Timelessness in Angela Carter's The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman

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Timelessness in Angela Carter’s
*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*

Satoshi Masamune

In spite of the many references to time that occur in the novels of Angela Carter, few studies have focused on the problems of time in her work. Criticism, thus far, has tended to concentrate on the topics of sex or gender, leaving the treatment of time surprisingly unexamined. This study focuses on Carter’s novel, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) (henceforth abbreviated as IDM), a text that, according to Cornel Bonca, pre-dates Carter’s investigation into the problem of sex. Bonca has noted a thematic break between *IDM* and the novel that follows, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). If Bonca’s claim is correct, *IDM* could offer a useful springboard for a critical study of time in Carter’s novels.

In the 1960s Carter’s novels explored the issue of the past. However, the focus here was not on the problem of history, a topic that, given the decline of Britain as a world power, had been a concern of several British novelists after World War II. These novels focused, instead, on the passage of time and the transformation of present events into past events, resulting in a sense of loss on the part of the protagonists. For instance, in *Shadow Dance* (1966), the awareness that an event has moved into the past is described vividly in a scene in which the two main characters break into an empty house to search for a collection of antiques; the characters are impressed by the contrast between the owners, who have long gone, and their possessions, which remain on the scene. In the 1970s, Carter’s style shifted; she moved from realism into science fiction and allegory. With this change in style, the focus on the problem of time also changed; a concern with the functional aspect of time passing emerges alongside a concern with the negative effects that are created as time slips away. Carter’s text shows how the lapse of
time can sweep away unpleasant events; however, it also shows that agreeable events can suffer the same fate, against the will of the protagonists. In each case, the passage of time is closely connected with the fixing of an event by means of description; this fixing of a moment and the erosion that is the effect of time are in constant tension. One example of this tension being played out can be seen in *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Carter’s only novel of the 1980s. At the beginning of this novel, a newsman interviews a female circus star. He listens to her talking about her life through the night. During the course of the interview, he hears Big Ben tolling three times. This tolling of the time assumes symbolic significance in that it reminds the journalist that the woman’s fascinating story, which has been veiling the passage of time thus far, is actually locked in the past, though appearing in the present. Thus, by marking both the fixing and the passage of time, Carter’s text elaborates the dynamic aspect of time.

Still more importantly, this elaboration includes, as its objective, a postmodern exploration of a temporal problem, that is, the act of narration. Generally, when one narrates an event, there are two temporal points involved: the point in time at which each event in the narrative actually happened, and the point in time at which the act of narration is fixed. However, when an event is being narrated, the latter aspect tends to become invisible, owing to the fact that it is difficult to be simultaneously conscious of these two different points in time. The result is that the entire narrative seems to exist in a timeless zone, exempt from the signs of the actual pauses that the narrator may well make during the act of narrating, with the result that the narrative emerges as a seamless whole. It is to be expected that postmodern consciousness, with its focus on the medium of transmitting messages rather than the messages themselves, should be attentive to this timeless character of narrative as it emerges in the act of narration. Interestingly, as if to bring the timeless character of narrative to the fore, some of the major British novels of the 1970s and 1980s take the form of a protagonist writing or telling his or her autobiography. In such novels, the autobiography is being completed as it is being narrated, and the time that it took for the narration to be finished is not taken into consideration; no clues relating to that information are left in the novel. This erasure of the duration of narrational time is indirectly problematized by those parts that come before and/or after the main frame of the autobiography. *IDM* is a novel that adopts this pattern. It is a novel in which the protagonist, a national hero because of his part in a war, writes his autobiography fifty
years after the war has ended. The novel starts with the hero explaining his current status and the reason why he is writing his autobiography; it ends soon after he finishes writing the autobiography, since he describes how he feels with the completed work before him. Consequently, although information regarding the historical time that his autobiography spans in the narrative is available, how much time the narration itself took cannot be known.

Perhaps, one simple way to determine this narrational information would be to relate each point of the narrative closely to the point of the narrational act; however, this examination of correspondence would obviously make the work look much too complicated. In this respect, Carter may be unique among postmodern novelists. Instead of simply indicating that such timelessness is a clear sign of a narrative that only partially represents reality, IDM seems to suggest that our perception of reality is timeless by nature, and that our regular sense of the passage of time, created fundamentally by the use of tense and considered to occur not only when an event is experienced but also when it is narrated, could be an illusion. Indeed, the very adoption of a pseudo science fiction form for IDM seems to support this hypothesis, in that such a genre would certainly function to deform reality, as it is normally perceived.

