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“The smell of the basket of the magic journeys” – Natural and Mechanical Time in Alejo Carpentier’s *The Lost Steps* (1953)

Once upon a time people lived in places spatiotemporally divorced from other places. The natural (cyclic) time blended seamlessly with the everyday time of agricultural life. The rhythm of time was designated by the seasons and a limited repertoire of life’s events: births, deaths, marriages, meals, and work. The Age of Exploration, however, led to the shift from this pre-colonial cyclical time to the linear colonial one, and the rhythms and cycles of nature were replaced by charts, clocks, and maps as well as Christian time. The year of the “discovery” by the European explorers, regarded as the most important event in the history of a place, constitutes a rupture in cyclic time and becomes the commencement of the arrow of time, a symbolic landmark marking a transformation from Indian America to European America, from an Indian territory to an extension of Europe.¹ By this temporal positioning pre-colonial history is marked as “prehistorical” and thus irrelevant, undergoing in this way “mnemonic decapitation.”²

In the 18th century in Europe the notion of time started to be associated with nature as its crucial part.³ Simultaneously, scientists rejected the chronology of nature as depicted by the Bible, which was later corro-

¹ Eviatar Zerubavel, “Language and Memory: ‘pre-columbian’ America and the social logic of periodization,” *Social Research*, 65/2 (1998), Academic OneFile <<http://find.galegroup.com/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=AONE&docId=A20964255&source=gale&srcprod=AONE&userGroupName=mbic-gscholar&version=1.0>>.

² Zerubavel, “Language and Memory.”

³ The history of mechanical time after G.J. Whitrow, *Time in History. Views of Time from Prehistory to the Present Day* (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 152–169. See also Chapter 5 “Times,” in: John Urry, *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 105–130.

borated by geological findings and the employment of fossils to establish a chronology of the rocks. Both Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and the discovery of radioactivity at the end of the 19th century, which designated time's arrow, contributed to the idea of time as linear progression.

The growing influence of linear mechanical time on human life was marked by public transport. Its breakthroughs were 1784 when the mail-coach system was introduced and the second quarter of the 19th century when the railway system started operating in Britain as the first one in the world. As steam power became the decisive factor in the industrial revolution, factory workers had to adjust their working hours to the time when the steam power was on. This is when the hegemony of clock time commenced. The necessity to be punctual was accompanied by the replacement of local times based on the cycles of nature with the imposed artificial system of timetables in Britain, the Statutes (Definition) of Time Act of 1880, declaring Greenwich mean time as the standard time in Britain, and the following establishment of standardized time zones across the world, marked out from Greenwich zero time. The collapse of natural time into Western temporal regime took place, described by Dan Thu Nguyen as a construct: "No longer determined by either organic or cosmic cycles of time, 'Greenwich time' is a mathematical fiction which signals the collapse of human experience of space and time into a mathematical formula."⁴ This accords well with Isaac Newton's conception of God the watchmaker and the clockwork universe in which "Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external."⁵

What followed was the invasion of clock-time over almost all spheres of social life, resulting in the popularity of pocket watches (although the mechanical clock had already been invented in Europe in the 13th century). People have become slaves to the mechanical time and the Victorian work-ethic with spare time and annual holiday as a reward for hard work still prevails. Yet, some time ago people started to realize that the price paid for the imprisonment in routines, schedules and deadlines, clocks and calendars, had been too high. The reaction against the tyranny of time has been various movements and initiatives, such as The Slow Movement, Slow Food, Cittaslow (Slow Cities), Slow Travel, Slow Living, Slow Design, The Long Now Foundation (established in 1996 to promote thinking in the framework of the next 10,000 years),

⁴ Dan Thu Nguyen, "The Spatialization of Metric Time: The Conquest of Land and Labour in Europe and the United States," *Time and Society*, vol. 1 (1992), pp. 29–50.

⁵ Isaac Newton, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, vol. 3 (London: Knight & Compton, 1803), p. 6.

The School of Life, and many others, interrogating the speeding time of neoliberalism, which totally ignores human biological time.

