

Reconfiguring Narrative Time: Recursion, Fragmentation and Minimalism in Three Modern Novels

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Abstract—This study examines how modern fiction reconfigures narrative time. Through a comparative analysis of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2014), Lance Olsen's *Calendar of Regrets* (2010) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2007), it distinguishes three specific temporal configurations: recursive, fragmented and minimalist. The study explores how the selected works treat narrative coherence and how this reframes the readers' intellectual engagement. Through a comparative narratological methodology, and close reading of the major texts and secondary resources, it examines how recursion destabilises progression, how fragmentation disrupts continuity and how minimalism intensifies temporal compression. The findings emphasise that time reconfiguration emerges not from a single technique but from multiple ones, each reshaping the cognitive experience of reading. The work is relevant to wider discussions of contemporary temporality since it shows that the narrative form can be used to demonstrate cultural concerns about the acceleration, fragmentation, and unstable nature of lived time.

Index Terms—recursion, fragmentation, minimalism, cognitive analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Modern narrative fiction indicates a shift where time is seen as accelerated, fragmented and unstable. Ermarth (1992) states that postmodernism narrative ceases to present the unity of time but rather “subverts...temporality” (p. 7). Jameson (2016) argues that modern fiction generates a state of temporal compression that interrupts the past-present-future connections of history and so “it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but ‘heaps of fragments’” (p. 24). Bauman (2000) recognises a larger crisis in representing time that destabilises narrative continuity: “Time-distance separating the end from the beginning is shrinking or vanishing altogether” as “the two notions, which were once used to plot the passing...of time, have lost much of their meaning...There are only ‘moments’ - points without dimensions” (p. 118). These theoretical perspectives lean closer to formal innovations of modern fiction, which do not follow a chronological plot progression but rather use different techniques such as recursive, fragmented, or minimalist plot structures. This can be found in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2014), Lance Olsen's *Calendar of Regrets* (2010) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2007) because of their unique strategies of disrupting time. In these novels, a world is created where traditional pauses or reflective moments are reduced or eliminated. This research examines how these texts reconfigure narrative temporality to reflect the complexity of the modern world.

The experimental nature of time in these novels requires a theoretical model that considers each novel's narrative structure and experience. The concepts of order, duration and frequency outlined by Genette (1980) provide the structural framework for analysing how the texts play with narrative time. Moreover, postmodern critics like McHale (2004) point to the increase in temporal fragmentation in modern fiction. Novels are not just restructured sequences of time; rather, they focus on the consequences of living in a world where time is threatened or lost. The reconfiguration of structural and affective temporalities situates narrative transformation as a formal method and a thematic expression of contemporary consciousness. Hence, while this study draws on established narratological frameworks, it investigates how such reconfiguration results in the dissolution of temporal continuity through different strategies (i.e., recursion, fragmentation, minimalism) and the cognitive consequences of this.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Time has always been a major source of organisation in narratives, yet this has changed in modern fiction, leading theorists to differ in their conceptualisation of the role of time. Genette (1980) claims that temporal steadiness is challenged in contemporary fiction, as there is no systematic chronology. He states three important aspects that structure story time and narrative time: “connections between the temporal order of succession of the events in the story and...their arrangement in the narrative,” “connections between the variable duration of these events and...the...duration...of their telling in the narrative” and ultimately “connections of frequency...relations between the repetitive capacities of the story and those of the narrative” (p. 35). In other words, “postmodern reality renders time phenomenon as accelerated, non-

linear, fragmented, open-ended, instable, instantaneous, disposable, displaying each moment split into multiple versions of itself, demonstrating perdition of temporal/historical continuity and embodying continues present inherent in our postmodern reality” (Gruic Grmusa, 2013, para. 5). This shows that narrative temporality is not merely a technical order, but a concept influenced by changing cultural and aesthetic conditions.

Contemporary narrative time theory has developed as a reaction to cultural acceleration and fragmentation that undermine stable temporal structures. Harvey (1990) argues that postmodernism has produced “an intense phase of time–space compression that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact” that has fractured the narrative wholeness one experiences (p. 284). Likewise, Ginn et al. (2018) contend that “modernity’s temporality and its counter temporalities” are shaped by global interconnectedness and ecological uncertainty (p. 214). Extending this argument, Bobaru and Sas (2024) state that the temporal collapse is the reaction of global interconnectedness, indicating that “the fragmented depiction of time and disjointed spatial constructs in postmodern literature reflect the socio-environmental disruptions characterizing our present-day world” (p. 101). These arguments indicate that fragmented temporality has resulted from global perception, not only aesthetic experiment. Cohen (2014), however, illustrates that former artistic styles expressed different perceptions of time, highlighting the continuity of aesthetic experimentation. Although some theorists would consider contemporary temporality a total renewal, others would consider it an extension of aesthetic innovation. Thus, time must be perceived as being both historically placed and formally experimental, with influences of cultural pressures and artistic reaction.