In this connection, IDM seems focused on the problem of our perception of reality, as it is related to desire. Her focus on the timeless nature of our reality emerges by denying the time normally assumed to be required for any desire to be formed. In other words, she denies the process by which a subject’s desire emerges as a recognizable, material form. In this connection, the arguments of two major postmodern thinkers could be introduced here: Jacques Lacan’s thesis that ‘desire is desire of another’ and René Girard’s focus on ‘the triangle of desire.’ They both emphasize the imitative nature of desire; one desires what someone else desires. The possible elimination of time in this mechanism for the formation of desire seems to have informed aspects of Carter’s IDM, in that by the time one has clarified the nature of one’s desire, that desire is already activated. In other words, desire is not formed after the stipulation of what is desired; stipulation is always after the fact. Furthermore, one can never return to a point in time when one did not, in fact, feel a desire that one ends up actually having. Therefore, seen from this viewpoint, that which is stipulated as desire could be located in a timeless world.

Against this claim, the following counter-argument might be proposed: even if one’s desire is stipulated after the fact, whether it is
fulfilled should entail the future; therefore, the whole postulation of a
timeless world in relation to desire is faulty. In fact, this hypothetical
position highlights another aspect of the nature of desire as it emerges in
Carter’s text; her text seems to emphasize that desire, in the process of
being stipulated, will lose something of its original nature, and that such
a stipulation will be, in effect, no different from a simple, related objec-
tive fact. Thus, as a number of specific examples in IDM illustrate, IDM
mediates the idea that narrative attempts to grasp the original state
of desire, attempts that might create a sense of future, are futile, and that
if one depends on narrative to specify one’s desire, timelessness must be
a key feature of such a narrated world.

The aim of this study, therefore, is to demonstrate the timeless nature
of narrative in IDM by focusing on the hero’s desire. Initially, the after-
the-fact nature of stipulating one’s desire emerges in her text. Subsequently,
there is a focus on the transformation of the original state
of one’s desire through the process of stipulating it; the loss incurred by
this transformation contributes to the embodiment of timelessness in
Carter’s text. Additionally, in the course of this investigation, some
modification to existing interpretations of the hero’s motive for killing
the enemy leader and his daughter will be offered, and further sugges-
tions as to what the last sentence of the novel means will be made.

I. The Model of Time in the Capital and the Doctor’s Plans for
Dissolving this Model

The setting of IDM seems to be a country in South America. The
protagonist and narrator is a man called Desiderio. Fifty years earlier,
he became a national hero because he had successfully brought a war,
known as the ‘Reality War’, to an end. It started as a result of a conflict
between the Minister, who reigned like a monarch, and Doctor
Hoffman, who had been at one time regarded as a great intellectual but
who had suddenly dropped out of public life. Although historical
descriptions of this conflict already exist, Desiderio begins to write
about the journey he was ordered by the Minister to make during the
war, a journey that has not been included in the official, documented
account of the war. It appears that the different concepts of time sup-
ported by the two parties in the war represent, on the one hand, an
easily recognizable temporal perception of reality and, on the other
hand, another, less recognizable form of temporal recognition with
respect to reality, a form that may well be truer to how we actually recognize reality than the former mode. An examination of this conflict, as part of an investigation into what the Doctor is trying to do, follows.

At the beginning of the war, a messenger the Doctor has sent to the capital announces that the Doctor is in the process of sending out a variety of images; this announcement is made with the claim that the Doctor will release all that has been repressed with regard to people’s desires. The energy produced by a number of couples engaging in sexual intercourse in the Doctor’s laboratory is used to send out these images. Desiderio reports that he noticed a change in the nature of his day-to-day experiences, soon after the outbreak of the war; he notes that, ‘Sugar tasted a little salty, sometimes. A door one had always seen to be blue modulated by scarcely perceptible stages until, suddenly, it was a green color’ (15). A feature of the changes he reports is that, despite the fact that only images have been sent out, it appears that these visual signals also modify the messages of senses other than sight. Shocked by a limitless number of strange events, people in the capital begin to panic as a result of their inability to distinguish what is real.

