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## Residues and Presents in Contemporary Shrinking Temporalities

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**Abstract:** Taking into consideration the inherent crisis in our experience and perception of time, we will have to ask ourselves what is the link between the way in which we engage with the “present” and with the “aesthetic” in our postmodern societies as we experience the opposing categories of the “resisting” and the “elusive”. Zygmunt Bauman believes that our “liquid culture” is marked by discontinuity and forgetting as our social realities become more and more fragmented. Frederic Jameson also mentions the ways in which “the displacement of old-fashioned industrial labor by the newer cybernetic kind” has changed continuity-based possibilities of engaging with reality. A temporality of “passive reception” rather than “agency” characterizes our possibilities of making sense of reality. It is highly important to discuss about the language of an aesthetic, cultural and subjective “present” as a possibility of creating meaning from inside categories of experience that oppose our culture of the fugitive and disengagement.

**Keywords:** Zygmunt Bauman; “Liquid Culture”; Fragment; Time; Experience; Culture; Anarchetype; Perception.

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Taking into consideration the inherent crisis in our experience and perception of time, we will have to ask ourselves what the link between the way in which we engage with the ‘present’ and with the ‘aesthetic’ is in our postmodern societies, as we experience the opposing categories of the ‘resisting’ and the ‘elusive’ at the level of representations and cultural images. Zygmunt Bauman believes that our “liquid culture” is marked by discontinuity and forgetting as our social realities become more and more fragmented. Frederic Jameson also mentions the ways in which “the displacement of old-fashioned industrial labor by the newer cybernetic kind”<sup>1</sup> has changed the way we engage with reality. A temporality of “passive reception” rather than ‘agency’ characterizes our possibilities of making sense of a preexisting reality made up of circuits that flow in and out of non-temporalized worlds. It is highly important to discuss about the language of an aesthetic, cultural and subjective ‘present’ as a possibility of creating meaning from inside categories of experience that oppose our culture of the fugitive and disengagement. That is why we will analyze the politics of residuality in connection to anarchetypal temporal narratives which are also shaped

by the constant negotiation of our vision of the 'global' as a unified temporal frame confronted with perceptions of marginality and disjointed timeframes. At a moment in which we are witnessing and discussing the emergence of a global consciousness, maybe it would also be relevant to consider anarchetypal structures by means of defining experiences of time that oppose the unity of history, the totality of time or the imaginary centeredness of the body or the self.

In the light of concepts such as residuality, distance, and fragments, we shall find clues about the ways in which the experience of the *present* (and of time in general) is shaped by an underlying aesthetic logic of cultural memory. Our discontinuous planetary community sees itself through the ways in which it defines the relationship between the personal and the collective spaces of subjectivity or between the ephemeral and the memorable. It is relevant thus to look at the interplay between the sense of fluidity and the sense of solidity (regarding the present) in a globalized world, where the memory of the private and the public self-create dissonant possibilities of perceiving the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the individual. As Fredric Jameson observed, the postmodern period is marked by "a depersonalization in terms of time"<sup>2</sup> triggered by the post-war and decolonial experience of the "bourgeois self" who was no longer safely secluded in the idea of individual destiny or a time of unique life, after having been exposed to "the multiplicity of other people."<sup>3</sup> The age of the masses and the postmodern experience of globalization have staged our encounter with a 'present' that is anonymous, plane, empty, subjectively and historically diminished. We will ask

ourselves whether we could re-envision the 'present' as an 'open' temporality defined by the multiplicity of historical and subjective meanings and by its many, distinct future possibilities. We can state from the start that by rethinking the experience of the present as an always unfinished project in-between individuality and collectivity, monument and loss, superstructure and trace we will be able to reflect on the fictional and symbolic mechanisms through which we define our place in anarchetypal pictures of time.

