repetition, before representation. Difference and repetition were taken to be attributes of reality, instantiated as themselves rather than the products of an image created by configuration. In moving away from theory which has its abstract basis in the image, Deleuze wanted to open philosophy to deep change. His unusual characterisation of time - as the movement of three syntheses - was based on the sentiment that “the theory of thought is like painting: it needs that revolution which took art from representation to abstraction”.³⁰

The first synthesis which makes up Deleuze’s notion of time is that of repetition. He argues that because the past is the background upon which all time occurs,³¹ all events are incontrovertibly dissimilar to one another. It is the nature of an event that each one occurs in a different context, with different precursors and thus a different determination. To use a more concrete metaphor, once one note is played on a piano the second must follow from the perspective that the first has already been played. That first note begins to set up a musical context for the second which the second cannot escape from. It can develop but it cannot radically break, as “all of the past coexists with the new present in relation to which it is now past”.³² Even if the second note played on the piano has the same length, volume, and pitch as the first, we understand the phenomena of the two notes occurring over time differently than the first alone; it is in this sense that we cannot conceive of the notes as having a shared object.

The second synthesis is the background of pasts required by the first synthesis to condition the event. What inserts itself between the first note and the second is a world of pasts. Yet this is not a realm of real pasts; as to Deleuze, such a statement is a contradiction. Inasmuch as the way that history conditions the present is not factual but rather interpretative, the second synthesis is more like a complex of possibilities than a catalogue of occurrences. It is a “pure past [that] contains every

³⁰ Deleuze, G. *Difference and repetition*. p. 276.

³¹ “the past, far from being a dimension of time, is the synthesis of all time of which the present and the future are only dimensions.” *Difference and repetition*, p. 100.

³² Deleuze, G. *Difference and repetition*. p. 100.

possible event".³³ It is the interrelation between the first synthesis and the second, a world of possibilities for the constitution of history, which gives the present its form. The current moment is thus not a representation of all that has past, but rather a coordination between the contemplative first level of time, which allows repetition and difference in the present to be conceived, and the speculative but totalising second level which provides the material that instates that repetition and difference.

The third synthesis is the engine of the future, which introduces change into time by realising possibilities. The dynamic relation of the first synthesis to the second cannot be given motion unless the progression of events can occur. Without a means by which possibility is actualised, the whole system exists in stasis, as "experience is closed upon itself containing already everything that can happen".³⁴ The potential is infinite, but we cannot give form or order to anything. Deleuze argues that the system "ceases to be a circle" when "time itself unfolds".³⁵ The future is conceivable because possibilities for the present are constantly and selectively brought into view. The fact that the possibilities which are exposed to our experience of reality are always different affirms the belief that the next moment will be different from the current one, thus making time the 'form of change'.³⁶

Deleuze argues that things of the past show up to us as "illusion[s] of the in-itself."³⁷ We think they have a determinate form, a reality which can be experienced in the present, when in fact the very condition of our remembrance is that we are recollecting them whilst not there. These "correlate[s] of representation" are problematic for a presentist notion of time because "we cannot say that [the past] was". The in-itself of the past which Deleuze touches on is thus unreal, neither real in a past present, nor real in direct correspondence with the present. The Derridean deferral finds itself in this constitution of the past through the present³⁸ because in spite of this absence of direct relation, the recollected past still pertains to the category of reality. Reminiscence cannot be written off as unreal since "it is futile to try to reconstitute the past from the presents between which it is trapped, either the present which it was or the one in relation to which it is now past".³⁹ Thus, unable to conceive of not-being or live a kind of direct being that relates solely to the current moment, we must turn to indirect being to explain human subjectivity.

V. The Other and Temporality

Deleuze opens the way for a psychoanalytic, being-focused rereading of his three syntheses of time by calling the past and its repetition in the present "the erotic effect of memory itself".⁴⁰ In placing sexual desire downstream from the reliving of potential history, he suggests that the dislocated, irreal experience of the present which he describes is a fundament of being. However, inasmuch as desire is for something outside ourselves, this erotic characterisation of time also allows the Other to be intagliated into being. We have seen in Section I that the idea of a perpetual, inescapable fantasy may help us to explain Aciman's irreal mood. If this is true, then the paradigmatic case of fantasy, its sexual

³³ Yinon. D. Change's order: On Deleuze's notion of time/ p. 211.

³⁴ Change's order: On Deleuze's notion of Time. p. 212.

³⁵ *Difference and repetition*. p. 107.

³⁶ *Difference and repetition*. p. 89.

³⁷ *Difference and repetition*. p. 108.

³⁸, "no past would ever be constituted unless it were first constituted 'at the same time' as it was present." *Difference and repetition*. p. 100.

