

Narrative Time and Speculative Fiction: Reflection of Social Conditions in Temporal Implications

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Abstract: Speculative fiction, with elements of fantasy integral to narrative, has developed as a literary genre with some underlying postulates and textual strategies that challenge the boundaries of narrative realism. It is often examined as a search for the definition of human beings and their status in the universe and an impact of scientific and technological advances upon human beings. It is believed that the world view created by development of science and technology at a particular period influences the choices made for various narrative devices, such as point of view, narrative time sequence, plot structure, character and language in speculative fiction. This paper examines temporal implications of the plots in two speculative fiction novels, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1972) and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), written in two different periods which are about ten years apart. Using Ricoeur's (2002) distinction between *episodic* and *configurational* dimensions for the conception of time, the paper aims to uncover different ways of using narrative temporality in the configuration of plots in these two novels, and relate these differences to broader social conditions happening at the two respective stages in the postmodern age.

Key words: Narrative Time; Plot; Temporal Implications; Social Conditions, Speculative Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Speculative fiction, as a literary genre, depicts alternative or possible conditions which are well-rooted in our contemporary society. Through its imaginary world, which closely resembles our own, it often shows the impact of scientific and technological advances upon human beings, and helps us understand better the definition of human beings and their status in the society and the universe. One of the effects of the rapid development in such fields as information technology and mass media is on our experience of time. Given that "time is one of the most fundamental parameters through which narrative as a genre is organized and understood", and that "narrative can be characterized as the mode by which we mediate and negotiate human temporality" (Heise, 1997, p. 47), an examination of temporal implications in the

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speculative fiction could be one way of understanding the society's consciousness of time at a particular period in which the narrative is created.

However, as pointed out by Heise (1997) in her study on time, narrative, and postmodernism, an analysis of the relation of literary forms to their social and cultural context is complicated by the fact that "postmodern literature interacts not only with its contemporary environment, but must also engage with its own genre-specific history" (5). Therefore, claiming a relationship between narrative time and the contemporary conception of time represented in speculative fiction does not imply that these literary works reflect social, economic or material changes in any simple sense. Moreover, the primary objective of a speculative fiction novel, for example, may not be the experimentation with narrative time in highly innovative ways, but may involve the emphasis on other narrative elements, such as introducing new ways of handling characters and descriptions. This paper examines the temporal implications of plots in two speculative fiction novels written in two different periods which are about ten years apart, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1972) and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Through an analysis of different conceptions of time implied in the configuration of plots in these two novels, the study aims to find out how two different uses of time can reflect two different social ideologies of the respective stages in the postmodern age.

1. THE CONCEPT OF TIME AND NARRATIVE TEMPORALITY

Time, with its link both to the physical world and to our perception of the world, has been regarded as a complex concept. Although the concept of time is so diffuse that it is practically difficult, if not impossible, to define, it remains as a fundamentally important category for human beings. With its link to our perception of the world, "our perception of time varies", and "one of the factors that creates this variation is precisely the age in which we live" (Lothe, 2000, p. 49). With literature providing a continual response to these changes, the conception of time has become part of the thematics of literary texts, and an important motif in fictional prose.

In narratology, the methods of narrative theory inspired by modern linguistics (Fludernik, 2009), time in narrative fiction can be understood as the chronological relation between story and discourse. Just as the concept of time is linked to the physical world, "narrative time is related to narrative space, i.e. the fictional universe which the text presents through its narrative discourse" (Lothe, 2000, p. 49). This relationship between narrative time and narrative space allows authors of fiction to use different forms of narrative time representation in depicting the universe and the objects that they wish to look like.

On this basis, narrative time can be elucidated in three main terms: "*Order*", "*Duration*" and "*Frequency*" (Genette, 2002, p. 24). According to Genette (2002), order can be understood as the temporal arrangement of events in the story in relation to the presentation of these events in the narrative discourse; duration stands in a relationship to the length of the text that presents the story; and frequency refers to the relationship between how many times an event occurs in the story and how many times it is narrated.