Previous studies of this novel have suggested that the point of conflict between the Minister and the Doctor may be expressed as the repression of desire versus its release, or order versus chaos. The Doctor’s attempt to release desire seems to be based on the assumption that the more quickly an individual’s repressed desire is released, and its object achieved, the better it is for that person. It appears, therefore, that he tries to minimize or erase the time that it takes for the satisfaction of desire. The Doctor also seems to assume that time itself is oppressed by the model of time that operates in this country and, thus, he tries to set it free. Interestingly, the release of people’s desires and the release of time are linked. To examine this connection, a brief look at the order of time operating in this country might be useful. The Minister emphasizes the significance of time to the Doctor’s messenger by pointing to a large cathedral in the capital; this cathedral constitutes a good example of how a historical structure embodies the nature of time, as he sees it:

Time, the slavish time you despise, had been free enough to work in equal partnership with the architect; the masons took thirty years to build the cathedral and, with every year that passed, the invisible moulding of time deepened the moving beauty of its soaring lines. Time was implicit in its fabric. (34)
However, this vision of the nature of time as repetitious and accumulative obstructs a vision of the past that varies from person to person; in the Minister’s monolithic concept of time nondescript individual histories are ignored. The lives that constitute history are limited to those who made a heroic contribution to the nation, a contribution like Desiderio’s. Moreover, this concept of time includes a particular feature, a feature that is implied by the Minister’s phrase ‘with every year’; in this phrase the future of the country is presupposed as never failing to arrive after a certain amount of time has elapsed. In this concept of time there is no room for contingency.

Evidently, the Doctor wants to dismantle this system of time. By way of his messenger, the Doctor tells the Minister and Desiderio that he has already made the capital ‘a timeless place outside the world of reason’ (36). Later, the Doctor announces to Desiderio, in person, that the ‘dissolution of time’ (234) is his aim; the Doctor believes that time is repressed under the name of the past. Desiderio describes the scene in the city soon after the war starts: ‘Dead children came calling in nightgowns, rubbing the sleep and grave dust from their eyes. Not only the dead returned but also the lost living’ (19). He goes on to say:

Past time occupied the city for whole days together, sometimes, so that the streets of a hundred years before were superimposed on nowadays streets and I made my way to the Bureau only by memory, along never-before-trodden lanes that looked as indestructible as earth itself and yet would vanish, presumably, whenever someone in Dr Hoffman’s entourage grew bored and pressed a switch.

(21)

To Desiderio’s eyes, not only do the things of the past that are unknown to him appear isolated, they also overlap with images associated with the present. From these examples, it seems clear that the Doctor, in sending his images, wants to make the status of the past equal to that of the present. As can occur in film, which is referred to several times in this novel, he tries to make what happened in another place and time appear here and now. Apparently, he believes that if he continues to emit images, he will eventually succeed in eliminating the distinction between the past and the present, and thus appease those who have had their past buried in darkness.

What is behind this desire? Part of his reason for acting in this way seems to be private; this is clarified towards the end of the novel, when Desiderio reaches the Doctor’s castle residence. He finds the Doctor
there, caring for his dead wife as she lies upon a sofa; it turns out she has been chemically treated and her body has not decomposed. When their daughter returns home, the Doctor informs his beloved wife of her return in a whisper. Judging from this scene, it may be stated that the Doctor started this conflict because he attributed the cause of his wife’s death to the order of time operating in this country, an order that will not allow a person to live forever.13

However, the Doctor’s plans cannot be completed only by the release of the past; he also needs to release the future. As noted above, where a repetitious and accumulative time order prevails, the future comes to the present after a certain, calculable amount of time. By the time an expected future event becomes the present, a passage of time has occurred, a passage of time that people must experience, and that can only delay the fulfillment of their desire. However, in the situation created by the Doctor’s transmission of images, people in the capital have no way of anticipating anything; the images enter an individual’s mind directly, without mediation. If the images are those that people desire, a situation obtains in which the desire is instantaneously gratified and no future exists.14

Strictly speaking, though, there is some mediation and, thus, it cannot be said that images come directly to the minds of the people in the capital. First, there are a large number of slides that are used as samples of the images; on each slide various items are reflected, including the details of female genitalia and several isolated parts of the female body. Secondly, the Doctor has left his former advisor in charge of these slides, ordering him to wander all over the world with them. Thus, forms of mediation, with respect to the transmission of images by the Doctor, are, in fact, present.15