³⁹ *Difference and repetition*. p. 100.

⁴⁰ *Difference and repetition*. p. 108.

variation, should be comparable to the enlivened potential history that Deleuze puts forward as the present. It is certainly plausible to see how we could conceive of the sexual imagination as drawing up from the well-spring of past experiences in order to project a new, unrealised future into the current present. But to argue that sexuality itself is merely the playing out of time on consciousness seems a mistake. To make sense of such an abstract statement we might think of ourselves as identities who find counterparts by recognising what we are, and thus the desirable *thing which we are not*, throughout time. But this recognition of similarity, causality, and difference between presents which Deleuze argues helps make up the character of the current moment as real⁴¹ cannot be produced by time. In order for this identification of the self and not-self which drives desire to be conceptually coherent, Otherness, or alterity, must be a fundamental part of experience. An Other, which intrudes on our being to manufacture the lack of coincidence with oneself that allows thought to wander across time and space, should be contained within subjectivity. This would be the Other that prevents the “now” from being conceived of as a single, isolable event, but rather requires it to defer to a framework of pasts. Radical temporal alterity, the continual creation of difference within time which prevents the subject from directly approaching the real, could serve as the productive negation that embeds humans within the world without allowing this relationship to be examined or made concrete. A second person, a partially inaccessible subject within our subjectivity that mediates interaction between us and the cognitive Medusa of reality, could be the node within the framework of desire that helps us build the intermediary fantasies that allow us to have experience.

If “time is the form of change”,⁴² the Other is the rudiment of change itself: as a site of difference, it is defined by heterogeneity and separation, and this can be equally problematic and productive for the self. Lacan distinguished between the big Other and little Other; the first a veridical Other, the second deceptive. The little Other is a partial projection of our internal contents onto other entities, giving them form without true difference. It thus masquerades as alter whilst actually being a configuration of ourselves.⁴³ By contrast, writers like existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) have characterised the genuine (or Lacanian big) Other as traumatic, and impossible to integrate within one’s conscious experience. In his study of being, he delineates three modes of interrelation between conscious subjects. Firstly, there is the sadistic mode, in which the Other is reduced to object – self as subject, Other as object. Secondly, we have the masochistic mode, in which oneself is reduced to object *by* the Other – self as object, Other as subject. Thirdly, we have out and out hatred, which Sartre defines as a neglect of the being of what the Other really is – a kind of out-and-out objectivity in which we really comprehend nothing. Sartre used sexual terminology for his categories because his oeuvre takes significant inspiration from the psychoanalytic preoccupation with sexual desire. Sigmund Freud (1859 - 1939) famously elaborated a system of theory dependent upon the phallus as signifier; the alterity of woman being constituted by a lack of phallus,⁴⁴ and Lacan likewise employs sexuality and sexual relations to explain general human behaviour - it is an undeniable fact that for much of the adult population, sex and sexuality not only inform one’s understanding of the world to a substantial degree, but also represent some of the strongest desires and fantasies we have.

⁴¹ “What we call the empirical character of the presents which make us up is constituted by the relations of succession and simultaneity between them, their relations of contiguity, causality, resemblance and even opposition.” *Difference and repetition*. p. 101.

⁴² *Difference and repetition*. p. 89.

⁴³ Lacan, J. *The Seminar. Book II*. “The ego in Freud's theory and in the technique of psychoanalysis, 1954-55.”

⁴⁴ Freud, S. *Three essays on the theory of sexuality*.

Sartre also uses lack and difference to problematise the Other. He famously utilises the moment at which we are caught doing something untoward, like peering through a keyhole, to exemplify the Look that the other gives us.⁴⁵ In the moment at which we are caught, we feel shame because the Other sees us as object, denigrates our status to the performer of a morally culpable action. This perception of the Other, as an autonomous agent who interacts with the world independently of us, Sartre calls “little particular crack in my universe.”⁴⁶ Yet although this Other can be observed as if it is a version of ourselves, with the same privileged outlook on human reality, Sartre’s Other can never be seen as a version of ourselves: only one of us may be human.

Lacan’s big Other is likewise defined by its exclusion from the self, unable to be fully integrated within or understood through one’s personal sphere of being. The big Other is the social presence the individual faces towards, contextualising their actions and regulating their behaviour. Whether or not we are made of the same physical materials or have the closest affectual attachments, the Other always has epistemic privilege and hosts a world which the self does have access to. It is ultimately impossible to be recognised. A subject-subject relation in which self and Other are on the same footing is thus, like reality itself, horrific. The introduction of personal difference is necessary to our very comprehension of reality, and thus Otherness is crucial to understanding our temporal placement.

