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### Time travel with Gilles Deleuze

John M. Winslade

California State University - San Bernardino, [jwinslad@csusb.edu](mailto:jwinslad@csusb.edu)

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**Time travel with Gilles Deleuze**  
**Keynote address European Narrative Therapy Conference**  
**Iasi, Romania, July 2-4, 2014**  
John Winslade

**Abstract**

My focus here will be on working in therapy with an elastic concept of time built on Deleuze's readings of time as a synthesis of the past, present and future. This interest has particular value for the construction of remembering conversations. I shall speak to the value I can see for this field of practice. The poststructuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze has much to offer narrative practice through the concepts he developed. I intend to explore some specific aspects of his reconceptualization of time in this presentation.

Travel through time is a consistent human fantasy. There are many instances in movies and in literature of fascination with returning to the past and altering with hindsight the course of history, or indeed going back to the future. The long run of the British TV series, Dr Who, testifies to this fascination with time travel, as do movies like Back to the future. Ever since H.G. Wells, we have imagined the idea of a machine that helps us do it - the idea of a time machine.

French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) coincidentally were drawn to the concept of the machine. In their terms, not all machines are mechanistic, with whirring parts that make lots of noise. They talk also of abstract machines which are concepts that produce forms of life. For example Deleuze and Guattari might talk about therapy, including narrative therapy, as machinic. It is not a term of disparagement either, but a description of what therapy does. It helps people figure out how one might live, or as Deleuze and Guattari put it, to actualize what otherwise remains virtual in a person's life.

Deleuze also has been described as a philosopher of time. In some of his central writings, he reworks conventional ways of thinking about time and invites us to read time differently. In order to have a sense of difference, of becoming different, we need a sense of movement and movement happens across territories of space and time. These movements are not timeless aspects of the universal. Deleuze and Guattari call them transversal.

Deleuze's concepts of time are thus themselves machinic. As some commentators have suggested it is quite justifiable to argue that Deleuze constructed a philosophical time machine.

My interest here is to interrogate the usefulness of his time machine for therapy so that those who consult us can travel through time to enhance the project of becoming. We can do so without building a magical telephone box, or driving a Delorean car, or diving into a wormhole. Simply by using certain kinds of questions creatively, we can travel across time.

I believe that narrative practice already has implicit within it a notion of time travel. My suggestion is that we take this seriously, and use it intentionally. Deleuze helps us to do this.

First let me make a distinction. I want to travel through time and briefly recap some moments from the history of therapy.

Freud and psychoanalysis.

Come with me to the early twentieth century. There he is - Sigmund Freud. Listen to what he is saying. He wants to develop a credible science of therapy as understood from a positivist realist perspective. This aim leads him to a conventional emphasis on what the ancient

Stoics called *chronos*, in which time is marked by strict divisions into a discrete past, present and future. What is in the present is real and the past becomes a source of causes. It is dead and gone. Freud is not uninterested in the past. On the contrary he is fascinated with the classical era and himself traveled back in time to pick up the myth of Oedipus and bring it into his present. But he also maintains a sharp distinction between the past and the present. Living in the past is at the very least neurotic, if not psychotic.

He uses time travel, not so much as a resource to inform how one might live, but as a source of relics, or artifacts of past experience, that help explain problems. He advocates a return to the past to find the cause of what is in the present.

For example, initially he hears the women of Vienna who speak to him of their experiences of sexual abuse as revealing the causes of their current personal pain (Masson, 1984). Later he will revise this theory and propose that these women have imagined these events and are referring to a mythical desire from childhood for their father's affection. In the process he will both pathologize time travel and invite therapists to not believe these accounts as real. In the process he will taint time travel itself with the stigma of pathology.

Zooming back to a hundred years later, we are still living with this legacy.

In the *Logic of Sense* Deleuze (1990) disturbs this reading of time as deterministic. He articulates a systematic philosophy of time through his investigation of what makes something an event. His major contention is that events are logically prior to identities. It is not so much the 'categories of person' which produce the events of our lives. We are people who participate in events and these constitute us as persons, including types of persons. He argues further that, to understand an event, we should see it as one in a series of events. A series constitutes events within it as linked together in what we might also call a narrative.

We need to use narrative sense to appreciate events in a series. Each event in a series is slightly different from what has gone before, just like each frame in a movie is slightly different from the one that preceded it.

But events in a series do not cause subsequent events. They do not reach the level where we can apply the rules of science, or philosophy, to claim that an earlier event always determines a subsequent one. Rather, Deleuze argues that all events in a series make sense to us or explain connections in a way that would satisfy the criteria of folk psychology.

