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Conceptualizing Temporal Perception Through Henri Bergson's 'Duration' in Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*

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Abstract

Time perception constitutes a central thematic concern in Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004), a play that follows Lisa as her psychological condition occurs between the realities of the external world and the magical realm of Dissocia. This study examines the dynamics of time perception by contrasting measured, or mechanical time with experienced, or psychological one. It aims to identify Henri Bergson's philosophical concept of "duration" as a framework for analyzing how the protagonist's subjective consciousness affects the main character's view of time and how she experiences duration in her mind through recollecting the past. It explores that true time cannot be spatially limited within a fixed sequence of measured moments, but it is a qualitative, diverse, and rooted in inner existence. The play dramatically emphasizes that subjective perception of time is more experiential than measurable by presenting a character who is in a state of internal duality. Bergson's duration concludes that Neilson's play discloses those two opposing temporal modes of being rather than oneiric and realistic ones.

Key words: Anthony Neilson, duration, Henri Bergson, memory, temporal perception

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تصور الإدراك الزمني من خلال نظرية "الديمومة" ل هنري بيرغسون في مسرحية عالم ديسوسيا الرائع لأنتوني نيلسون

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الكلية التربوية المفتوحة، مركز صلاح الدين، فرع سامراء، سامراء، العراق

المستخلص

يُشكّل إدراك الزمن محوراً أساسياً في مسرحية "عالم ديسوسيا الرائع" (2004) لأنتوني نيلسون، التي تروي قصة ليزا وحالتها النفسية المتأرجحة بين واقع العالم الخارجي وعالم ديسوسيا السحري. تتناول هذه الدراسة ديناميكيات إدراك الزمن من خلال مقارنة الزمن المقاس، أو الميكانيكي، بالزمن المُعاش، أو النفسي. وتهدف إلى تحديد مفهوم هنري بيرغسون الفلسفي عن "المدة" كإطار لتحليل كيفية تأثير الوعي الذاتي للبطل على نظرتها للزمن، وكيف تختبر هي المدة في ذهنها من خلال استرجاع الماضي. وتستكشف الدراسة أن الزمن الحقيقي لا يمكن حصره مكانياً ضمن تسلسل ثابت من اللحظات المقاسة، بل هو نوعي ومتنوع ومتجذر في الوجود الداخلي. وتؤكد المسرحية بشكلٍ درامي على أن الإدراك الذاتي للزمن تجريبي أكثر منه قابل للقياس، وذلك من خلال تقديم شخصية تعيش حالة من الازدواجية الداخلية. يخلص بيرجسون إلى أن مسرحية نيلسون تكشف عن هذين النمطين الزمنيين المتعارضين للوجود بدلاً من النمطين الحلمي والواقعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أنتوني نيلسون، الديمومة، هنري بيرجسون، الذاكرة، الإدراك الزمني

Introduction

A Scottish playwright and director, Anthony Neilson (1967-) is renowned for his thought-provoking plays that breaks away from classical theatrical conventions. His plays are distinguished by their unadulterated passion, dark humor, and psychological inquiry. These subjects frequently include violence, mental illness, and existential fear. The in-yer-face theater movement, which first appeared in the 1990s and is characterized by its aggressive manner, frank material, and willingness to address taboo themes, is often associated with Neilson's work (Sierz, 2007).

One of Henry Neilson's most acclaimed works is *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, a play that vividly illustrates his unique approach to storytelling. Neilson masterfully combines the absurd with the poignant, skillfully transitioning between various tones and

genres within a single play. This approach makes his works both challenging and profoundly impact. His writing is often nonlinear, emphasizing psychological complexity and emotional authenticity, which encourages audiences to confront intricate and sometimes unsettling themes in a manner that is both intellectually stimulating, and emotionally powerful. (Bağırlar, 2019)