Alterity is inscribed into being in that as our subjectivity is built up out of indirect and dislocated temporality, we are, like the Other, never quite what we seem to be. Humans are not determinate objects; we are shape-shifting products of change, which makes authentic recognition of ourselves a matter of embracing ambiguity.⁴⁷ This is perhaps why it is so hard to identify or even conceive of consciousness. We do not quite “know” what mental states are, as our experience cannot be reduced to an object of scientific knowledge without dissection and extrapolation.⁴⁸ It thus follows that we also fail to “know” whether other people have an experiential world like ours.⁴⁹ Yet there is an interpersonal “connective tissue” of existence which fills the space between mutually unknowable individuals with sociality and desire. Operating amongst others we identify ourselves as subject continuous throughout time, despite the fact that we have an understanding of our past and future that we do not have access to as subject. Rather, our idealisations and present-experienced visions of anterior and posterior times are a method of identifying with oneself and one’s being in the present *through* the objectified, temporally dislocated subject which is ostensibly us but in another place. Existing between the big and little Other, the Other of another time – whether a present lived somewhere else, or the life of a past or future similarly removed – is characterised by a projection of the qualities we have now (like the little Other), onto an epistemically mysterious alter version of ourselves (like the big Other) which is desirable because it cannot be accessed. When Aciman imagines himself in Paris, he objectifies himself, turns his world-conditions into a matter of interpretations of a place in which he is not, recalling both memory and impressions to construct himself as if in a mutually constitutive setting that occupies the present. But by writing all the impressions of his current memory into this figure of him, slightly removed, he projects his own perception onto a self which is not him, a human which he can identify with but not actually experience. The experiential break between the present, which enlivens reflection, and the hypothetical selves constructed by fantasy, which we

⁴⁵ Sartre, J. *Being and nothingness*. p. 259-277.

⁴⁶ *Being and nothingness*. p. 256.

⁴⁷ de Beauvoir, S. *The ethics of ambiguity*.

⁴⁸ Foucault, M. *Discipline and punish*.

⁴⁹ Avramides, A. *Other minds*.

continually inhabit as we yearn to become things which we are not, ensure that Otherness is always a part of time; the very means by which we understand ourselves.

Irreal temporality thus contains a dislocation which is reliant on a notion of oneself and other, spatiotemporally distinct subjects as linked by a Derridean deferral and fantastical identification. In a sense, the irreal vision of time is a calque for fundamental Otherness. The *is/is-not-me* makes up my reality by inserting itself into the means of perception. The *is/is-not-me* is brought about by my irreal reflections; this alter existence being the one my consciousness gives life to. Whatever past I may find in my memory is not the historical existence of me as I am now, but the me that occurred before the change that brought me here. Yet the person of the present is me neither, as it is contingent upon that collection of mythical pasts. We build identity by fashioning a dialogue with the past, a past which is dynamic because of the possibilities of interpretation. The temporality of the irreal is an Otherness writ large into being, which brings forth the capacity for us to be ourselves solely through the fantasy of our own existence.

VI. Conclusion

Glissant said that the fundamental tenet of human value is our opacity to one another.⁵⁰ We cannot know what the Other sees or how she sees it. However, we also have an opacity toward ourselves. This opacity diffuses the real, making it indirectly accessible, liveable through desiring and fantasy, yearning for mythical pasts and promised futures. We are ajar from reality in that the question of its presentation to us always involves a discursive answer.

This essay has sought to use the writings of André Aciman to inspire a new view of time that enmeshes with psychoanalysis and philosophical theory. Time has been viewed as a journey toward an end by Augustine and as a form of matter by Bergson, but what emerges from these readings of *Homo Irrealis* and Derrida, Deleuze and Lacan is time as a scaffold of the self. Aciman's understanding of nostalgia and desire have helped us see how non-present thoughts can make up the now, and through the concept of *différance* we have explained the escape from concreteness in the relation of meaning. Deleuze's contemplation and the living present developed our sense of immediacy in time as always contingent upon possible pasts. Finally, Lacan and in part Sartre gave us an interpretation of the Other in conscious experience which clarified how the construction of the irreal fantasy relates to subjecthood and being. Irreal temporality, the model of time which emerges from this, is in summary defined by an inversion of the relation of the subject to time and time to the subject. Time is, in a vein broadly similar to Bergson, an extensional thing which surrounds the subject. Subjectivity is induced by time and the ability to bundle sets of events which are experienced by disjunct alter selves into coherent wholes. Temporality is not produced by the subject. Rather, through memory and anticipation, time opens up the possibility for Otherness to be inscribed within being, and thus affords us being itself.



⁵⁰ Glissant, E. *Poetics of relation*.

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