However, when the former advisor encounters a landslide, and the samples are lost, the possibility of mediation disappears. At this point, a transitional period, called Nebulous Time, begins. In this Nebulous Time zone, the Doctor’s daughter, Albertina, with whom Desiderio travels, explains to him how desire embodies itself in this transitional period. She says: ‘[D]esires must take whatever form they please, for the time being’ (169). According to this explanation, it seems that, in Nebulous Time, people have learned to see what they want to see, without any need of samples. Concerning this Nebulous Time, the Doctor talks about a cannibal community that Desiderio, together with a Count who is accompanying him in this time zone, has encountered. It emerges that, ‘The Cannibal Chief was the triumphant creation of neb-
lous time. He was brought into being only because of the Count’s desire for self-destruction’ (212). The masochistic Count has been killed by the Chief, according to the Count’s wish. With the advent of this Nebulous Time, therefore, the Doctor’s plans approach their successful fulfillment. People no longer need to suffer the experience of the passage of time that occurs before a certain expected future event is realized; nor do they need to worry about the thus far inevitable process of an event moving into the past because, now, whatever they hope for, can be instantaneously obtained.

This, then, constitutes a summary of the Doctor’s schemes and how they develop in the text; his plans are clearly directed at the creation of a timeless world, opposed to the world regulated by the time system that prevails in the capital. Two questions, however, arise in relation to the Doctor’s ideas. Apparently, the Doctor takes it for granted that the images he sends out are exactly what people in the capital want. It is true that, judging from the devastated state of the capital, these samples seem to have successfully set the people free from their repressed condition, but how could he be certain of the correspondence between the images and people’s desires? This is the first question that the above summary of the text invites. Another issue, in relation to what happens in the Nebulous Time zone, arises: despite the fact that people have reached the stage at which they can immediately realize their desires, nothing is problematized with respect to their choice of desires; this process seems to have been deliberately omitted. In order to find solutions to these two problems, we will have to look at some examples of desire formation as represented in *IDM*. All we have available for reference, however, are the cases set down by Desiderio. Few concrete descriptions of the reactions of ordinary people during the war are provided.

II. Desiderio’s Journey and the Passivity of Desire

The analysis of desire leads us, naturally, into ideas from the field of psychoanalysis. The discussion of desire in this study will be related to Jacques Lacan’s theory in that Desiderio demonstrates Lacan’s definition of desire. Lacan’s theory of desire may be summarized as follows. At first, a child exists in a condition of complete union with the mother. At this stage, it may be said that the child has not yet entered the world. In due course, however, the child, while looking at him/her-
self in a mirror, wants to know if the one seen in the mirror is him/herself. When the child receives the reply, ‘Yes, ‘it’ is you.’ (single quotation marks added are mine), and sees the glance of the responder, the child marks him/herself as in the world. Through this process, the child takes his/her place in the world but, at the same time, the state of union with the mother is lost forever. The child might ‘demand’ the meaning of ‘it’ but, owing to the limits of language, no explanation is possible.17 Thus, this ‘demand’ is transformed into ‘want’, while the mother tries to satisfy the child physiologically. On the child’s part, ‘desire’ for something prohibited is born in the gap opened between ‘demand’ and ‘want.’18 Importantly, Lacan’s theory of desire is not peculiar to children. Even as adults, we will never know what ‘it’ means; we will simply refer to another signifier (Lacan’s usage of ‘signifier’ is indicated here) and continue to remain unsatisfied.19 It seems, then, that the desire that Desiderio begins to cherish is similar in nature to that described by Lacan’s theory, as will be demonstrated in what follows.

Unlike others, who have been disturbed by the Doctor’s images, Desiderio has not gone mad before he leaves the capital, under the Minister’s orders, to assassinate the Doctor. This was partly because of his indifference to the world surrounding him, an indifference that has caused him to feel his existence as flimsy. As he acknowledges, ‘I often felt I was half-breed ghost myself…’ (19). Soon after the journey starts, this open-ended sense of self positions him in a no-man’s land; even the sense of loyalty that he feels towards the society of which he is a part begins to feel vaporous.20 Desiderio loses his sense of identity as he moves away from the capital, and it is at this point of separation that he feels the need to ask himself about something that corresponds to ‘it’ in Lacan’s theory of desire.21 Specifically, what spurs his search for the meaning of ‘it’ is something that he sees, accidentally, by the seashore before he reaches the town named S:

It was late August and the shops offered pink rock, coloured postcards, candy floss, straw hats and all the appurtenances of the holiday maker but, though all the doors were open, I could see no shopkeepers within, behind the counters, and the entire place was quite empty of humanity.