Pointing out the mutually constitutive nature of temporality and plot, Ricoeur (2002) suggests a more complex and dynamic conception of time in narrative. He argues that "the ordinary representation of time as a linear series of 'now' hides the true constitution of time" (Ricoeur, 2002, p. 36). In Richardson's (2002) words, for Ricoeur, time in narrative is "never merely a linear sequence of discreet, successive instants, but an emplotted, dialectical whole that is projected toward a definite future and is envisaged through past experience" (12). With his hypothesis on the reciprocal relationship between temporality and narrativity, Ricoeur correlates the stages of the analysis of narrative with the different depths in the analysis of time. Plot is regarded as "the most relevant for an investigation of the temporal implications of narrativity" since it places us at "the crossing point of temporality and narrativity" (Ricoeur, 2002, p. 34, 36).

In his analysis on the temporal implication of the plot, Ricoeur (2001) proposes two-fold structure: "*episodic dimension*" and "*configurational dimension*" (44). In episodic dimension, narrative time tends

towards “the linear representation of time” in several ways with “episodes constituting an open-ended series of events”, and “the episodes follow one another in accordance with the irreversible order of time” (Ricoeur, 2001, p. 44). In configurational dimension, on the other hand, “plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events”, and “establishes human action not only within time but within memory” (Ricoeur, 2002, p. 45). It is asserted that every narrative combines these two dimensions in various proportions, “one chronological and the other nonchronological” (Ricoeur, 2001, p. 43).

Ricoeur’s two fold structure for the temporal implication of the plot in narrative corresponds to the two different conceptions of time. In the linear representation of time, time is absolute and objective, which flows continuously from the past forward into the future, which Sadler (1984) regarded as “the logical outcome of a mechanistic theory of the universe” (8). In the configurational representation of time, with a higher level of non-chronological models and codes, time is no longer absolute, but subjective, fragmented and related to the system to which it is referred. This conception of time can be identified as “a relativistic concept of time” (Sadler, 1984, p. 76), or “an understanding of time derived from a particular type of scientific philosophy, which combines contingency and causation” (Heise, 1997, p. 263).

2. NARRATIVE TIME IN SPECULATIVE FICTION NOVELS

Considering Ricoeur’s claim on the reciprocal relationship between temporality and narrativity, these two different conceptions of time can be traced in the literary narration of the novels. Sadler (1984) claimed that the adoption of chronological development with linear plots can be taken as one of the characteristics of most nineteenth-century novels, underlying “an objective concept of time” in which “everything tended to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe” (8). Likewise, Heise (1997) has contended that

...the fragmented plots of many postmodernist novels are to some extent conditioned by the accelerated temporal rhythms of late-capitalist technologies of production and consumption, which tend to make long-term developments more difficult to envision and construct (6).

Realizing this relationship between the temporal implication of a plot and the society’s conception of time, the author of a speculative fiction novel may choose to foreground a particular narrative time sequence in depicting an extrapolated world. With reflection of the concepts of time as apprehended by contemporary society, the narrative temporality of the speculative world, in some ways, seems to help us relate the depicted conditions in the alternative world to those in our present world. In this way, it also helps in producing the reader’s willing suspension of disbelief in the extrapolated world.

3. TEMPORAL IMPLICATIONS OF PLOTS IN A CLOCKWORK ORANGE AND NEUROMANCER

The narrative time sequence in Anthony Burgess’s (1972) *A Clockwork Orange* underlines the author’s satirical representation of the mechanistic conception of time in a society in which machines are juxtaposed to nature. Alex’s speculative world is created with some elements of political and social implications of the particular period, including the objective conception of time. In the novel, Alex’s narration of his story moves forward chronologically from chapter to chapter, which are linked with the concept of cause and effect. To quote Alex’s words (Burgess, 1972, p. 40),

What happened, though, was that I woke up late (near seven-thirty by my watch) and, as it turned out, that was not so clever. You can viddy that everything in this wicked world counts. You can pony that one thing always leads to another. Right right right.

Time, as perceived by Alex, is objective, moving on unequivocally and detached from characters and events like a machine. In the linear representation of time, “the ‘then’ and ‘and then’ structure ...

provides an answer to the question ‘What next?’ and suggests a relation of exteriority between the phases of the action” (Ricoeur, 2002, p. 43). Alex’s rhetorical question, “What’s it going to be then, eh?”, which is repeated at precise points of the story suggests an open-ended series of events in episodes following one another in accordance with the order of time.

The three parts of the novel, although they seem to have equal length as each comprises seven chapters, cover different duration of narrative time. Part One follows Alex over the course of two nights; while Part Two covers Alex’s two years stay in Staja and a fortnight of going through the Ludovico treatment. Part Three begins from the day Alex is set free to the last chapter, which cuts ahead of Alex’s eighteenth year.