Herman (2007) indicates that due to the manipulation of order, duration and frequency, narrative time is not formed by text structure on its own but also by how readers construct a “structured time-course of particularized events” in their minds rather than from the sequence of sentences (p. 9). In *Story logic: Problems and possibilities of narrative*, Herman (2004) highlights that narratives give adequate information to allow readers to reconstruct time, which enables them to draw conclusions about temporal relationships. McHale (2004) argues that postmodern fiction has been created to intentionally violate these cognitive and phenomenological expectations, creating temporal uncertainty. It engages in questions such as “What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?” (p. 10). Thus, structural narratology that focuses on manipulating form and experiential and cognitive perspectives places much importance on the role of readers to create temporal coherence.

When narrative works present unconventional temporalities, they impose high cognitive load on readers. Cognitive narratology offers a critical understanding of how readers manipulate time arrangements. Zwaan and Radvansky (1998) assert that readers create mental representations of narratives by integrating temporal, spatial and causal information, suggesting that coherence requires stable cues in narratives (p. 171). Kurby and Zacks (2008) support this argument, indicating that readers interpret narratives by “segmenting them into events” according to perceptual and cognitive cues (p. 72). Carrasco (2023) contributes to this discussion, showing that working memory and attentional capacity influence the way readers revise situational models, especially when narratives do not follow an expected temporal order: “As readers progress through a text, they continuously update and revise their situational models to integrate new information and reconcile inconsistencies or contradictions,” which is cognitively demanding (p. 1). Willemsen (2025) builds upon this view by demonstrating the “importance of epistemic emotion dynamics” in readers’ engagement with “time-loop narratives” and responses to narrative uncertainty (p. 42). Thus, cognitive theories indicate that the process of understanding time is active and requires resources, and it is stressed when narratives erase or disturb the temporal breaks. Further, the elimination of pause in modern fiction not only challenges structural norms but also increases the intellectual and emotional burden on readers.

Critics who have investigated *Cloud Atlas* (2014) by Mitchell have focused on the complex time structure of the text with special emphasis on the meaning of its recursive narrative structure. Kucała (2018) argues that *Cloud Atlas* confronts the crisis of how history is understood, a crisis intensified by the novel’s recursive organisation of time rather than by themes. He clearly states that “it is the persistent and conspicuous recurrences that hold the novel together” (p. 108). Rogers (2018) believes that the “temporal collapse” in *Cloud Atlas* is a phenomenon specific to modernity (p. 27). Both critics mention that the novel breaks away from linear time, although Kucała views it as a criticism of historical writing, while Rogers sees it as an expression of modern cultural acceleration. Mitchell’s narrative structure supports these arguments, as he breaks each storyline at a point of high intensity. Thus, both critics agree that the novel disrupts the continuity of time, but they disagree on whether it is rooted in the criticism of history or a reflection of culture.

Although *Calendar of Regrets* (2010) by Lance Olsen has received little scholarly attention, its narrative experimentation has been recognised within broader critical discussions of postmodern fiction. McHale (2004) identifies the innovative techniques that characterise Olsen’s narrative but does not examine what they mean from a cognitive perspective. By contrast, Currie (2007) provides a theoretical way of understanding the author’s use of repetition and interruption as patterns of nonlinear narrative time, describing “progression as regression” in which “progress is made by reconstructing the timeline of events leading up to the story which is now being told” (p. 88). These approaches are mostly contextual and descriptive rather than analytical examinations of their effects on readers’ cognition. Therefore, the way in which *Calendar of Regrets* uses fragmentation to actively shape its experience of time and pause has not been adequately theorised. In contrast to *Cloud Atlas* (2014), which has received extensive historical and cultural criticism, *Calendar of Regrets* is frequently interpreted considering its novelty rather than its treatment of time.