The Wonderful World of Dissocia is structured in two distinct and contrasting acts, each representing different facets of Lisa's experience with mental health. In the first act, the audience is introduced to Dissocia, a bizarre and surreal world that exists only in magical reality. Here, time behaves remarkably off beat accompanied by the absence of the real-world logic. This world, with all its peculiar inhabitants and unpredictable rules, mirrors the disordered state of Lisa's mind where her perception of time and reality is fundamentally altered. The second act highly contrasts with the first, shifting the scene back to the hospital world, where time is linear and structured, and the cranky, dreamlike elements of Dissocia are replaced with the cold, clinical environment of a hospital room. (Cassidy, 2013)

Henri Bergson's "duration" is used to analyze the mutual relation between time and perception which is theatrically represented in the play. Lisa's dissociative state is seen as a radical immersion in 'duration' since she lives in a continuous, experiential present where reality bends, escaping the quantitative time of the outside world. This shows the continuity of Lisa's duration as Bergson believes that "evolution" of a living being, implies a "continual" recording of duration, a "persistence" of the past in the present (Bergson, 1991, p.208). In act1, time is no longer a reliable measure, but a fluid and mutable concept that reflects the chaotic nature of Lisa's inner world. This disruption of time highlights the instability of her perception, as she navigates through a reality that is constantly shifting and uncertain. The play presents time as a thematic device by creating a narrative that explores the fluidity of perception within the subjective nature of time, and the indefinite expectations of the human mind using it to depict the fragmentation of Lisa and to underscore the challenges of living with mental illness in a world that demands a linear and coherent experience of time (Bağırlar, 2019).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive literary methodology grounded in close textual literary analysis. It examines Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of*

Dissocia through the theoretical lens of Henry Bergson's concept of Duration to explore subjective time perception. It focuses on showing the difference between the psychological time and the measured one.

Theoretical Framework

Over the ages, numerous thinkers have focused on time as a basic component of life in the universe. Because of its elusiveness, it has been a constant source of conundrum. This problem was the focus of the writings of many philosophers like Heraclitus, Aristotle, and Augustine, and it was linked to important theories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The concept of time has also been directly or indirectly addressed by advanced discoveries in science. The "central problem of all ontology" is the reason why time is still a mysterious reality, despite progress in technology and the study of the concept itself. (Bağırlar, 2019)

In Chapter Two of *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (2011) which was published in 1889, Henri Bergson (1859–1941) challenges those established metaphysical and scientific practices by radically redefining time. He distinguishes between clock-time, which is spatial, divisible, and quantitative, and the time that is qualitative or so he called 'duration' and defined it as the "immediate flow of lived experiences." (Bergson, 2011, p.120) Bergson argues that we involuntarily express duration in terms of space. He notices how we naturally employ spatial analogies to define time, referring to it as long or short, as if it were a line that could be measured in distances or dimension, or as if length were an attribute of time. His critique centers on the idea that modern cognition has confused time and place. He claims that this concept of time is not only artificial, but also misleading when used to the study of consciousness and freedom. (Bergson, 2011, p.120)

Bergson critiques the homogeneous time used in science and logic promoting by scientific theories where time is broken into equal, similar and measurable moments or units (like ticks of a clock) that advance equally. He argues that this is just a simulation, a spatial mimicry of real, lived succession. Time for Bergson is dynamic, not static and indivisible. It is "the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances." (Bergson, 2011, p.125) His concept of duration is not an abstract metaphysical conjecture; rather it captures the instantaneous experience of consciousness where time is experienced, felt, and irreducibly qualitative.

Bergson suggests that duration is not a collection of discrete mental states but a qualitative unfolding where each moment interpenetrates with the past and contributes to an evolving sense of self. Duration is as living flow is lost if you evaluate it in an immobile frame. For Bergson, memory is a constant source of information that gives our perception a purpose and context. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish perception without memory since each experience of perceiving or feeling is imbued with some remnants of prior events; in other words, all perception is essentially a perception throughout memory. He says that memory “constitutes the principal contribution of individual consciousness in perception, the subjective side of our knowledge of things. “(Bergson, 1991, p. 31)

The only way to grasp duration is to look into the deepest recesses of your mind. It's about experiencing, not about quantifying. Our inner time permeates every moment, transcends clock units, and is constantly evolving. Your anticipation for tomorrow, for instance, affect your current mood, and your memories of yesterday affect your current attitude. They are a continuous flow rather than discrete components. (Bergson, 2007, p.3)