The minimum textual length for a fortnight period of Alex undergoing the Ludovico treatment instead of serving the rest of his fourteen years’ term in Part Two, compared to the two nights of Alex and his droogs’ ultraviolet spree taking up almost the whole portion of Part One, not only gives emphasis on the amount of violence, but also suggests how time can be shortened with mechanical imposition on humanity. Thus, duration in the narrative time of the novel can be seen as a vehicle serving to illustrate the impact on the conception of time when machines are imposed on human beings.

Repetition in the narrative time frequency of the novel, on the other hand, shows the cyclical aspect of time in a mechanistic society. According to Lothe (2002), “narrative repetition, which is closely related to narrative time ..., is an important constituent aspect of prose fiction”(p. 63). Repetition of individual words occurs throughout the novel, which can be linked to the characterization of the protagonist Alex. In addition, repetition of similar events and scenes, though not necessarily identical, takes place at certain fixed points of the chronology – for example, Alex and his droogs “sitting in the Korova milkbar” “drinking milkplus with knives in it” before a night of violence, going to “the Duke of New York” and buying drinks for the old ladies to get an alibi after their violence spree”, the repeated procedures Alex has to go through each time for the Ludivico treatment. These repetitions may not be coincidences, but proof of the clockwork nature of time in Alex’s world.

However, narrative repetition at the end of *A Clockwork Orange* makes Alex return to the status quo, except for a few changes, such as his becoming the oldest of his droogs, getting bored with ultraviolet spree, and a desire to settle down and start a family. These do not exclude a future threat of violence, as Alex imagines, in relation to his son and his son’s son (Burgess, 1972, p. 148):

I would not be able to really stop him. And nor would he be able to stop his own son,
brothers. And so it would itty on to like the end of the world, round and round and round.

Alex’s imagination suggests the repetition of events at certain chronological points as time moves on. In other words, Alex’s imagination seems to reflect the cyclical notion of time and causality fixed in the mechanistic society of the period in which the novel was written. Hence, it can be argued that the narrative time sequence and repetition in *A Clockwork Orange* complement the author’s satirical representation of the society’s mechanistic conception of time and causality, which is depicted through Alex’s speculative world. While other aspects of the novel show postmodern elements, such as the innovative use of language; the temporal implications of the plot gives a glimpse into the inhuman encroachment of objective time in the society which is, on one hand, still affected by what Heise (1997) calls “the 19th century philosophies that conceived of history as linear, progressive and unified movement” (264), and on the other, by the imposition of mechanical and technological advances on human beings.

A different way of conceiving causality, time and the universe can be found in William Gibson’s (1984) *Neuromancer*. As a cyberpunk novel, its narrative represents “cybernetic culture” and “fluid and shifting urbanism” with “techno-surreal images” (Bukatman, 1993, p. 137, 139). With narrative structures based on perception and spatial exploration, time and space seem to be shifted into a compacted and decentred world, enabling Case as well as other characters in the novel to “jump” from Chiba city to the Sprawl, then to Istanbul and to Freeside. It represents one of the phenomena in the revolutionary conception of time, which, as Heise (1997) suggests, is possibly the result of the technologically mediated compression of the temporal horizon.

Moreover, the narrative temporality of the novel follows the characters' fast actions in the nearest frequency. Time becomes subjective and inherent in the events rather than an abstract dimension surrounding it. The temporal rhythm of an urban city is signified with its fragmented narration of fast-moving events with little repetition. As observed in the novel (Gibson, 1984, p. 7),

Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button. Stop hustling and you sank without a trace, but move a little too swiftly and you'd break the fragile surface tension of the black market.

As for the transition in the cyberspace, time seems to be more fragmental, as the duration in the narrative time follows the second-by-second action of Case's mind using Molly's body in the cutting of Sense/Net ice (Gibson, 1984, p. 62–63):

At 12:04:03, every screen in the building strobed for eighteen seconds in a frequency that produced seizures in a susceptible segment of Sense/Net employees...

At 12:05: 00, the mirror-sheathed nexus of the Sense/Net consortium held just over three thousand employees...

12:06:26 Case's Virus had bored a window through the library's command ice.