The protagonist of Alejo Carpentier’s novel, *The Lost Steps*⁶ (1953), is also overwhelmed by the temporalization of experience. He makes an attempt to find a way back to natural time, yet, he must fail in his utopian endeavour; instead he should rather negotiate a balance between internal time and social time.

In the treadmill

The Lost Steps is a story of an unnamed musicologist who travels from an unnamed North American city to South America in search of an ancient musical instrument. Journeying up the river Orinoco, he finds a secret passage to the heartland and back in time to a pre-lapsarian world. Leaving behind his estranged wife Ruth and mistress Mouche, in the village Santa Monica de los Venados he starts a relationship with a “natural” woman, Rosario. When the search party finds him, he decides to go back to his city to put his affairs in order and get some paper and ink (as he starts to compose music again) and then marry Rosario and stay in Santa Monica forever.

The oppositions between natural time and mechanical time, authenticity and artificiality, art and life, culture and nature, time and timelessness govern the novel. The narrator feels subordinated to the regime of time, the weekly repeatability of activities connected with it and people’s inescapability from the treadmill. He emphasizes the modern lifestyle’s violation of the biological cycles of time in the human organism. It is the discrepancy between subjective and objective time, between the fluctuating rhythm and quality of private time and “the steadiness, fixity, and prearranged variations in quality of public time” that constitute the core of the conflict, as Cornelius Castoriadis argues. He differentiates between two entangled threads in social time and space: identity or ensidic time, based on calendar time and characterized by homogeneity, recurrence and difference of the identical; and imaginary time, embracing the significance of festivals, feasts and rituals.⁷ This repetition and alleged difference of the identical make the protagonist’s life unbearable, locked into a routine which deprives his life of any taste

⁶ The original title is *Los pasos perdidos*. In the current paper I am interpreting the English translation of the book.

⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis, “Time and Creation,” in: *Chronotypes. The Construction of Time*, eds. John Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 49–50, 59.

and colour: “I [...] summoned up my last years, seeing them pass, autumn to Easter, blizzard to sticky asphalt, without time to live them, knowing by the signs in a restaurant window that the wild ducks were back, that oysters were in season, or that it was chestnut time. [...] There were gaps of weeks in the chronicle of my existence, seasons that left with me no real memory, no unusual sensation, no enduring emotion; days when every gesture left me with the obsession that I had done the same thing before under identical circumstances.”⁸ Imaginary time is rid of meaning as well – his birthdays are exactly the same, and what varies is only the number of candles on the layer cake. He feels detached from his life, trapped in its repeatability like Sisyphus in his never-ending ordeal, “Ascending and descending the hill of days, with the same stone on my back, I kept going through a momentum acquired in jerks and spasms”; yet, he notes that it is impossible to escape from this lifestyle as it is imposed by the times he lives in, “the era of the Wasp-Man, the No-Man, when souls were no longer sold to the Devil, but to the Bookkeeper or the Galley Master.”⁹

He recognizes emptiness and artificiality in everything that surrounds him. Having sacrificed his vocation of a composer and musicologist, he has become an “office worker,” composing for the radio and film industry so as to ensure himself and his wife material security and to help her fragile career as a theatre actress. It has transpired, however, that in her case art cannot be the locale of authenticity since she has been caught in the prison of a play staged for the fifteenth-hundredth time, her part becoming “the parasite that was sucking her blood, that occupant of her very body, grappled to her flesh like an incurable disease.”¹⁰ In consequence, she has been imprisoned in an automatism similar to his own as well as a necessity to subordinate to the regime of the job: unpredictable journeys, long tours and seasons away from home. The protagonist’s lover, Mouche, professionally deals with the make-believe and deceit as she is an astrologist. Her opinions always follow the aesthetic trends and rely heavily on quotations from books and conversations, becoming their travestations. She is ready to adjust her views to the person she admires, for instance the Canadian painter they meet. In the jungle, although they are surrounded by the spectacle rarely seen by a human being, nothing seems to move her; instead she continues “her silly chatter.”¹¹ The narrator also criticizes the superficiality of religious practice and rituals

⁸ Alejo Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, trans. Harriet de Onis (London: Minerva, 1991), pp. 8–9.

⁹ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 5.