While *Calendar of Regrets* (2010) presents temporality through fragmentation, *The Road* (2007) by Cormac McCarthy approaches it by minimising time markers. According to Begmatova (2025), it is the father–son relationship in the story that triggers emotions and shows how time is experienced through memory and anticipation: Their relationship is “expressed more through silence and movement than words, is artistically written in a minimalist style, which leaves the reader with a deeper emotional impact” (p. 2201). Godfrey (2011) highlights the novel’s physical settings, arguing that places serve as stores of lost memories: “geographical memories unfold within each scene” (p. 174). Both critics emphasise the paucity of time markers in the novel, but Begmatova views it as a character-driven phenomenon, whereas Godfrey sees it as related to space and ecology. These interpretations are supported by McCarthy’s approach where time is compressed into an ongoing struggle for survival and thus temporal breaks are removed as a minimalist strategy.

Despite the significant amount of literature on the topic of narrative temporality and cognitive processing, these sources have rarely been combined to investigate how modern novels employ the reconfiguration of narrative time. Critics of *Cloud Atlas* (2014) stress its temporal recursion, but they do not extend their analysis to the fragmentation of *Calendar of Regrets* (2010) or the minimalism of temporality of *The Road* (2007). Similarly, cognitive theorists discuss readers’ processing of disrupted temporal cues but do not consider the narrative strategies employed in the three novels. This results in a lack of cross-theoretical analysis that unites narrative temporality and cognitive processing. This research addresses this gap by combining these points of view to examine how *Cloud Atlas*, *Calendar of Regrets* and *The Road* restructure the temporal experience through the conscious employment of narrative reconfiguration.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative narratological methodology that joins structural and cognitive approaches to examine how *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, 2014), *Calendar of Regrets* (Olsen, 2010), and *The Road* (McCarthy, 2007) employ recursion, fragmentation, and minimalism as temporal reconfiguration techniques along with their cognitive effects on readers. Through close reading, each text is analysed separately to determine its temporal arrangements and cognitive processing. The analysis first builds on major theories of narratology, particularly Genette’s (1980) framework of order, duration, and frequency, and second on Herman’s (2004) cognitive narratology. Within this framework, each category will be applied to a single text based on the dominance of the relevant narrative technique. Recursion, which refers to narrative movement to earlier temporal incidents across the story, is seen in *Cloud Atlas*. Fragmentation, defined as structural discontinuity that interrupts and alters time, characterizes *Calendar of Regrets*. Finally, minimalism, which signifies narrative reduction through limited exposition, is evident in *The Road*. Therefore, these categories are not universally applicable to all narratives, but are the dominant techniques within the selected texts, through which each novel is examined.

The close reading procedure applied to each text maintains consistency to ensure comparability across the analysis of the three texts. Each novel will be read for its structural organization of time and the cognitive effects of that technique. A comparative analytical framework is developed to examine the extent to which these three different techniques reconfigure narrative time, resulting in cognitive demands on readers. Such an analysis considers each text according to its specific technique to recognize convergence in their effects, especially in relation to temporal progression and reader engagement. It highlights how such strategies require readers to negotiate narrative gaps to reconstruct temporal order revealing how these distinct stylistic techniques converge in intensifying interpretive engagement.

IV. DISCUSSION

Cloud Atlas (2014), *Calendar of Regrets* (2010) and *The Road* (2007) tend to play with time through recursion, fragmentation, and minimalism. The manipulations are intentional, as they operate simultaneously on structural techniques, thematic interpretation, and readers’ cognitive experience. Ricoeur (1984) asserts that different narrative forms shape temporal experiences, stating that “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative” (p. 3). Consequently, recursive, fragmented, and minimalist narrative structures comparably reshape temporal perception through restructuring the chronological order of events into experiential time. Narrative pauses should not be considered inactive periods but rather active forms of narrative time. In this sense, recursion, fragmentation, and minimalism are not only stylistic devices but also epistemological strategies that define perception and thought. In *Cloud Atlas*, *Calendar of Regrets* and *The Road*, structural techniques overlap with thematic concerns, aesthetic experimentation, and existential collapse, demonstrating that form and content are constitutive of one another. Herman (2004) states that manipulation of structural devices including pauses is multidimensional and intentional to permit “cognizing events [that] resist (or altogether deny) chronological ordering” (p. 220).