Hence it is a mistake to go back and find the cause of an event in the past. What holds events together is not determining causal chains but sense.

Moreover an event only becomes an event through language. Language works like a machine to fix events (e.g. when they start and finish). One implication for therapy is that using language is itself machinic. The questions we ask people play a role in constituting events and series of events. We can be confident, when a moment of difference happens, that it will always be linked with other differences. Inquiry into these differences is machinic. It generates experience. Through asking questions we encapsulate experiences in time, or create time capsules.

Until we construct an event in language it remains virtual. When we inquire, we actualize it. Before we do so, the event does not have a full existence. Instead it has a subsistence. It subsists (or ekes out a living through subsistence).

Now let me use our time machine to take you to the 1960s. Now that you are there you might notice that there is a preoccupation in this decade with the here and now. In part it is a reaction against the psychoanalytic treatment of the past as causing the present. Fritz Perls insists on it. Carl Rogers privileges the immediacy of now. The behaviorists emphasize current

rather than historical contingencies of reinforcement. All reject the past as the focus of therapy. The present, the logic goes, is the only place we have to make a difference. Well is it? It might be, without a useful time machine, but what if we were to have one of those?

Coming back to the present, I suspect it was not just reaction to the psychoanalytic pathologizing of the past that led to the preoccupation with presence and the here and now. It was also the pervasive influence of existentialism. It made sense after two world wars, after the holocaust, after the Great Depression of the 1930s, in the Liddell of the Cold War and with the new threat of Nuclear Annihilation to see life as harsh and earlier realist optimism as faulty and to fall back on individual responsibility to find meaning in a hostile and bleak world. History seemed bent on destruction and the here and now was a place of refuge where one could find freedom.

Modernist thought has long been associated with the rejection of history. Remember the architect of the modern factory, Henry Ford, who claimed that 'history is bunk'. I can't help wondering whether the concentration on the here and now and the rejection of the past and the future as real is one reason for the current failure in the world, especially in the United States, to grapple with climate change. It amounts to a stubborn denial of the time travel into the future which is necessary to avert large scale disaster.

You can still find the emphasis on the here and now in therapy textbooks. It is currently expressed in the recent fashion for mindfulness. But this is without considering the possibilities of time travel.

What does Deleuze offer? He gives us a chance to escape the narrow confines of the here and now and provides a rigorous philosophical argument for reading time differently. Deleuze does not reject the conventional reading of time as broken into discrete categories of past, present and future.

He regards this reading of time as useful in certain contexts. It helps what sports psychologists refer to as 'being in the zone'. We can also use it to appreciate the sensation of sipping a fine wine. To enjoy a fireworks display requires an openness to a fleeting moment of light exploding in the now. But it is not as the only way to read time.

The present can also be described as an instant without thickness and without extension (Bowden, 2011, p. 23). Without a sense of the connection between events moving through time, we cannot appreciate a sense of narrative. We cannot thicken the moment through establishing it as part of a series or sequence of events connected together. When we focus on the here and now, we lose a sense of duration.

Therefore, Deleuze suggest a multiplicity, or "a receptivity to the multiple" (Rodowick, p. 16) in the ways we read time. Another way to understand time is to see it as the interval between events (Bowden, 2011, p. 21). We don't have to understand time as already divided into a discrete past, present and future. Deleuze suggests that intervals of time can be infinitely divided. Time is not already divided into ready made parcels called the past, the present and the future.

Deleuze draws from the ancient Stoics and argues for what they called aion. I think there is therapeutic value to reading time in terms of aion. It involves reading time as an arc that runs through the present, past and future. They are all part of the same arc and we can divide this arc up where we choose to, according to narrative sense, rather than according to what is real. Thus the past is continually present and the future is already here. As Deleuze says, "Aion is populated by effects which haunt it without ever filling it up" (Deleuze, 1990, pp. 164-5).

What is the value of this perspective? It allows us to divide time up in therapy according to new criteria. We can now ask how a given event fits into a person's sense of a life. Michael

White called this evaluating the problem story. In the concept of a life we are not just bound up in the now. We are calling on a reading of time that spans the past, present and future. That is, we can see an event in terms of an arc of time.

Another concept often evoked in narrative practice is the sense of a career. This is another way of marking out projects of living as having duration across time. Through a sense of aion we can notice how such projects travel through time. A career can develop a sense of rhizomatic growth. Michael White illustrated this by inquiring into the career ambitions of someone on Death Row; or of someone living with a schizophrenic diagnosis and an in the corner lifestyle.