¹¹ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 109.

and Western civilization’s pretensions to progress. Discarding the great traditions of art and science, of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, “the spirit of humanism, the Faustian aspiration, and the Apollonian soul,” Europe has engaged in “terrors, [...] new exoduses [...] scholars sentenced to salt mines, [...] unsolved disappearances, assassinations, defenestrations, peasants machine-gunned in bullrings.”¹²

When his vacation starts, the narrator is overwhelmed by the abundance of free time. In “a silence unbroken by mechanical music or megaphone voices,” hurrying him and organizing his time, he feels “a vague threat hanging over [him].”¹³ He has nothing to fill his free time with and is instead afraid to be left with his thoughts: “the pointless awakening would follow and the fear of meeting the person who emerged from myself and waited for me each year on the threshold of my vacation.”¹⁴ The free time makes him ill and he feels the next bout of depression approaching, accelerated by the reflection that his life depends on the will of other people and leaves no room for choice.

The only antidote against the supremacy of clock time is for him the uncontrolled time of the night when he indulges in “strange journeys through the mazes of the city invisible to him [the Bookkeeper], a city within a city [...] for erasing the memory of day when the vicious caprice took me to secret apartments where personal identity was left at the door. Because I was chained to my technique among clocks, chronographs and metronomes in windowless, artificially lighted rooms [...] my instinct [...] was to seek pleasures that would make me forget the passing of the hours. I drank and took my ease, turning my back on the clocks until drink and ease laid me low beside an alarm clock in a sleep.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, this offers a temporary relief only and lacks authenticity as well because anaesthetized by alcohol, he is going to be “more desolate, wearier, sadder than before”¹⁶ in the morning, and expected to start another day of hectic activity.

An escape

It is only during his journey into the South American interior in search of a musical instrument to prove his theory of the origin of music that the narrator finds a purifying release from mechanical time. His movement

¹² Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, pp. 90, 89–90.

¹³ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 33.

¹⁵ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁶ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 252.

up the river becomes an escape from the present as it is simultaneous with a journey back in time, through the year zero to the Paleolithic Age as the narrator joins a community where life follows a primordial rhythm. The chronotope of the community takes the shape of the Bakhtinian “idyllic chronotope,” suffused with ancient folkloric time. He describes it as “a dense and fragrant time, like honey. [...] a time saturated with its own strictly limited, sealed-off segment of nature’s space,”¹⁷ disconnected from other places. The unity of place results in the blurring of all temporal boundaries – between the stages of one’s life and between lives. Space and time have a unique relationship here:

an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one’s own home. Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one’s children and their children will live. This little spatial world is limited and sufficient onto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world. But in this little spatially limited world a sequence of generations is localized that is potentially without limit.¹⁸

Connected with the cancellation of temporal boundaries is “the cyclic rhythmicalness of time,”¹⁹ measured by the seasons and a limited set of events. This is also collective time since it is only punctuated by the events of collective life; an individual is only conceptualized as part of the community.

People in the pre-historic community which the narrator joins are plunged into this bucolic-pastoral-idyllic chronotope to thrive in pre-lapsarian ignorance, happiness and wholeness, “still without the primordial shame [...] naked without knowing it, like Adam and Eve before the Fall.”²⁰ The narrator perceives the people in the community as Rousseauistic “noble savages” who lead a life more authentic and valuable than his own people. Their Edenic realm is based on the spiritual union with nature as it ensures stability, boundlessness and timelessness. In performing their rituals, Rosario’s community preserves freshness and

¹⁷ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michale Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 248.

¹⁸ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 225.

¹⁹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 225.