This distinction between inner and outer time has crucial implications for psychology and the philosophy of mind. Bergson criticizes psychological methods that attempt to measure emotions, thoughts, and decisions as if they were fixed entities, instead he emphasize the very nature of inner life which is in constant flux. Consciousness is not composed of stable, countable units of thought or feeling, but is instead a dynamic process where each moment carries within it the residues of all previous moments. (Bergson, 2011, 125) His views challenge the deterministic frameworks of scientific psychology, which seek to explain human behavior through causal mechanisms and measurable stimuli.

By emphasizing duration, Bergson (2011) lays the groundwork for his broader defense of free will, which he takes up in Chapter of Three *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. If time is spatialized and human actions are seen as occurring in a mechanical succession, then freedom becomes impossible and every effect must have a predictable cause. Thus, human behavior is thought to be dictated by outside factors, and future events are predicted from past events. Bergson defies that deterministic view because time is duration and present moment is uncertain and consequently people feel free over time. Moreover, consciousness has the freedom to create, evolve and act unpredictably. This creativity for Bergson is not randomness but the organic development of the self through lived experience. He contends that duration is the source of creativity and innovation, when spontaneity and true freedom are permitted and past experiences inform but do not compel present acts. (Bergson, 2007)

Discussion

The Wonderful World of Dissocia opens with the main character, Lisa Jones, a young woman sitting absent minded while playing her guitar impassively and feeling detached from reality until she is approached by a mysterious Swiss watchmaker, Victor Hesse, who comes to 'discuss her wristwatch' which is going slow. He informs her that she has lost an hour of her life and must journey to a place called Dissocia to 'recover her balance.' At first Victor seems to be no more than a 'voice in her head' because all his speech is either being recorded or sometimes told through a mike that comes from a letter box off stage. However, Lisa is still afraid of the voice since Victor is heard but not seen. After that, a conversation between him and Lisa is started concerning the importance of the watch as an indicator of tangible time. He opposes Lisa's belief that it is 'just a watch' by saying; "Every clock face, every timepiece, reveals to him the story of its owner; its hour hand mourns their losses, its minute hand describes their lives, its second-hand sings to him of every moment spent in bliss." (Neilson, 2004, p.174)

That very first serious discussion about time drags the attention about time as a prominent figure in the play along with Lisa's last hour which will be her major premonition all along the first act. Victor's previous speech conveys the idea that a clock is more than just an instrument to measure time, but it becomes a symbolic storyteller. Each hand of the clock represents an aspect of its owner's life. The hour hand symbolizes significant losses or hardships, reflecting the deeper and slower moving experiences of sorrow. The minute hand captures the rhythm of their daily lives, narrating the ordinary and extraordinary moments that make up their journey while the second hand highlights fleeting but cherished moments of happiness, singing of the joys that pass quickly yet leave a lasting impression. This suggests that timepieces hold a connection to human experiences, with each tick telling a fragment of the story of the person who owns or interacts with it. Bergson's concept of duration can offer valuable insights into understanding Victor's speech since duration exists within consciousness and is shaped by individual perception, memory, and emotion. According to Bergson, "Duration exists only for us and on account of the interpenetration of our conscious states." (Bergson, 2011, p. 116). He shifts the focus from external measurements of time to the inner reality of how time is lived and felt.

Henry Bergson claims in the introduction of *The Creative Mind* that “time is what is happening, and more than that, it is what causes everything to happen.” (Bergson, 2007, p. 2) Victor asks Lisa whether her life has lately been unbalanced and she answers positively. Then he says; “You’ve become sluggish, unfocused, and apathetic. You’ve neglected your friends, your family, your . . . relationship?” (Neilson, 2004, p.176). In her inner feeling she realized that her life is out of control. Victor presents a reasonable argument about losing the hour during her last journey to Europe made her life one hour slower than real time which is supposed to indicate by her watch. Lisa is now convinced that the reason behind her chaotic life and the way she has been acting recently is definitely the lost hour. It is this hour that has thrown her off balance, leading to her current state of distress. “I don’t care about anyone but myself that I was just being lazy and miserable, but I wasn’t! It wasn’t my fault! I just lost an hour along the way!” (Neilson, 2004, p.176). Losing time can signify a deeper alienation from one’s sense of self or purpose. People who feel they’ve lost time may struggle with their identity or a sense of worthlessness. Lisa insists to restore balance and order to her life and fix this temporal disturbance. Victor tells her that the only way to get the lost hour is by travelling to Dissocia, a country she can move to through 'an elevator'.