In Mitchell’s (2014) *Cloud Atlas*, six stories reflect one another, and important narrative resolutions are pushed into the future and repeated in the corresponding narratives. This can be highlighted through what Genette (1980) terms ‘metadiegesis’ as each narrative overlaps and mirrors the other (p. 228). He emphasizes that “what happened several times would also be recounted several times, but a different (either greater or lesser) number of times” (p. 115). Each story is set in a different time, genre, and style, still thoughts, ideas, and story patterns echo throughout the novel, where the past, present, and future interweave in a repeated cycle. This is stated from the very beginning of the novel when Ewing, the first story’s main character, says, “I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrum of itself, but as I approach, it

bestirs itself and moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 17). For example, a journalist uncovers letters written by a composer in the 1930s, and a clone in a post-human regime watches a film about that journalist. Hence, each story echoes the other as the narrative progresses. Even identities recur as a comet-shaped birthmark appears on protagonists of different stories. Structural powers also recur; imperial exploitation, predatory capitalism, enslavement, and resistance reappear in the novel’s various cultures and centuries. And so, recursion in the novel is structural, narrative, and thematic.

The architecture of *Cloud Atlas* compels readers to experience its narrative structure while trying to reach an understanding. As Rzayyig et al. (2023) observe, “due to the multilayered structure of *Cloud Atlas*, the experience of unravelling the nested narratives of the novel, is like stumbling unaware into the exciting experience of opening Russian dolls... matryoshka dolls. The Russian doll could be taken as an analogy to the structure of the book” (p. 3719). In the middle of the novel, the stories unwind in reverse chronological order until the final chapter where the first story is finished, resembling a matryoshka doll. “One model of time: an infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments, each ‘shell’ (the present) encased inside a nest of ‘shells’ (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we perceive as the virtual past. The doll of ‘now’ likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we perceive as the virtual future” (Mitchell, 2014, p. 409). Such interruptions compel readers to preserve and construct recursive narratives; hence, they experience a continuous cognitive load. Herman (2004) stresses that “stories depend vitally on sequences of actions [and that readers] build *action structures* [based on] general cognitive principles” (p. 83). This structural style requires the readers’ active reconstitution of time to connect actions of different stories set in different times and places into a meaningful development.

On the other hand, *Calendar of Regrets* (Olsen, 2010) is based on fragmentation and narrative looping, as twelve narratives intersect unpredictably. As Genette (1980) argues the order of narrative does not necessarily follow the order of the story (p. 35). Hence the story line and narrative sequence rarely coincide with chronological order. Although the calendar implies order and coherence, fragmentation is the governing principle in the novel, as the stories do not progress chronologically. Czyz (2011) describes it as follows: “[a] delicate bridge between scenes is constructed of the sentence fragment that concludes one chapter only to become the starting point of another” (para. 7). The novel is about a journey of memory and perception. The characters are all lost and related in a series of recurring events. This fragmentation reflects the characters’ psychological and emotional state as many of them experience regret and are unable to achieve closure.

Besides enjoying the experience of reading the book, readers must follow the events to capture the deep meaning of the stories. Early in the novel, we are asked to “look closely: everything is webbed with everything, existence an illuminated manuscript you walk through” (Olsen, 2010, p. 12). Fludernik (2002) stresses that “noncanonical narratives” prove that storytelling rules are not fixed but defined by how readers make sense of them (p. x). Olsen uses time to understand the past while still stuck in the present and unable to move forward. Hence, the interactions between characters end with no clear answers. From the perspective of cognitive narratology, these unresolved narratives run through unrelated stories, creating a state of inferential fragmentation that “force[s] readers or listeners to modify or shift the interpretive models on which they have hitherto relied” (Herman, 2004, p. 13). Readers must construct coherence and meaning from discontinuity. Carrasco (2023) emphasises that discontinuous narrative cues strain the memory, as readers must “hold and manipulate information in working memory, and draw inferences based on the available information and their prior knowledge” (p. 1). In both cases, Mitchell (2014) and Olsen (2010) pursue comparable effects but through different processes: Mitchell uses excessive systematic complexity, whereas Olsen depends on unresolved discontinuity.

