

Consequences to the question of time

By Clémence Ortega Douville

From there, we could tackle in a new light the question of time. From the notion of memory and its role in sensorimotoricity, given the proposition of the sensorimotor paradox as a condition of possibility for the evolution of our species, time unravels rather simply. As all experiences are and will always be only *past*, memory creating itself as a neural condition in sensorimotoricity and ontogenic development, time is always a result of that memory. But we human bodies are continually seized in the maintaining of a state of sensorimotor paradox that we hold through socio-symbolic controls, so our perception of time, even in contemplation, is not the one of *rest*. On the contrary, even when we are still, we remain restless, suspended in our capacity as a body to interact freely with our perceived environments (Darian Leader, *Hands*, 2017). It is to say that when we approach the question of time, its perception and phenomenology, we have to take into account that we would always perceive it as an opportunity for action that is repeatedly lost. That is why we came back to this other meaning of *trauma* that could be that of 'the defeat'. Our interpretative nature finds its measure in the bodily memory of action that is inhibited in order to favour prescribed conduct and mental projection. Our perception of time is full of interactions with our surroundings that are only whispered and fast discarded. Our perception of time is conditioned by that amount of aborted interactions that we are in the way of holding hidden, only sparked, in a perpetual state of forced equilibrium. We are never at rest with time unless we take a nap. We create time as a measure of the stability that we manage to get with our emotional trauma, that of silencing our own body to the performance of social conduct. The same conduct obeys to a very specific notion of time that is the compartmentalisation of labor in our societies.

So the restraint cast on our body by social imperatives pushes us to retain and examine the possibility of *full* occupation of space and time according to one's own 'biological rhythm', to submit it to a constant and compulsive evaluation. We then create a memory of that time spent controlling our movement according to ritualised patterns that we learn from childhood to our latest socialisations, which have us reactualise them. Our experience of social time is highly sequenced, clockwise, all resting on our capacity to hold the paradox and keep our body tamed so to satisfy the assumption of someone else's gaze – even *oneself* in a reflexive movement that impersonalises the relation to one's own reality, as would philosopher Darío Sztajnszrajber put it.¹ Through this gaze or anticipated gaze, we regulate our conduct and its restraint over our body, which generates a form of violence that cannot be expressed directly if not licenced in formalised and ritualised ways – as is 'acting out'. So our perception of time, even a parenthesis of contemplated time, is never at rest. Even the break we take from social time to contemplation is timed up and conditioned by conventional spaces (at home, in a park or a temple, on a train, ...) in which one doesn't yet express sensorimotoricity without deliberation. On the contrary, every move has to be chosen as a legit form of positioning towards others, as posing no threat nor exposing oneself to. Our perspective and projection in the future is therefore as well always conditioned by the necessity to mind our situation as to the repartition of spaces in political, moral and social structures.

From attention to memory

That debate between past, present and future has a philosophical history, as Paul Ricœur recalled in *Temps et récit* (1983), notably focusing on the figures of Augustine and Aristotle. In

1 See « [Heidegger | Por Darío Sztajnszrajber](#) », Facultad Libre, january 2016 on YouTube.

Book XI of his *Confessions* (approximately 397-401), Augustine elaborated an early phenomenology of time as the sense of it would constitute a tension between what we consider as future or past. The couple *attentio-distentio* expresses the idea of the continuity drawn out of the attention born to some local event. We cannot but experience time as an investment of our attention in reality, whether in action or imagination – and we saw that one is another side of the other. Trying to tell them apart is an attempt to distend the perception of time in a broader sense, that is the concept of *distentio animi*.

But the mental object of time itself is a product of imagination, sourced in the same memory, as we try to open a space for conceptual analogy and representation. *Abstraction* is an abstraction from actual sensorimotor memories. We approach future as an achieved form, something that would be past once it is done, but alternative from one actual past memory that we would know of – mingled. And that is even more true that memory always recomposes experience from its continuous making, self-generating. As we recall memories in a deliberate way², we enact something that we learnt to do in our early development : to mind and considerate manageable memories, to use our body resources in order to access those memories as one mental space to be invested in our own imagination.