According to Bergson, our conscious experience or temporal perspective interacts with the unconscious, which is a dynamic, changing entity rather than a static repository. Experiences and memories are not stored as separate things but rather are linked dynamic things that affect us no matter how long we live. The past coexists with the present and goes beyond mere than recollection. Lisa is a Bergsonian "dreamer" because of her fascination with the past. Most significantly, she reflects Bergson's opinion that the present must be both a sense of the recent past and a forecast of the recent future. (Bergson, 1991, p. 86) The quest for the "lost hour" in Dissocia is central to Lisa's experience in this world. This lost hour represents more than just a fragment of time; it symbolizes a part of her life that she feels she has once lost control over. She asserts the importance of losing that hour by saying, “It’s supposed to be just one hour, just a tiny fragment of time. But when it slipped away, everything fell apart.” (Neilson, 2004, p. 176) She can feel its absence in every second, every minute in her disordered life. This quest represents something important that has gone missing from her memory. The past remains within her as a deep and inseparable emotional loss or trauma that Lisa has yet to properly absorb. Therefore, it

is possible to interpret her dissociative journey to Dissocia as a plunge into these deeper layers of duration, where the past and present converge in peculiar, nonlinear way. Reality is only in the duration of individuals and it is the only way to achieve freedom.

Bergson (1991) views consciousness as deeply rooted in duration and memory. Even the seemingly forgotten parts of our past remain within us. Even if they are not actively recalled, memory images persist over time. The intersection of the past, present, and future is what defines this duration's continuity, flow, and heterogeneity. Lisa's search for the lost hour becomes a means of seeking closure for unresolved pieces of her history or regaining a sense of control and balance in her present and future life, even if it is through an imaginary and fantastical journey. Lisa thinks that maybe by putting everything back in its rightful place, only then, she would finally feel whole again. Lost hour reflects the desire to recover the past to correct something. This 'search' is comprehended literally and metaphorically. By immersing herself in a world where time is not bound by reality, Lisa is able to detach or disengage from the overwhelming stress of her actual life. This escapism into a time that is flexible and malleable allows her to momentarily cope with her mental health struggles, though it ultimately cannot offer a lasting solution.

In literature with a particular perspective, there is a propensity toward so-called narrative chaos. Neilson intentionally disrupts the chronological storyline with character experiences or foreshadows. (Sierz, 2007) This play depicts Dissocia as a strange, fantastical world governed by its own eccentric logic, resembling a dream or a reflection of Lisa's fragmented perception. Lisa describes it saying 'It's quite an odd place but the people are nice and the sky is really colourful and hopefully' (Neilson, 2004, p.197) The cast of strange and surreal characters whom Lisa encounters represent dormant memories and fears, which suddenly surface in ludicrous, dreamlike forms. According to Bergsonian theory, they are "latent memories" brought to life, dramatized as durational living elements as opposed to rational narrative events. Among these characters are the Guardians of Insecurity, the Black Dog King, and unsettling yet vibrant characters like Jane and the Polar Bear, all of whom contribute to the chaotic and confusing nature of Dissocia. Lisa faces many trials and temptations in this strange world, which often derail her from her mission. The environment is saturated with dark humor and absurdity, highlighting how Dissocia represents a form of escapism and a manifestation of Lisa's inner turmoil (Biçer, 2018).