Zygmunt Bauman uses the phrase "culture of waste"<sup>4</sup> to characterize the 'liquid' modern world in which many of the objects of today's become tomorrow's waste. The modern world is no longer contained inside a vision of eternity giving rise to a distinct version of the fear of the obsolete. According to Bauman, "the specter of redundancy"<sup>5</sup> marks our fear of life, meaning a resisting attitude to the inherent aspects of life, such as change, rests and waste. The modern "liquid culture"<sup>6</sup> is intimately bound to this category of waste and the impossibility of envisioning a unified system that would hold together the proliferation of meanings and representations. This lack of a coherent background or system generates "an age of uncertainty" from which we would all like to escape. John Scanlan's book, *On Garbage*, also deals with the psychological relationship we do have with waste. The contemporary obsession with health, fitness and the individual body is seen as a defensive mechanism which protects us from the perspective upon the material body as a receptacle of garbage. Besides these traditional "damnations" of materiality, Scanlan notices the ways in which transitory spaces (which are

usually sanitized, neutralized and anonymous) make our own traces look back at us as garbage. Scanlan draws on Marc Augé's understanding of the *non-lieu* as a space not marked by historical or identitarian dimensions, inside which the fugitive becomes the experience of a reality that disposes of us just as we discard it in a present without traces. These threshold spaces determine not only our sense of spatial expulsion but also our experience of time, as the category of waste seems to also include an unnamed and non-particularized present that is embedded in the temporal excess or surplus neutralized by such places. As we move through these sanitized transitory public spaces the present itself becomes a rest in the larger economy of 'liquid' time. Jameson also talks about "the reduction to the body as a present of time"<sup>7</sup> which betrays our desire to escape from other dimensions of time and from ideology into a self-sufficient autonomous present that looks like a form of eternity and nontemporality. This "end of temporality" is also realized by means of a "shrinkage of existential time"<sup>8</sup> as the dimension of the past and the horizon of death have been excluded or diminished considerably in our contemporary spaces of experience.

Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of the auratic<sup>9</sup> tells us a lot about the ways in which late modernity engaged with the tension between fluidity and the idea of the *timeless* (or nontemporality) as a distinct parallel disposition of temporal reality. The idea that the 20<sup>th</sup> century's technological advancements overwrote our perceptual and aesthetic possibilities of representing the world is well-worn. What is still fascinating about Benjamin's text is that it tries to draw a distinction between the aesthetic

experience fostered by the idea of a spacial/temporal split or *distance* and the commodification of art. The auratic in arts is built by the sense of a *distance* that forces us to witness the distinction between the fleeting moment (or the subjective time of our own gaze) and a temporal "other" that is the time of someone else's artistic gesture, and which cannot be fully appropriated. The age of mass reproduction has erased that split line, creating such familiarity with a piece of art that it becomes part of the contexts of our lives, without being able to support our aesthetic gaze as an encounter with a temporal or a spatial "other". Our sensibility is now staged by the spectacle of appropriation, eluding the experience of mediation in the present and the logic of the distance that used to underlie our sense of temporality. The importance of the idea of *distance* in the philosophy of art is not the focus of this paper, but Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of Kafka's works<sup>10</sup> is also worth mentioning from this point of view. "Minor literature" is subversive only insofar it takes shelter against the dominant culture by creating possibilities of distancing the reader from ordinary concepts, embodiments and rhythms. The logic of the distance makes room for anarchetypal structures in literature or what Deleuze and Guattari call "the rhizome". Anarchetypal structures are, thus, not just a contestation of forms or ideologies, but rather a way of reinserting the sense of *distance* (as non-systemic wondering) into a confiscated, fluid present. As Corin Braga conceptualizes them, anarchetypes would be "fragments of meaning,"<sup>11</sup> potentially drawn from an initial archetype, which do not allow for their systematization into a coherent unity. Thus, anarchetypal structures in literature (and arts in

general) tend to lead us towards the margins of perceptual consciousness, forcing our attention not on the central core of cultural meanings, but rather on the *residual* and on *distance* in relation to a named or unnamed center. Then, we shall ask ourselves whether anarchetypal structures manage to realize, through fragmentation and split, that aesthetic experience opened by the encounter with a temporal “other” that marks our experience of temporal residuality inside the present. But what is the implicit idea of “the present” that we rely on and why do we need to talk about residuality in the present?