The Road (2007) employs a different version of narrative looping. Instead of repeating fragmented plots, McCarthy (2007) highlights the recurrence of survival moves and scenery: “People are always getting ready for tomorrow... Tomorrow wasn’t getting ready for them. It didn’t even know they were there” (p. 168). The repetitive cycles of walking, scavenging, and evading in the novel lack any narrative variation to form a temporal loop, generating what would be described as minimalist repetition, making time feel circular although it moves forward. The setting itself reflects minimalism: the cities are ash, and the sky is grey. Moreover, readers are never told about the catastrophe that has led to such destruction. Humans’ entire existence is reduced to one fact, which is death: “Every day is a lie... But you are dying. That is not a lie” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 238). *The Road* is known for its simple structure and minimalist techniques, such as limited descriptions, short sentences, sparse punctuation and straightforward dialogue: “Are we still the good guys? ...Yes, we are still the good guys” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 75).

The minimalist prose and lack of time indicators set the narrative time within the ongoing present. According to Genette (1980), such narrative compression increases the “tempo” through condensing the textual space of events (p. 94). However, from a cognitive narratological view, the ‘tempo’ is not only a structural strategy, but it also affects the readers’ perception of the narrative events. In *The Road* (2007), this minimalist compression accelerates the tempo, which redirects readers’ awareness from plot development to existential stakes. Contrary to Mitchell’s (2014) recursion, which generates interpretative instability, or Olsen’s (2010) looping fragmentation, which eliminates resolution, McCarthy’s (2007) minimalism reduces structural anticipation and interpretative complexity, replacing it with temporal compression.

In all three novels, different techniques intersect in their disruption of temporal continuity. In *Cloud Atlas* (2014), Mitchell creates cognitive congestion before a resolution is reached. The ambiguity in *Calendar of Regrets* (2010) results from fragmentation and looping, while time compression in *The Road* (2007) intensifies experimental immediacy.

Together, these strategies create ambiguity and segmentation, increase cognitive load, and induce temporal disorientation, demonstrating that time reconfiguration can be deliberately manipulated. These findings extend Genette's framework of narrative temporality proving how modern fiction reconfigures time through different techniques rather than mere chronological order. Also, they align with Herman's view on cognitive narratology emphasizing readers' role in constructing coherence and meaning from chaos. Consequently, equifinality is a crucial principle: the similarity of readers' experiences is achieved through different narrative strategies, whether recursion, fragmentation, or minimalism. Ultimately, modern narrative temporality is flexible, reader-oriented and influenced by textual organisation and the act of reading.

V. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of *Cloud Atlas* (2014), *Calendar of Regrets* (2010) and *The Road* (2007) reveals that modern fiction is radically different in its employment of reconfigured temporal strategies that reshape narrative time, therefore disrupting the cognitive and experiential framework of readers' narrative understanding. It also reveals that temporal formation does not occur from a single narrative device but from interpretive intervals that continuously mediate the narrative flow. Accordingly, these strategies reconfigure narrative time through redistributing, modulating, and compressing it. *Cloud Atlas* does it by recursive nesting and delayed resolution, imposing interpretative demands on the readers only to gain coherence in the end. In *Calendar of Regrets*, Olsen employs mosaic fragmentation, narrative looping, and endless interruption to preserve ambiguity and increase cognitive load without structural resolution. Finally, *The Road* uses radical minimalism, descriptions of repetitive survival actions and a lack of temporal markers. It compresses narrative time into the constant present to produce a sense of disorientation through simplification instead of multiplication. In each of the three texts, the progression of events creates ambiguous segmentation, strain on working memory and unstable temporal orientation, proving that these strategies shape readers' experience and essentially reconfigure narrative time.

The cognitive strain caused by such texts shows how readers are forced to construct meaning from fragmentation, monotony, or structural excess. Narrative reconfiguration, therefore, turns out to be not a stylistic ornament but a narrative framework and a cognitive affirmation. The experiential confusion that is created throughout these novels indicates that modern fiction is more interested in depicting time as unstable, recursive, or collapsed, which is a literary response to the inconsistency and complexity of the world. In a world shaped by globalisation, digital media and cultural dislocation, the notion of a chronological and coherent storyline seems inefficient. Recursive, fragmented, and minimalist narratives become an alternative, as they reflect the experience of real modern life. Thus, time reconfiguration may be interpreted as a narrative device and a sign of an anxious culture, concerned with how time is experienced, perceived and construed at the structural level of narrative. Accordingly, narrative reconfiguration should be examined not only as structural arrangements but also as an interaction between structure and cognition. By integrating structural and cognitive narratology, this study emphasizes that temporality is both a formal strategy and a cognitive process, a notion that can be further examined in future studies across broader textual corpora and more diverse theoretical frameworks.

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