Along the promenade, striped umbrellas cast pools of shade over deserted tables at which no ice-cream eaters sat, though there were plenty of saucers smeared with residual traces and also glasses half full of pink, green and orange drinks in which the ice had not yet melted and the paper straws were still indented at the top from the
pressure of lips. The pale acres of sand were empty but for a few waddling sea-birds and I noticed a corpse who lay where the sand had left him, unattended but for a cloud of flies....It was as if the entire population of the town had slipped off somewhere, called to witness some event to which I alone had not received an invitation, and would all be back at their posts in five minutes....

This scene gives Desiderio an impression of the normal flow of time having been arrested; it also creates a presentiment that the people who should have been there might come back in a few minutes. He feels the future to be uncertain. Moreover, he can hardly have been left unaffected by a dead body lying on the beach. What kind of effect would the body have had on him? Lacan’s analysis of a painting, The Ambassadors by Hans Holbein, might lead us to an interpretation of the function of the dead body. According to Lacan’s analysis, a weather-beaten skull in the picture, when looked at from a certain angle, expresses ‘our own nothingness.’

Looking at the skull, Lacan tells us, we begin to desire an existence we have lost. Likewise, the dead body on the beach seems to incite Desiderio to long for a lost existence, in that after the experience of noticing the body on the beach his original aim of looking for the Doctor gradually recedes, and a journey that has no object or sense of specific purpose begins in its place.

According to Lacan’s scenario, the person whom Desiderio ought to ask for the meaning of ‘it’ is his mother. At the beginning of the war, while he is still in the capital, he sees a person who looks exactly like his dead mother. He instantly judges that she cannot be his true mother and, therefore, he does not feel any emotional upsurge when confronted with this mother look-alike. In contrast, he begins to feel enormously concerned about the Doctor’s daughter, Albertina, who appears in front of him in a mysterious way. In the capital, as well as during the first half of his journey, Albertina appears in front of him several times, in disguise. Her history of disguise runs like this: a black swan, the Doctor’s messenger, and the daughter of the mayor of the town S. He does not notice her existence until after the disguised Albertina disappears, leaving behind a trace that evokes her. She continues to haunt him in this way, as a mysterious lady, although why he fails to meet her remains a mystery to him.

In the second half of the novel, however, her chances of effecting a disguise lessen. There is even a scene where Albertina, dressed as a whore, reveals her natural shape before Desiderio. Eventually, she stops disguising herself altogether and accompanies Desiderio as a
guide to lead him to her father’s castle. If Albertina, who seems to follow her father’s orders, symbolizes Desiderio’s mother, given that he desires her, then, judging from the history of her appearances in front of him, it seems that the Doctor is trying to erase the incest taboo, to allow Desiderio to unite with the mother again. This interpretation is in accord with the Doctor’s general scheme of eliminating the time required for obtaining what is desired in that the Doctor may have thought that, through such a union, the future would be deprived of someone who still retained a sense of incest as a prohibited union. Desiderio, on the other hand, rejects the Doctor’s invitation to have eternal sexual intercourse with his daughter, and kills both the daughter and her father.23

Why, then, did Desiderio refuse the Doctor’s invitation? Previous studies of this novel have suggested that the hero’s motivation for the killing is based on his love for and loyalty to his country, i.e., the protagonist was forced to kill the woman for the sake of his country. In addition, extending this argument, scholars have also pointed to the last sentence of the novel ‘Unbidden, she comes,’ as indicating the strength of the protagonist’s desire for the woman he kills at the end of the war.24 Nevertheless, the hero has not been an enthusiastically loyal subject to the Minister; his immediate mental separation from the capital proves this point. Rather, as mentioned above, it would be more reasonable to think that Desiderio rejects life as structured by the Doctor, a life that would bring him to a timeless world, making love to Albertina forever. Evidently, Desiderio abhors living in such a world. A new interpretation of the hero’s motivation, then, is offered here: Desiderio rejects the idea of living in such a timeless world. In other words, on receiving the Doctor’s invitation, Desiderio immediately decided to keep the existence of an unpredictable future possible; he may even have imagined a state where, with no intervention by the Doctor, he could continue his journey.