²⁰ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 182.

authenticity as they are ignorant of the customs’ symbolic value, contrary to modern people who, aware of all the implications, repeat the rituals mechanically for the sake of tradition. As the traveller observes,

the lack of awareness which they brought to this mystery was typical of nearly all their acts. When they married, they exchanged rings, they threw handfuls of rice, without any realization of the age-old symbolism of what they were doing. These people prided themselves on preserving traditions whose origin had been forgotten, the expression, for the most part, of a collective reflex, like collecting objects whose use is unknown, covered with inscriptions that fell silent forty centuries ago. In the world I would now return to, on the contrary, not one gesture was made without cognizance of its meaning [...] practices whose effects were weighted in all their implications.²¹

It is in communion with nature and a return to ancient time that the narrator discovers inner peace and wholeness. He is invigorated by the freshness of nature, its smells and silence. His natural time is allowed to emerge and he reconnects with his biological rhythm as well as nature’s rhythms: “I noticed that I, to whom the measuring of time was a mania, shackled to the metronome by vocation and to the clock by profession, had stopped thinking of the hour, gauging the height of the sun by hunger or sleep.”²² He finds himself in a place outside of time, in a “timeless savanna,” adjusting himself to the “immutable rhythms” of the natural world, his walk governed by “the Code of the Rains.”²³ Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska define a journey as an experience leading to “a place where time ‘stands still’ or is reversed into a Utopian space of freedom, abundance and transparency.”²⁴

The protagonist is confronted with an attitude to time opposing his, particularly when he observes his Native girlfriend, Rosario. She is not effusive about her past, which makes the musicologist uneasy. He speculates that she either has a short memory or conceals her past deliberately, protecting the intimacy of her previous relationships and preventing her current lover from assuming anything before him mattered. In fact, Rosario and her people live in the eternal present, “without possessions,

²¹ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 251.

²² Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 111.

²³ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 111.

²⁴ Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska, “‘Getting there’: Travel, Time and Narrative,” in: *Travellers’ Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, eds. George Robertson et al. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 197.

without the chains of yesterday, without thinking of tomorrow,” and as such they have no awareness of history; they constitute its “first chapter”²⁵ themselves. The knowledge of the year they live in does not represent any value to them. Living in the present without the past or future as points of reference is the reason for Rosario’s giving up on the protagonist although he promises to come back to her. Although he imagines that he has always been seen as an outsider who will not be able to assimilate, in fact, the notions of “tomorrow” and “waiting” have no significance for people who live in an eternal present.

Released from the chains of mechanical time, the narrator yields to psychological time, its ability to accelerate and slow down, according to the type of activity one is immersed in. Inner time, whose source is the human body, resists division into equal units since it cannot be measured in space.²⁶ When in solitude, human awareness is governed by the rhythms of inner time,²⁷ as Thomas Luckmann argues. William James describes subjective time as “an alternation of flights and perchings.”²⁸ Rosario’s lived time, divorced from the past and future, gains particular density:

This attitude must lengthen the lapse of hours from one sun to another. She spoke of days that were very long and of days that were very short, as though they were in different tempos – tempos of a telluric symphony that had its andantes and adagios, as well as its prestos. The astonishing thing was that, now that time was of no concern to me, I noticed in myself different values of the intervals: the prolongation of certain mornings, the frugal elaboration of a sunset, and was lost in wonder at all that could be fitted into certain tempos of this symphony which we were reading backward, from right to left, contrary to the key of G, returning to the measures of Genesis.²⁹

Without time shifts within one’s consciousness, without thinking about the past and the future, the undiluted present gains a new dimension, “lasting” longer in the subjective optic. After observing this quality of time, the protagonist rejects what people from his world call the present,

²⁵ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, pp. 181, 278.

²⁶ Thomas Luckmann, “Constitution of Human Life in Time,” in: *Chronotypes. The Construction of Time*, eds. Bender and Wellbery, p. 154. See also William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2013), chapter I and IX.

²⁷ Luckmann, “Constitution of Human Life in Time,” pp. 154–156.

²⁸ James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. I, p. 243.

²⁹ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 181.

which is always fleeting, transient, not lasting: “This could not be the present, which would be yesterday before man had been able to live and contemplate it; this chill geometry without style, where everything grew weary and old a few hours after birth.”³⁰