The narrative time following the digits as pulsed in Molly's chip suggests time as "subject to divisions and fragmentations that affect the worlds and identities of individual characters" or "the experiencing of time in the age of posthistory and the nanosecond culture" (Heise, 1997, p. 7, 2). With a large portion of fragmented events often disrupted by the dreams or memories of the characters in its plot, time in *Neuromancer* seems to be perceived in Ricoeur's conception of the configurational dimension, with a linear concept of time only implicitly involved. Human actions are narrated not only within time, but within memory. Thus the temporal order in the novel is often disrupted with *analepsis* or *flashback* (Genette 2002; Lothe, 2002), for example, disclosure of Case's history and his recalled first meeting with Linda Lee (in Chapter 1), the Finn's story which begins with another man's story called Smith (in Chapter 5), Armitage's life as Colonel Corto (in Chapter 6), and Molly's stories (in Chapter 15).

These stories within a story interrupt the chronological sequence of the main story, causing temporal disruptions. Taking sequentiality in terms of the two ways by which the concept of time is understood in narrative, such disruptions in temporal sequentiality affect our idea of time in the novel (Talib, 1990, p. 16). Recollection of the story with its plot construing, to borrow Ricoeur's (2002) words, "significant wholes out of scattered events" (45) suggests the combination of contingency to the sequentiality and causality of time. With the narrative time sequence moving forward and backward freely, it captures the "sense of time as it actually operates in the human awareness of it" (Sadler, 1984, p. 89) or "a conception of time which does not differ very much from what most of us have in our everyday existence" (Talib, 1990, p. 2).

Moreover, the temporal disruptions in the novel are also caused by Case's back and forth movements between his hallucinated virtual world when he jacks into the matrix, and his physical world. The back and forth movement of narrative time between the virtual world and his physical world with little time lapse resembles the switching of channels on television, suggesting simultaneity or instantaneity as a characteristic in the contemporary consciousness of time. On the other hand, Case could seem to be in his virtual world for several hours, which overlap with a few minutes in the temporality of his physical world. This evidences the possibility of telescoping time with the advancement of technology and mass media in contemporary society.

The fragmented and tangled narrative temporality in *Neuromancer* appears to represent the phenomena shaping the broader cultural conception of time in society during the particular period when the novel was written. The disrupted narrative temporality seems to represent "the rupturing of any possibility of strict linear, objective time", indicating "a postmodern consciousness which seeks to deny the possibility of singularity and cohesion, in the name of the infinitely possible voices, consciousness, moments, and interpretation" (Goh, 2004). As Booker (1994) notes, "Gibson himself states that *Neuromancer* is about the present. It's not really about an imagined future"(158). Together with the representation of urbanism, crime and corruption, the narrative time in the novel appears to be sending

messages to us about the social symptoms of the transformed contemporary anxiety of time as subjective, fragmental and simultaneous.

CONCLUSION

Sadler (1984) claimed that “the world view created by modern science does determine the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain narrative devices, such as point of view and narrative time sequence, and their use in fiction” (4). Linking the violence of narrative chronologies with social violence, Goh (2004) also contends that “contemporary narratives which play with chronological order, not necessarily in a backward motion, are very much concerned with socio-political crises and schism as well”. Following these claims, the two different temporal implications of the plots in *A Clockwork Orange* and *Neuromancer* can be read as one of the ways in which narrative time in speculative fiction depicts broader social and cultural conditions at their respective stages in the postmodern age.

At the same time, it is important to recall Ricoeur’s (2001) claim that every narrative combines these two dimensions in various proportions, “one chronological and the other nonchronological” (43). Taking the episodic and configurational dimensions as general categories, it may be argued that even the most linear of narratives will have some configurational exceptions; and conversely, many configurational narratives will also still be driven by an overall sense of linear progression. Then what is interesting, as explored in this paper, is to find out how different proportions of the two temporal dimensions implicated in the configuration of plots in speculative fiction can reflect different kinds of social attitudes towards time in a particular period. It is also useful to understand that by experimenting with narrative temporality and its socio-cultural implications, these speculative fiction novels extrapolate our experience of time in contemporary society to a speculative world, helping us to make better sense of the social conditions in contemporary society, perhaps. As much as the episodic linear representation of time foregrounded in *A Clockwork Orange* makes us recognize the mechanistic concept of time in a society with mechanistic imposition, the disrupted and instantaneous temporality reflected in *Neuromancer* seems to help us recognize and reorientate ourselves with the transformed or revolutionary awareness of time.

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