

‘An Invisible Labyrinth of Time’: Temporal Disjunction in J.M. Coetzee’s Dusklands

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Abstract : This paper focuses on temporality in J.M. Coetzee’s first novel, *Dusklands*, to argue that the novel’s fractured, disjointed temporality is intricately linked to the representations of the war in Vietnam and the colonial project in South Africa. The disrupted temporalities in the novel eschew chronological plots and linear time in favour of narratives that subvert the notion of historical progress to suggest instead the coextensive, multivalent ways in which the past and present interpenetrate one another. The disruption of temporal flow in the novel is evident in its form – the novel comprises two novellas that are juxtaposed, with the first part (‘The Vietnam War’) set centuries before the second part (‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’). The juxtaposition of the two novellas suggests history’s sometimes overlapping and lateral, rather than linear, movement. The novel’s form is extended in its montage narrative structure, which works to extend its temporal range. The temporal disjunction is reinforced, firstly, by Coetzee’s textual strategies, which include the subversion and critique of realism, parody, repetition, and the narrative technique of montage, and secondly, by the novel’s thematic concerns, which focus on the ways in which American domination can be linked to the colonial quest from earlier times. The complex structure of various strands and levels of authorship slows down the narrative’s temporal flow, requiring the reader to spend a fair amount of time unraveling the various parts of the narrative and relating them to each other. The structure epitomizes reflexive referencing, in which the reader can only make sense of the narrative by going back and forth and connecting various parts of it. The narrative structure also emphasizes the underlying similarities in the brutality that marked these two distinct historical events, epitomized by the drive towards subjection and domination by the novel’s two protagonists, Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee. The links and overlapping strands between the two novellas emphasize the ways in which the historical truth of colonial discourse becomes as much a myth as the propaganda program in Vietnam.

Keywords : disjunction, juxtaposition, montage, temporality

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