Through the encounter with the time of the other the narrator is also reconnected with the boundless temporality of his childhood. Curtis and Pajackowska identify in accounts of travel the desire to regain a memory of happiness, an attempt to find in somewhere else what is already obsolete in our life; therefore “the sense of lost environmental pleasure, the ‘elsewhen’, is often expressed in terms of the ‘elsewhere’.”³¹ This may encompass the time of childhood when the spatial and temporal were bound and did not reveal their mutual restrictions. In Santa Monica images and smells trigger the narrator’s long forgotten childhood memories, especially “that willow basket, the vessel of my voyages with Maria del Carmen, which smelled like the alfalfa in which I was burying my face almost painful with emotion.”³² His experience of evoking early memories by means of smells, in psychology called the “Proust phenomenon,”³³ a process taking place in the twinkling of an eye, is repeated later on: “The thick rustling pile fell on us, enveloping us in perfumes, like a mixture of camphor, sandalwood, and saffron. A sudden emotion left me breathless: this was almost exactly the smell of the basket of the magic journeys, the one in which I held Maria del Carmen in my arms when we were children, close to the plant beds where her father sowed sweet basil and mint.”³⁴

While the narrator experiences memories and his childhood, time in *The Lost Steps* is presented as interchronistic. The terms “past” and “present” are meaningless as the community’s chronotope is parallel to the modern world’s. The time from prehistory to modernity can be compressed into three hours as this is the time a flight takes: “this city of Enoch [...] was only three hours from the city as the crow flies. That is to say, the fifty-eight centuries separating the fourth chapter of Genesis from the current year *back there*, could be spanned in one hundred and eighty minutes, returning to the epoch some identity with the present – as though this was not the present too – flying over cities that today, at

³⁰ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 255.

³¹ Curtis and Pajackowska, “‘Getting there’: Travel, Time and Narrative,” pp. 200, 202.

³² Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, pp. 111–112.

³³ See Douwe Draaisma, *Why Life Speeds Up as You Get Older. How Memory Shapes Our Past*, trans. Arnold and Erica Pomerans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 31–44.

³⁴ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 151.

this very time belonged to the Middle Ages, the Conquest, the Colony, or the Romantic era.”³⁵ The temporal and spatial distance is removed. Past, present and future are relocated in their mutual relationship, often in psychodynamic forms. The notions of progress and historical perspective are subverted, and the Paleolithic community’s simultaneousness with the modern ones exposes as a construct the historical perspective of perceiving the past as a finished entity.

Having experienced freedom from mechanical time and spiritual recovery, the protagonist decides never to return to his previous life. When the search party comes to “rescue” him, he realizes the thickness of the elapsed time: “I approached this world that I left a month and a half before by calendar calculation – but the immensity of the six weeks I had lived was incommensurable by the chronology of that climate.”³⁶ Once again he can thereby experience vacillations in the specious present and psychological time resulting from the experience of travelling and the encounter with the time of the other. The travel time as the “time out,” as Curtis and Pajaczkowska argue, leads to the intensification and extension of subjective temporality which result in the perception of the holiday place as the one in which “time is condensed and diffused.”³⁷ For Michael Leiris travelling is “a symbolic way to stop growing old.”³⁸ This extension of time is possible thanks to the shattering of the everyday routine, an unfamiliarity with the new locale and the culture of its people, the variety of activities and sensory stimuli, their intensity, the attention devoted to them, and the emotions they evoke.³⁹

In his decision to become a part of the prehistoric community the musicologist becomes an adherent of the existential mode of tourist experiences, as designated by Erik Cohen. Aware of the futility and meaninglessness of his everyday life, an existential traveller rejects his native culture and society to engage totally in a culture of his choice as it appears the fulfillment of his quest for authentic experience. Life away from the elective culture becomes for him life in exile. Most existential travellers live in the chosen place periodically,⁴⁰ as opposed to the protagonist in *The Lost Steps*. The simplicity of life in Rosario’s community and their direct relationship to nature and tradition away from clock time fulfill

³⁵ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, pp. 233–234. Emphasis in original.

³⁶ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 239.

³⁷ Curtis and Pajaczkowska, “‘Getting there’: Travel, Time and Narrative,” p. 199.

³⁸ After Curtis and Pajaczkowska, “‘Getting there’: Travel, Time and Narrative,” p. 199.

³⁹ See Draaisma, *Why Life Speeds Up as You Get Older*, pp. 205–207.