David W. Noble<sup>12</sup> traces the underlying modern belief in progress back to the old distinction between a timeful cultural world as a byproduct of human imagination and a timeless world that is “free from history,” limitations and scarcity. The reiterated promise of this second world feeds the capitalist drive of infinite expansion. Inside this frame, the present becomes a mediation between a temporality we are trapped in and a ‘timeless’ underlying time of growth and progress. It comes as no surprise then that the idea of a homogeneous and unified present has been subjected to scrutiny as more and more attention has been given to the question of an impossible totality, the idea of multiplicity and socially disjunctive temporalities. As Kaisa Kaakinen shows, “instead of a site of transition, the present is increasingly experienced as a site of disjunctions.”<sup>13</sup> Contemporaneity is no longer defined as an equal and unified anchoring point of collective perception becoming a contested concept that also shakes the foundational ideas of continuity and global community.

On the other hand, there are theories that discuss the issue of a lacking present or

a present that has shrunk due to the changes in the ways in which we experience time or historical consciousness. Among them, Alain Badiou discusses the idea that “un présent fait défaut” in relation to Modernism and Rimbaud’s famous line (*Nous ne sommes pas au monde*) that seems to proclaim the end of a sense of contemporaneity. In trying to understand the potential causes of our contemporary obsession with memory, Andreas Huyssen remembers Hermann Lübbe’s theory about our sensibility for musealization<sup>14</sup> as a modern need to compensate for the lack of lasting experiences that would secure a culturally place-bound present of the modern subject. Huyssen discusses in more depth the aspects of an “informational and perceptual overload”<sup>15</sup> that make us turn to memory for comfort, in search of a circumscribed space of subjectivity and slow-motion. Amid accelerated forms of temporality, we do look for the ‘margins’ of memory as an attempt to secure lost subjective boundaries. We could thus argue that the idea of the present becomes relevant not only as a temporal category but also as a spatial and geographical dimension of consciousness. Reality itself is turned into a ‘museum’ to map a lacking present and its non-referenced material, subjective and temporal reality.

As Peter Osborne shows, the historical present plays a fundamental role in shaping the open-ended temporal narrative of historical consciousness. The idea of a unity of historical time is constructed through narrative mediation, but inside it, the experience of the present marks the incompleteness of this mediation. Following Ricoeur, Osborne maintains the difference between ‘lived’ time and ‘cosmic’ time in order to emphasize the connection

between them: “a narrative mediation grounded, ontologically, in a temporal structure of action for which each interpretive closure opens out, simultaneously, onto the radical indeterminacy of a new beginning.”<sup>16</sup> The “openness to action” of our historical present underlies the de-totalizing experience of time, which is just an interval-phase in the larger cycle of narrative temporality that Ricoeur describes as an ‘imperfect mediation’. It is interesting to notice the way in which the present is understood to operate a fracture into the inner unity of cosmic time, making room for an autonomous ‘time of initiative’ that is not fully dependent on the reception of the past or the expectation of the future. Thus, we could argue that the category of the present is not only bound to the ideas of fluidity and redundancy as opposed to the historical time of musealization and remembrance, but rather it marks the fundamental openness and vulnerability of individual time inside the re-totalizing forces of ‘cosmic’ time. The experience of the present is like an indispensable imperfection inside the internal unity of a shared historical time. We might say that the popular idea of “risk-taking” in mainstream narratives or self-help books is an attempt at rediscovering the temporal category of the present as an anarchetypal and autonomous ‘space of experience.’ Concepts such as the “anti-monumental” and “loose space”<sup>17</sup> (understood as a transformation of public space through individual or collective free gestures of expression or remembrance) also reveal our need to reaffirm the present inside improvised memorials or unstructured threshold spaces. The looseness of public space and the affirmation of time as ‘openness’

are usually characterized by risk, anonymity and unplanned encounters.

As Patrick H. Hutton observes, the notion of history as unitary shared cosmological time loses its meaning in the post-war era, as a coherent narrative about western progress is no longer possible. Precisely because of this, the relationship between past and present is no longer thought in terms of a narrative to be uncovered from the depths of time<sup>18</sup>. Our century’s obsession with memory emerges out of this uncertainty regarding historical time. The postmodern concept of memory has an in-built idea of restoring ‘long-forgotten’ aspects of our past, compensating for the loss of a historical unified narrative. The plurality of lost worlds replaces the unified story of ‘cosmic’ time as identity becomes no longer solely narrative-bound, but rather associated with the idea of a fathomless loss that needs to be made up for in the present:

„In the midst of a time of uncertainty, when the near past disappointed and the future promised diminished expectations, historians looked back into their own heritage for places of memory to which they could secure the historical moorings of the present age. The past was of interest not as a seedbed for a unified narrative of human progress but rather for the fathomless pluralism from which lost worlds might be drawn.”<sup>19</sup>

We would like to argue that the idea of an identity that draws on empty places, losses or the blurred areas of historical narratives might be characteristic for the ways in which we understand the symptomatology of post-culture. According to George

Steiner, “postculture”<sup>20</sup> contains a crisis of the modern world that is built on the decadence of memory, fragmentarity, contradictory temporalities, *ennui* and inbuilt amnesia. Steiner shows that the feeling of *ennui* is triggered by the industrial and bourgeois values that have replaced intellectual and revolutionary values. The feeling of *ennui* might also be regarded in relation to the shrinking of the experience of the present that we mentioned. Thus, our contemporary relationship to the past is also articulated in terms of this feeling of *ennui* that draws our attention to a geography of ‘vacuole’ temporalities and spaces where the subjective present appears as a residue of lost historical times. The experience of residual temporality marks our contemporary culture’s musealization drives that aim at re-configuring narratives of the past in the name of an “incomplete” present. As Marianne Hirsch shows, the ways in which postmemory invests the past into the present are not dictated “by recall, but by imaginative investment, projection and creation.”<sup>21</sup> Hirsch argues that, if we inherit memories and narratives that precede our consciousness, individual life stories seem to be displaced. Thus, life stories of the ‘present’ are reaffirmed by means of a cultural recollection process that emphasizes incomplete narrative constructions, blanks and rests as part of a larger creative mediation of memory. The blanks and residues in historical time are the cultural spaces that make room for subjective presents. Ultimately, our passion for lost histories and objects is characteristic for our need to build a sense of time that does not exclude the de-totalized, ‘open’ time of the present. This sense of time is deeply associated to anarchetypal structures that embrace fragments of meaning, the

hybridization of temporalities, the looseness of space, etc.

In *Le Temps en ruines*, Marc Augé also discusses this modern ‘flawed’ sense of time that lacks the capacity of sustaining the experience of the present, while enjoying *l’inactuel* and the sense of a time without object. The musealization drive we have discussed in relation to our “liquid culture” can be better understood by means of what Augé calls *jouissance de l’inactuel*<sup>22</sup> which describes our fascination with the idea of a time that does not belong to history or to the present and which is rather in-between temporalities, just like ruins are. This suspended interval time or the sense of “pure” time as lack of actuality makes us think about a certain need of our contemporary digital culture to counteract the sense of fluidity, discontinuity and the experience of a shrinking present with the aesthetic elaboration of *distance* and inactuality, or, in Benjamin’s view, the auratic. This aesthetic experience of *distance* or atemporality affirms a subjective position in the present and manages to give a distinct meaning to the experience of a historically marginal or residual temporality. In other words, it is by means of projecting a distance or creating a dis-junction inside our perception of temporal narratives that we succeed in resisting the “commodified recycling” of the past and envisioning a cultural and subjective space for the present as fundamentally relational and not transitional.

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## NOTES

1. Frederic Jameson, "The End of Temporality", in *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Summer 2003), p. 702.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 710.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 709.
4. Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2004.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
6. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007.
7. Frederic Jameson, "End of Temporality", p. 712.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 708.
9. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (eds.), *The Work of art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2008 (1935).
10. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Kafka : pour une littérature mineure*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1975.
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12. David W. Noble, *Debating the End of History: The Marketplace, Utopia and the Fragmentation of Intellectual Life*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
13. Kaisa Kaakinen, *Comparative Literature and the Historical Imaginary: Reading Conrad, Weiss, Sebald*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 12.
14. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 22.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
16. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London, Verso, 1995, p. 53.
17. Karen A. Franck, Quentin Stevens (editors), *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, London, Routledge, 2007.
18. Patrick H. Hutton, *The Memory Phenomenon in the Contemporary Historical Writing*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 11.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
20. George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture*, Yale University Press, London, 1971.
21. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 5.
22. Marc Augé, *Le temps en ruines*, Galilée, Paris 2003, p. 47.