Bergson claims that ‘the measuring of time never deals with duration as duration; what is counted is only a certain number of extremities of intervals, or moments, in short virtual halts in time.’ (Bergson, 2007, p.3) In the world of Dissocia, every temporal exponent enhances the idea that time can’t be measured mechanically or separated from one’s inner experiences. It behaves in unpredictable ways; clocks turn backward, minutes lengthen into hours, and the typical course of events is reversed. Characters in Dissocia can linger in the moments they choose, to stretch out the good and shrink away the bad. This casts doubt on time's accuracy as an indicator of reality and calls into question the idea that time is a static, unchanging force depending on one’s perspective and experience.

Time and memories that seem to be lost are not completely erased. The entirety of a person's past is stored in the unconscious as what Bergson refers to as "integral" or "pure memory" (Bergson, 1991, p. 64). Bergson argues that every aspect of one's past continuously applies stress at the deepest levels of the unconscious guiding and subtly influencing one's contemporary consciousness and perception, even as he regularly emphasizes the relative ‘powerlessness’ of this unconscious memory. As he writes in *Matter and Memory*, “Our whole past mental life conditions our present state, without determining it in a necessary way; whole also it reveals itself in our character, although none of its past states are manifested in character explicitly.” (Bergson, 1991, p. 64)

Dissocia's unpredictable and illogical nature reflects Lisa's fragmented nature where past thoughts give way to dreams, fears, and desires unconstrained by the rules of the real world. Act 1 as a whole could be interpreted as a dream. The unconscious mind is not as limited in dreams as it is in waking life, allowing strange and fantastical events to occur. Bergson introduces dreams as free flow of interlaced memory images that resist the suppressed feelings or needs. This view in fact reinforces his theory of duration since time in dreams is relatively long comparing with the measured time which could be seconds or minutes. In dreams time doesn’t submit to mathematical order. This is reflected in Lisa's adventure as she navigates a universe in which reality is constantly changing and cause and effect are unrelated. (Cassidy, 2013).

According to Bergson (2011), a distinguishing feature of time is its objectivity and subjectivity. Time is unique to each individual and is influenced by a variety of elements such as viewpoint, age, etc. However, it is also psychological, which means it is dependent on personal aspects and attitudes and exists at a range of consciousness, senses and emotions. Since time is more than just an indicator of chronological progression, it virtually has a personality and set of whims of its own. In fact, it is treated like a character in

Dissocia. The thought that Lisa is "stuck" in time raises questions about how one's interaction with time affects time itself and blurs the boundaries between subjective experience and objective truth. As a subjective experience influenced by Lisa's mental state, time in Dissocia is neither a constant nor objective metric, it is not measured but lived. She reflects on her lost hour saying:

An hour doesn't mean

So very much in itself

But it's my hour

And it means a lot

To me (Neilson, 2004, p.198)

Temporal fragmentation is furthered by the characters she meets in Dissocia, including the forgetful clockwork king, the bewildered watchmaker, and the ticking clock. Strange characters that emerge from Lisa's innermost thoughts abound in this world. One of those characters is Britney, the owner of a shop called 'Lost Property' where Lisa tries to find her lost hour. During their talk Brittany asks Lisa:

Britney Well, do you feel heavier since you lost it?

Lisa Actually, yes, I do.

Britney So it must be light. If it's light it's daytime. And if it's daytime, it must be big.

Lisa Why?

Britney Because the small hours are at night. So, it's a big hour, in the day – was it thick or thin?

Lisa I can't answer that. Hours aren't thick or thin . . .

Britney All right, then – was it dense or was it fine?

Lisa That's just as stupid, if not more so.

Britney Not at all. Have you never heard of someone's finest hour? (Neilson, 2004, p.221)

Britney comments on the importance of the hour saying "an hour is a source of tremendous energy; it generates life and generates death." (Neilson, 2004, p.228) This idea about time reflects Bergson's disapproval of using spatial metaphors or visualizing time like a line that can be measured or divided. Moreover, it suggests that time, as experienced by individuals, is deeply tied to their consciousness, and that linear time is more of a social construct than an inherent reality.