⁴⁰ Erik Cohen, “A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,” *Sociology*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1979), pp. 189–190.

the musicologist’s need for an authentic life of wholeness. For him this is a sacred space-time suffused with unadulterated spirituality, contrary to the hasty artificial space-time of civilization.

Paradise lost

After the return to his city, the narrator feels remote from the events around him, from the aggressive pestering of the press, from the concerns of the people, who lead a death-like existence: “From these cement mazes emerged, exhausted men and women who had sold another day of their time to the enterprises that fed them. They had lived another day without living, and would now restore their strength to live another day tomorrow which would not be lived either.”⁴¹ The things once important to him have become a meaningless sham. The clash between life in communion with nature and metropolitan life makes him see more vividly the violation of people’s biological cycles by mechanical time. Only now, when he has learned to walk in pace with his breathing, he notices other people’s manner of collective walking, timed to the frequency of the metro or the green light at the pedestrian crossing. Those who do not succumb to the dictates of clock time are thrown to the margins of society both in the literal and metaphorical sense: it is in the narrow spaces between buildings or shops that those who the society calls “losers” stand quietly: a drunkard or “a Negro” playing ocarina.

The narrator boasts that his quest has been a kind of awakening: “I had seen things with new eyes, as though I had returned, my sight restored, from a long sojourn in the house of truth,”⁴² yet, his perception of the pre-historic community is idealized and romanticized. He constantly accuses civilized life of artificiality but nature is the realm of disguise and mirage as well, “the world of deceit, subterfuge, duplicity; everything there is disguise, stratagem, artifice, metamorphosis.”⁴³ Identifying nature with authenticity, he at the same time notices “the inexhaustible mimetism of virgin nature. Everything here seemed something else, thus creating a world of appearances that concealed reality, casting doubt on many truths.”⁴⁴ The boundary between illusion and reality is blurred in art as well. Looking at an Indian village, Bosch’s paintings come to the narrator’s mind. However, they imitate a landscape which the painter has never seen. The narrator recognizes that “art is not representation, but

⁴¹ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 252.

⁴² Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 247.

⁴³ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 166.

⁴⁴ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 165.

another reality just as real as nature” and thus both culture and nature constitute “a play of reflections.”⁴⁵

Praising the community’s support for monogamy, and criticizing his people’s contradictory attitude, the narrator forgets to look critically at his own romantic relationships. He has been lying to his wife, betraying her with Mouche. The relationship with Mouche is not ‘authentic’ either as it is only physical. Still, he does not hesitate to have a brutal sexual act with Rosario while Mouche is stricken with malarial fever in the same room. Bored with her, he “got rid” of her, cruelly sending her off in a canoe “weeping, almost unconscious, making her believe that I was following in another boat.”⁴⁶ He hides his marriage from Rosario. He idealizes her as a natural woman, in touch with natural time. However, she is attractive to him because she is a mystery, like no woman he has met: her “deeper being eluded the probing procedures I had used up to that hour in my dealings with women, whom I found pretty much alike.”⁴⁷ But perhaps he has found them alike because working too much he has never devoted enough time to know them? What he also likes about Rosario is her servile readiness to follow her man wherever he goes without question. This certainly situates her in opposition to his wife, forever absent, and him waiting for her and missing her. He is possessive about Rosario’s past and her refusal to marry him “flicked him on the raw.”⁴⁸ Rosario seems a romanticized version of his first love, Maria del Carmen, whose vivid memories flood back to him in the wilderness. Furthermore, Rosario’s and his relationship has been short so he cannot really know how they would manage without a common intellectual background. She does not understand his need to compose music, for example, looking at him strangely when he is engrossed in feverish writing which to her represents no practical purpose. He does not know her, as he admits himself. Her community does not really believe in him; he has not become one of them. As a composer he belongs to the world of art and culture and is “out of place in this setting”⁴⁹ as much as Mouche whom he accuses of the same. His psyche cannot blend with the opulent fauna as his gaze remains Western, filtered through its culture: he looks at the landscape “without taking my eyes for too long from the narration of Fray Servando de Castillejos.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Lois Marie Jaeck, “The Lost Steps: Goodbye Rousseau and into the Funhouse!” *Hispania*, vol. 75, no. 3 (1992), p. 537.