With the disappearance of the enemy, Desiderio is forced to return to the capital; it is as if he were leaving a dream world. His rather hasty decision in this respect offers a bleak prospect. He describes the pain he felt on his return thus: ‘I crawled like a worm on its belly through the clinging mud of common time and the bare trees showed only the dreary shapes of an eternal November of the heart, for now all the changes would henceforth be, as they had been before, absolutely predictable’ (221). He starts to feel suffocated by the oppressive nature of such a concept of time, as if the unpredictability of the future, which,
apparently, he had enjoyed during his journey, had been completely lost.

Given that the order of time in the capital is one that makes the future predictable, was it, in fact, the case that the future, as he experienced it on the journey, was genuinely unpredictable? With regard to this point, it should be noted that the unpredictability of the future, as he experienced it during the journey, had a double meaning for Desiderio. On the one hand, the future was unforeseeable to him in the sense that he had no certain foreknowledge as to when he might obtain what he pursued; this aspect of uncertainty, as it relates to pursuit, mediates Desiderio’s active attitude towards the future. On the other hand, this unpredictability with respect to the future could also be linked to Desiderio’s passive attitude towards the future, as if he were an onlooker on someone else’s life. In some of the communities that he both visits and participates in as a member, plans for his future already exist, plans that he is expected to follow. In such cases he simply performs the roles assigned to him, or, to be more exact, he observes himself playing the roles. For instance, he recalls a time when a community of river people, with a chief named Nao-Kurai, welcomed him. In that community Desiderio’s marriage with a nine-year-old girl named Aoi had been arranged, without any consent being sought on his part. He describes the incident thus:

Because Aoi was only nine years old, I thought there would be a long period of betrothal but everyone assured me she had reached puberty and offered me visual proof if I did not believe them. So I abandoned the last vestiges of my shore-folk squeamishness and Nao-Kurai fixed the date of my wedding for a few weeks ahead … (81)

Desiderio feels the unpredictability of the future every time others announce such plans, unexpectedly, to him, but it could also be said that it is only in terms of Desiderio’s recognition of such events that such unexpectedness arises, in that there are others who already know that these things are going to happen. The events that he experiences have already been determined somewhere beyond his intervention, and that could be the reason why his journey assumes a sense of pseudo-pastness. It is rather strange, though, that plans for him exist in a community to which he has had no connection until he comes to visit it. In connection with Desiderio’s conflicted attitude towards his journey, Susan Rubin Suleiman makes this point: ‘What further characterizes [Desiderio] is a kind of paradoxically active passivity – for although he
does nothing to initiate action, he is thrown into it; and once in it, he keeps going, as if his very passivity made it possible for adventure to seek him out.” The hero’s passivity, which Suleiman labels ‘active passivity,’ seems to point to something beyond the hero’s journey; it points to the problem of how reality, as it is related to desire, is recognized.

III. Desiderio’s Discovery

Now that a certain passivity with respect to the hero’s formation of desire has been identified in relation to the trajectory of his journey, this section will look at the mechanism of the hero’s desire formation in more detail, in order to determine the nature of this passivity. Before beginning that analysis, however, this section will offer an answer to the following question, a question that was raised at the end of the first section: Did the Doctor, in sending images, know in advance what the people in the capital would desire? Theoretically, the answer should be no. Even if the Doctor had specified, through samples, the kinds of images he would send, the number of samples that he had prepared was huge. As Desiderio reports: ‘[T]he city was no longer the conscious production of humanity; it had become the arbitrary realm of dream’ (18). The capital is flooded with images. Under these circumstances, if it was, in fact, true that people had had their repressed desires satisfied, it would have been the case that the people would have specified their desires at the same moment as, or even after, they had had them fulfilled. Thus, these images have been determined and it cannot be said, therefore, that the Doctor knew what the people would want before he started sending the images. Is it possible, then, to find a concrete, practical sequence wherein a recipient of the Doctor’s images makes an after-the-fact specification of desire? In this regard, we will again have to resort to Desiderio’s reactions to the images, as they constitute the only available evidence for our analysis.