The situation of sensorimotor paradox puts us in a position of witnessing ourselves as an object of consideration. We become subject of images that we cannot enact otherwise than minding them, and our social teaching reinforces our effort of selection between licit or illicit manifestations of our bodily sense of reality. So the distance that is put from unaltered sensorimotor interaction by the paradox makes us perceive time as us witnessing of our being selecting what to express or not. We are in a way subject to our own effort of selection and conformity, so to open the spaces for action that we know are allowed for us to invest. This topology for projection and its image are only complete if they come as a perpetual *past* – that Ricœur expressed with the idea that some meaning makes only *sense* in relation to a broader context for its interpretation. The kind of future in which meaning will realise itself is continuous with the experience of delimited spaces for interpretation which have been experienced in a broader past – the one that is *told*. That is at this point that Ricœur summons some features of Aristotle's poetics to underline how interpretation and formalised narrative structures are intertwined in the particular sense we would make of meaning. Here, the perception of time is rhythmised by the laced structures of the telling of an action. The way we tell things, the way the body is inscribed in the telling, are as important as what we actually tell, as it manifests the context in which we are to receive meaning. Part of our body always leaps with the action that is figured, as imagination is rooted in sensorimotor simulation. The telling always holds us back in the memory of our body. As well, the projection in a possible future is paradoxical and we are still trying to position ourselves in the perspective of realising it while we are resorbing at the same time the generation of *past* memory. The quality of being *past* is the quality of our body to still remain there where it is keeping position for an action to be told. Imagining a possible future or some alternative reality pertaining to dream or phantasy remains a substitution to immediate interaction, where the generation of past images becomes the source for others. In a way, while we are in the process of controlling our body expression and keeping ourselves still, the images born from aborted sensorimotor enaction come crashing against each other, from which crash we try to bring back some kind of order.

Consequences to the unconscious

This, of course, has serious implications to the theory of the unconscious, as we already saw in earlier work, because it dislocates the way we conceive it from the idea of a virtual finite space that would locate in our mind – and in the very fact that we would speak of an object that would be

² Read Francisco Varela, « [Le cerveau n'est pas un ordinateur](#) », *La Recherche*, Issue 308, april 1998.

the unconscious, even as a realm. *Unconscious* is a quality of something not being brought to consciousness, as the latter would be articulating the person's discourse and its position as leading their agency and understanding. It is closer to the repressed, at the heart of Sigmund Freud's founding principles to freshly-born psychoanalysis. What we learnt from psychoanalysis is that signifiers are opportunists. They are easily associated with a state of mind, re-rooting and rewriting through the elaboration of trauma. In the end, it all belongs to the same neural system where memory is constantly generated in the purpose of facilitating sensorimotor interaction that we are stuck in the effort to inhibit and keep quiet. This inhibition of sensorimotor enaction creates a swell of self-generating memory that is not able to relate to motor coordination. As it cannot associate with motor expression, it is more likely to do with some other images that would substitute to realisation in order to get a release.

On a practical side, our brain needs to hold control over its limits, that is also routed in sensorimotor coordination. Using those self-generated memories as a resource for imagination and thinking is likely to use the same means than to coordinate movement, simulating those neural connections in order to recreate a consistent chronology based on formalised sensorimotor memories. The situation of sensorimotor paradox has the effect of destabilising the routes through which to enact a stimulation. As we cannot repond directly to its object, we would rush on something else, like the fact that something unusual and extraordinary happens to us. Here again, Ellen Dissanayake's work in the field of neuroaesthetics is very useful to connect formalisation in ethological study and the hypothesis of artification, as aesthetic sense would be embedded in a very personal and emotional sensory inscription into a broader sense of reality.³ We situate ourselves in an interpretative time that is us trying to deal with this break in sensorimotricity, trying to bring back balance into a disruptive experience. The image becomes what is happening to us. That is what we are trying to bring back some sense and meaning from, to situate ourselves to. Our perception of time is always consistent with this effort to maintain of form of stability and chronological consistency out of a disruption in sensorimotor coordination. Otherwise, this self-generation of images, as they are not coordinated, open to an abyss ; and though here is the origin of our ability to think, that required some work of formalisation, as well as it got entangled in the intimate ties of symbolic debt to others like us. There is a history of imagination that makes one with the history of trauma.

Our body is where it is standing. It is a pack of memory, but also our connections with others actually are a convergence of memories. That means a lot, eventually that it is completely up to us to relate to those memories in the way that would be suited to our deeper sense of who we are both as a body and as a person. And then, the person reinvents the body they are living with.

3 Read, for instance, Ellen Dissanayake, « The Artification Hypothesis and Its Relevance to Cognitive Science, Evolutionary Aesthetics, and Neuroaesthetics », *Cognitive Semiotics*, Issue 5 (Fall 2009), pp. 148-173.