⁴⁶ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 153.

⁴⁷ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 112.

⁴⁸ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 228.

⁴⁹ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 150.

⁵⁰ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 110.

The heartland is far from paradisiacal. In summer the heat can be unbearable as are the mosquitoes, whereas in the rainy season there is no sun, it rains “too much” and people are “unspeakably bored” on “interminable” days.⁵¹ The jungle is full of unfamiliar and dangerous animals, such as snakes whose bites make it necessary to chop off one’s hand. There are diseases, hunger, everyday hardships. However, the narrator understandingly counts these things as necessary unpleasant things in life. While admiring the community’s system of values, he cannot adopt it as his own. He is not able to kill a man when expected to do so although earlier he has noted that sometimes man “has to” kill to defend his honour, which is not considered a great crime. The community themselves are not the embodiment of goodness before the Fall: a girl is raped, a priest is brutally murdered and mutilated, in the Stone Age village people keep some other tribe as prisoners because they consider themselves a superior race. All the dichotomies through which the narrator perceives life in North America and South America are subverted: past and present, nature and culture, civilized and savage, authenticity and artificiality, illusion and reality, origin and representation.

What is more, paradisiacal Santa Monica appears to be a vision of an ideal place, a city founded by the Adelantado, a 20th-century man, who established its laws. The punishments he prescribes for breaking the laws recall the system the narrator knows from his civilized life. This copy of a paradise, “an authentic way of living – thus has built into its foundations the evils that its inhabitants are attempting to escape from. The system can change and alter itself, but only within the limitation of the totality that is its ‘origin.’ Carpentier implies that there is no Garden of Eden – only representations of an ‘origin’ created by man himself in an attempt to overcome the anguish of a life rendered meaningless by the irrevocable presence of death.”⁵² Santa Monica is an artificial creation then like other cities in Northern America. The narrator’s hopes for Santa Monica to be a place of permanence and stability are frustrated as well since he cannot locate it the next time he goes to Orinoco. The river may give the impression of eternity but it is an illusion: it changes anyway, which points to the elusiveness and “futility of the narrator’s hope for a secure and permanent origin.”⁵³

His quest results in disproving his theory of music as mimesis – the imitation of animal movements or bird songs, for he witnesses “the

⁵¹ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, pp. 228, 229.

⁵² Jaeck, “The Lost Steps: Goodbye Rousseau and into the Funhouse,” p. 539.

⁵³ David Mikics, “Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier: Nature, History and the Caribbean Writer,” in: *Derek Walcott*, ed. Harold Bloom (Broomall: Infobase Publishing, 2003), p. 116.

Birth of Music”⁵⁴ and the birth of the Word in the shaman’s hypnotic incantation. The notion of mimesis is problematic as well since, as the narrator’s observations of nature have shown, “the ‘origin’ of mimesis and the ability to deceive may be in nature.”⁵⁵ Thus, Carpentier exposes the self-referential binary oppositions that “the history of western thought has utilized to define itself” as a manifestation of “the self-reflecting circular system that constitutes human reality.”⁵⁶ Similarly, the Word, “the ‘ultimate’ origin of western thought and of man – is born from man within the system of discourse he has created in his attempts to overcome irrevocable closure.”⁵⁷

Natural and objective time can never be separated with surgical precision, similarly to other dichotomies. The concept of time is too complex to be considered through dichotomies.⁵⁸ A return to natural time, to the time of origin, is therefore impossible. Instead, as the group of 20th-century people, making a conscious decision to live in a medieval city called Santa Monica demonstrate, the experience of natural time can be a private experience carefully carved out of public time. It is their conscious choice that makes their lives authentic. Accordingly, the narrator might try to break the routine of mechanical time by travelling more often and by living closer to nature as it inspires him to write music. Life in the wilderness has taught him an important lesson about his music and about life in general:

the greatest challenge a man can meet is that of forging his destiny. Because here, amidst the multitude that surrounded me and rushed madly and submissively, I saw many faces and few destinies. And this was because, behind these faces, every deep desire, every act of revolt, every impulse, was hobbled by fear. Fear of rebuke, of time, of the news, of the collectivity that multiplied its forms of slavery. There was fear of one’s own body, of the sanctions and pointing fingers of publicity [...] fear of the calendar, fear of the law, fear of slogans, fear of mistakes, fear of the sealed envelope, fear of what might happen.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 185.