At the beginning of the war, Desiderio still has plenty of confidence in his own judgment with regard to reality; he feels that he can differentiate between what is real and what is not. Once he has started out on his journey, however, his self-confidence in this respect begins to collapse. The seaside scene in which people are absent, and time flows without bringing anything new, causes him to doubt what he sees; so does the exhibition displayed by the Doctor’s former advisor near the
same beach. Furthermore, a new scene awaits him when he gets out of the exhibition tent: ‘Now the pier was peopled…. And, for so great a number of people, they made very little noise, as if they knew they had no existential right to be here’ (47). This is the kind of scene that makes the viewer feel as if he or she is in a movie theater, watching a screen, but with a broken sound system. In addition, the following scene, in which Desiderio boards a ship together with the Count, creates a similar effect; it unfolds like a film projected by a faulty device:

The sailors would sometimes halt, open-mouthed, in the middle of a shanty, as if they were actors who had suddenly forgotten their lines, and mouth away vacantly for a few seconds, their hands suddenly dangling as if they had forgotten how to hold the ropes. But these lapses of continuity lasted no more than a moment. Then all would be saltily nautical again, in the manner of an old print. But sometimes there was a jarring effect of overlapping, as if the ship that bore us was somehow superimposed on another ship of a quite different kind.… (144)

Desiderio feels as if his field of vision has become something like the screen of a movie theater. As he does not know where the light source is, or how to get out of the screen, he has no choice but to remain where he is.

During his journey, the reasons for phenomena are sometimes identified in that they may be attributed to the existence of things projected, i.e., samples. At several points during his journey, Desiderio discovers that what he sees as well as what he does have been included, albeit partly, among the samples that the Doctor’s former advisor carries. For instance, part of the night that Desiderio shares with the daughter of the mayor of town S has been included in the samples. In addition, as he goes through the experience described below, he is persuaded to think that a correspondence exists between the samples and the world he sees. When Desiderio becomes an apprentice to the Doctor’s former advisor, he is held responsible for maintaining the samples while the advisor is away. As he nonchalantly fumbles with some of the samples that relate to an earthquake, an earthquake occurs, and this causes a landslide over the village where he is staying. It turns out that he is able to escape the disaster because he happens to be in a cave on the mountainside. Through this experience, he is presented with evidence confirming that the mechanism of image projection does, in fact, account for part of what he sees around him.27

Does this discovery lead him to think, with some relief, that the dis-
tinction between reality and fiction can still be maintained? The answer is no, judging from how he feels when he makes the discovery. Even if he can demonstrate that his vision was a fabrication, the fact that he has already lived out that fabrication cannot be denied; the fiction is not conspicuous enough to be distinguished from reality. The situation might be more accurately described by saying that the distinction between reality and fiction always holds, on the basis of a larger reality, in which Desiderio’s whole life up to this point has been lived. Consequently, what he apprehends most powerfully through his discovery is the fact that he is unable to stand at the moment in time that is prior to the advent of a manipulated image, because such a moment cannot possibly exist. It follows that, if the moment prior to the perception of reality does not exist, and if his perception of that reality reflects his desire, then this could well be the reason why desire formation in Desiderio is passive.

In close connection with this realization is another, which he learns from Albertina; he discovers that, even without the samples, some other person could manipulate his life (or, more specifically, his desires). He records her explanation in his autobiography thus: ‘And she told me that, according to her father’s theory, all the subjects and objects we had encountered in the loose grammar of Nebulous Time were derived from a similar source—my desires; or hers; or the Count’s’ (186). The reason why the world was derived from the Count’s desire at the beginning of the Nebulous Time period is, as Albertina says, because the Count was closer at that point to unconsciousness than anyone else. If Albertina’s explanation is true, then what Desiderio has seen since the arrival of Nebulous Time would have been, at times, a reflection of his own desires. He would have been looking at what he liked to watch; if this had been the case, he should have felt satisfied. However, as he cannot recall such a satisfactory state of mind, Desiderio, embarrassed, tries to deny Albertina’s words, and points out that what he has experienced in Nebulous Time was simply the objective world; thus, he makes the claim that the world exists independently of individual desire. Clearly, what embarrasses him here is not simply the after-the-fact stipulation of his desire by Albertina; he is also perplexed by the discovery that what Albertina has stipulated as his desire does not seem to constitute his desire but, rather, a plain fact of his past life. He senses a wide gap between his memory of past experiences and her stipulation of them as his desire; this gap suggests the possibility that desire changes its nature when it is specified. That which is specified, then, seems to have no
investment in its own fulfillment in a subsequent moment; thus, even if a number of such specifications are stacked up, temporally speaking, there is still no mediation of the idea of a durational world. The next section of this paper will examine the idea of desire that is subject to change, in order to interpret the last scene of the novel in a new way.