What is realized by this idea of time travel, is that we don't have to make a fetish of the here and now after all. We can live across time and get a glimpse of Nietzsche's eternal return. We can hear in our lives the sound of the ritornello, the persistent musical phrase, the refrain, the echoes of another moment in time, of another event, that continues to live.

Life is thus enriched or thickened with a sense of duration. These ideas allow us to notice that ideas and discourses themselves are temporal. Foucault tried to show this in tracing the history of the present. Discourses exist in time and therefore we need a well-designed time machine to grasp the work they do.

From this perspective, therapy becomes a space where time travel can happen. The narrow confines of the here and now don't help us appreciate the thickness of life. A narrative sense, by contrast, gives us a sense of duration. We can ask specific questions about how a person wants his or her life to become. For the Stoics, such inquiry was the basis of ethical living: it focused on the 'ongoing interpretation of one's experience with respect to the whole: nature or the cosmos." Bowden p. 43. This means living in accordance with the event that never finishes coming about.

How is this sense resonant with what is already a part of machinic narrative practice?

Remembering conversations involve just the sense of time travel I am proposing. Rather than consigning a deceased love one or ancestor to the past we can bring them along with us as we move through time on our path of becoming. As therapists, we can ask questions about what a person from the past might say about an event about to happen in the immediate future. If we describe this as remembering a future we are starting to use the levers of Deleuze's time machine to go somewhere.

Narrative practice has also developed the machinic practice of externalizing and naming problems. I would suggest that externalizing fixes an event in language at one moment in time. Then we can decide whether or not to move through time away from it. It opens up a field of becoming and is typically followed by giving that becoming a history and a future. This is time travel. When you tie something down to a moment in time, that moment quickly passes. That is the nature of the present. It is here and then it is gone and we have another present moment. And now that moment is past too. Naming a problem and creating distance between us allows us to continue in our time travel and be less encumbered with baggage.

Consider also the practice of mapping the effects of a problem. It is easy to mistake this as grounded in a sense of chronos - to assume that we are inquiring into linear cause and effect links. But mapping the effects is not an inquiry through causal logic into what a problem determines.

It is an inquiry into the quasi-causal logic of sense through which things feel connected. Mapping the effects is more about a person's sense of how events are linked. They are linked at

the level of subsistence through sense, not through determination. They are therefore linked as events in time, which can give life a greater sense of duration.

Let me now invite you to consider some common narrative questions in the light of Deleuze's time machine and notice their implicit sense of time travel.

For example: "Has there ever been a time when this problem has taken a break and allowed you to live your own life?" (In other words, let's travel back in time and locate a contradictory moment and bring it into the present. Now the past is no longer gone and irrelevant. In fact it can easily be carried into the future.)

"How does this event (a unique outcome) fit with how you want your life to go?" (In other words, I invite you to journey through time to wherever this event fits in the arc of time that you divide up as your life.)

"How does it speak to the values that are important to you?" (Values are more than immediate and passing feelings. They are responses to the events of life that endure, that travel with us on our journey through time.)

"What would your (deceased) grandmother say about these steps you are taking to claim your life back from this problem?" (Let's travel back in time and recover your grandmother's voice in the language of the subjunctive (would) and fold it into the present and future. Notice the usefulness of subjunctive voice for time travel. It is the verb tense of liminal spaces and of possibility and the opposite of being realistic. It allows us to deterritorialize experiences from one time and reterritorialize them in another one. The past can be put to use in places it has not previously visited. It even allows us to remember the future. That is the flexibility of time travel.)

"What is the history of you standing up against this problem?" (Here a significant piece of differentiation, a unique outcome is strengthened by traveling back through time to add other events to the series in which it participates.)

There are many other narrative questions that draw on the possibilities for time travel. These are just examples. I propose that we free ourselves from conventional frameworks for thinking about time and embrace time travel. We just need the right kind of time machine. What Deleuze shows is that we already have such a linguistic time machine we can put to machinic use - helping people construct lives.

So why do we need time travel? In short we need it because we need memory. We need memory to have a sense of duration, a sense of being alive, a sense of existing in time. Time machines allow us to extend this sense beyond ourselves as individuals too. They allow us to have relational and collective memories, including memories of the future. Holding onto this sense of time enables us to stand apart from or to stand up to the forces at work in our world that regulate and control us, confine us into tiny spaces, interfere with our connections with each other, and detract from any sense of vitality, of being alive, of experiencing joy and love. Therapists need time machines because those who consult us are often searching for what is life giving, often more than they are searching for evidence-based achievement of goals specified by the forces of control.

Finally let me apologize to those who may have hoped I would unveil a new model of a narrative DeLorean car. That may have to wait for another conference. Perhaps in the future if you are interested in traveling there.

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