⁵⁵ Jaeck, “The Lost Steps: Goodbye Rousseau and into the Funhouse!” p. 537.

⁵⁶ Jaeck, “The Lost Steps: Goodbye Rousseau and into the Funhouse!” p. 538.

⁵⁷ Jaeck, “The Lost Steps: Goodbye Rousseau and into the Funhouse!” p. 538.

⁵⁸ Karin Tusting, “The New Literacy Studies and Time: An Exploration,” in: *Situated Literacies. Reading and Writing in Context*, eds. David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 36.

⁵⁹ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 255.

Fear is probably the reason why the musicologist did not return to his vocation after his wife had established herself in her profession. Still, it is evident that composing music is his source of fulfillment – he describes Rosario’s and his own experiences of the specious present in terms of music, “different tempos – tempos of a telluric symphony that had its andantes and adagios, as well as its prestos.”⁶⁰ While listening to music, he experiences time in a different way, a condensed time, which he describes as having an almost tangible form, “time almost objectified by being subjected to the demands of fugue or sonata form.”⁶¹ It is through his art that he can be reconnected with “the Valley where Time had Stopped”⁶² and find release from the dehumanizing effects of clock time.

⁶⁰ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 181.

⁶¹ Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 15.

⁶² Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*, p. 277.

Sonia Front

**„Zapach kosza magicznych podróży” –
czas mechaniczny i naturalny w *Podróż do źródeł czasu* Alejo Carpentiera**

Streszczenie

Tekst bada opozycję pomiędzy czasem naturalnym i czasem mechanicznym w powieści Alejo Carpentiera *Podróż do źródeł czasu* (*Los pasos perdidos*). Opozycje między czasem naturalnym a mechanicznym, autentycznością a fałszem, sztuką a życiem, kulturą a naturą i czasem a beczasowością dominują w całej powieści. Narrator czuje się niewolnikiem czasu mechanicznego i kieratu narzuconego mu przez nowoczesny styl życia, który całkowicie ignoruje czas wewnętrzny człowieka. Gdy wyjeżdża do Ameryki Południowej w poszukiwaniu starego instrumentu muzycznego, dołącza do prehistorycznego plemienia, gdzie łączy się na nowo z czasem naturalnym i rytmem natury. Jednakże, zarówno powrót do „początku”, jak i czasu naturalnego okazują się iluzoryczne, gdyż „początek” to konstrukt, a granica pomiędzy czasem naturalnym a czasem społecznym jest niemożliwa do ustanowienia.

Sonia Front

**„Der Duft von einem Korb mit magischen Reisen“ –
mechanische und natürliche Zeit in den *Verlorenen Spuren* von Alejo Carpentier**

Zusammenfassung

Im vorliegenden Text wird das Verhältnis zwischen der natürlichen und mechanischen Zeit in dem Roman von Alejo Carpentier *Die verlorenen Spuren* (*Los pasos perdidos*) untersucht. Die Diskrepanz zwischen natürlicher und mechanischer Zeit, zwischen Echtheit und Falschheit, zwischen Kunst und Leben, zwischen Kultur und Natur, zwischen Zeit und Zeitlosigkeit beherrschen den ganzen Roman. Der Erzähler fühlt sich als ein Sklave der mechanischen Zeit und der Tretmühle des modernen, die innere Zeit des Menschen völlig missachtenden Lebensstils. In der Suche nach einem alten Musikinstrument reist er nach Südamerika und schloss sich einem prähistorischen Stamm an, wo er mit der natürlichen Zeit und mit den Rhythmen der Natur wieder in Verbindung trat. Doch die Rückkehr sowohl zum „Ursprung“ als auch zur natürlichen Zeit erwiesen sich als illusorisch, denn der „Ursprung“ ist ein Gedankenkonstrukt und die Grenze zwischen der natürlichen und der gesellschaftlichen Zeit lässt sich nicht abstecken.