Bergson defines consciousness as a collection of "different planes" or "various tones of mental life," meaning that human psychological perception occurs at multiple

levels. He claims that our mental lives unfold in various levels of approach to reality, depending on the degree of our "attention to life," which affects whether consciousness operates at an elevated introspective or a lower, impulsive level. (Bergson, 1991, p. 240) In sharp contrast to the first act, the second act takes place in the real world, set in a hospital where Lisa is receiving treatment for her mental illness. The tone undergoes a significant shift, moving from the fantastical and chaotic to the ordinary and clinical that reflects the subjective significance of time itself. In hospital she is either lies or sleeps in her bed where she is powerless unlike her powerful role in Dissocia as the queen who is going to protect its people from the attack of the Black Dog King. While she is now more connected to reality, a lingering sense of loss from leaving Dissocia remains, highlighting the complexity and difficulty of the journey toward mental wellness. Accompanied by fragmented perception of time along with a sensation of disconnect about the actual situation. (Visser, 2011)

Duration is the lived experience of time as it unfolds in consciousness. It could feel fast, slow, or dense, depending on what happened in it. That adds quality to what Bergson wants us to focus on. The most vulnerable state of Lisa's perception is depicted in the hospital. The fluid and loose sensation of time in Dissocia contrasts sharply with the rigid structure of time in the real world. The dissonance between Lisa's internal experience and the outside world she must contend with is highlighted by this contrast. Even as Lisa tries to make sense of her experiences, Act 2 portrays time as an unforgiving, ever-present force that compels order again. That rigorous routines and the sense of static time in the hospital are in direct opposition to the fluid and surreal nature of time in Dissocia where only there she finally finds her balance. (Biçer, 2018)

Lisa experiences a sense of loss and alienation during her hospital stay. Vince, her friend who shows up only at the end of Act 2, told her that "you say you don't mean to. But you know what happens when you come off your medication. This happens. Sooner or later, you end up here." (Neilson, 2004, p.246) That could imply that Lisa on purpose chooses to neglect her medication to relive a temporal disassociation from reality each time she wants to reclaim the past. The treatment suppresses the extraordinary vivid experiences she had in Dissocia, even though it is essential to reintegrate her into society. The dull, colorless routine that takes the place of her sense of wonder and imagination emphasizes the costs associated with taking care of her mental health. Lisa is thrown into the linear daily routine of her life where there is no change. All the sixteen scenes of act 2 starts with lights up and ends with lights down. It is a circadian repeated rhythmic sort of life where sleeping and

waking are the maximum effort that Lisa has to make. The only sound to be heard is the one of nurse's footsteps, either approaching or walking away.

The dramatic transition from Dissocia to the hospital is abrupt. This shift represents clock-time and highlights the imposition of structured, objective time on Lisa's perception. The juxtaposition of the two acts serves to assure that Lisa is in a kind of duality within herself. The second act is divided into days, a day for each scene while time in Dissocia is fused with no distinct hours or days. Act 1 is longer despite the absence of a linear, measured time and it is about the past while act 2 is about the present. Lisa is clinging to time as a source of personal happiness and salvation by living her past in her present, 'Dissocia is the life your hour generated'. (Neilson, 2004, 228) It is duration that allows her to visit the past whenever she needs. (Bağırlar, 2019)

Conclusion

The Wonderful World of Dissocia tells a captivating story where Henri Bergson's philosophy of duration and Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* meet at a crucial juncture. Both want to give back the living experience its sentimental dimension and value by making time be felt from within, and only then the qualitative meaning about the time is revealed. Bergson's 'duration' helps in confirming the subjectivity of time perception which has a more challenging structure, wider scope, and tremendously unreal level in consciousness and consequently in the text as its result. The objective and stable features of time are altered in the play into subjective, multi-layered, and unpredictable enhanced by an intricate plot and a chaotic narrative framework. Act one transports the audience to the fanciful world of Dissocia, where time appears elastic and events develop in a dreamlike, non-linear form. Act two shows a spatialized, restricted and linear time that gives way to more ordered yet suppressed consciousness. The play's two-act structure manifests contradicted aspect of time that highlights Lisa's conflicting temporal perception which dramatically reflects Bergson's 'duration'.

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