What is intriguing in *IDM* is that it demonstrates, in passing, that this passivity of desire is also constituted in the reader’s act of reading. Just before he starts writing his autobiography, Desiderio announces that he remembers everything that happened on the journey, and denies any fading of his memory. In spite of this declaration, however, he finds himself running forward to the conclusion, apparently skipping over details:

I made a journey through space and time, up a river, across a mountain, over the sea, through a forest. Until I came to a certain castle.
And …
But I must not run ahead of myself. I shall describe the war exactly as it happened. I will begin at the beginning and go on until the end.

To set down events according to mere chronological order, however, would have dashed the expectations of a reader who anticipates that the autobiography will be a narrative rather than a history. To the relief of such a reader, Desiderio’s announcement that he will follow a chronological order turns out to be merely a rhetorical flourish.

Near the end of the autobiography, though, where Desiderio describes the Doctor’s laboratory, he dashes the reader’s expectations yet again by telling the reader how his story will end. Once he has disclosed this information, he attempts to justify his action:

But there I go again – running ahead of myself! See, I have ruined all the suspense. I have quite spoiled my climax. But why do you deserve a climax, anyway? I am only trying to tell you exactly, as far as I can remember, what actually happened. And you know very well already that it was I who killed Dr Hoffman; you have read all about it in the history books and know the very date far better than I because I have forgotten it.

The reader is confused not by the lack of suspense, but by Desiderio’s reminder. It may seem, on the one hand, that such a premature announcement of the ending of his story is unnecessary; alternatively, the remark may suggest that the conclusion of the story does not consti-
tute the point of reading it. At any rate, it is at least certain that the reader has not deliberately forgotten how the story will end. The reader simply wants to hear what Desiderio’s voice will reveal, without expecting anything extraordinary. In this regard, Alison Lee has referred to Desiderio’s voice as ‘a narrative voice rendered inarticulate by the complexity of his desire.’

What I am suggesting is that the narrator’s announcement functions to elucidate the mechanism of reading. Without such pronouncements, the reader’s self-awareness, in the act of reading, would not be stimulated. The narrator’s voice in these instances initiates self-awareness on the reader’s part, which leads the reader, in turn, to confirm the fact that he or she has actually chosen something as the object of desire, without noticing it. Lee argues that the relationship between Desiderio and the Doctor overlaps the relationship between the reader and the narrator, Desiderio. In psychoanalytic terms, this kind of overlapped relationship is known as transference, and it describes a relationship that pertains between a patient and analyst. The crucial question, however, is this: if the reader were asked what they were after, they would have difficulty giving a concrete answer to this question; they would have to settle with what Lee says would be the case, that is, they would have to answer that they desired just what the narrator had told them and nothing else. What this hypothetical question shows is that there seems to be something lacking from one’s desire when it is specified.

IV. The Last Scene

The final section of this paper examines the last scene of IDM; in this section I offer a new way of interpreting this scene, and I develop the idea of loss or omission that is inherent in the specification of desire. After completing his autobiography, Desiderio briefly describes his everyday life thus:

Old Desiderio lays down his pen. In a little while, they will bring me my hot drink before they put me to bed and I am glad of these small attentions for they are the comforts of the old, although they are quite meaningless.

My head aches with writing. What a thick book my memories make! What a fat book to coffin young Desiderio, who was so thin and supple. My head aches. I close my eyes.

Unbidden, she comes. 

(221)
After the long story of the journey has been set down, the focus of the novel now shifts to the narrator. In a nod to postmodern consciousness, old Desiderio becomes a person who is, himself, being narrated; the narrator, therefore, is now neither young Desiderio nor old Desiderio, but a spirit-like being. Generally, this transformation of the narrator, as manifested here, is to be expected in that, if we are to be told something about the act of narration, a new narrator would have to come on the scene and be situated in such a way that the narration could be commented on. However, the case of old Desiderio is unique, in that even before he commenced his act of writing, he had come close to being a spirit-like being. This has come about because his life, a life of routine in the complete care of a government grateful to a national hero, has now become the life of a man who is barely alive, one who is hanging on to life only through the glory of the past. In such circumstances, the image of Albertina has been intermittently haunting him, as if it were the only sign that showed that he was still alive. He says that on the verge of death, all he hopes for is a final look at Albertina before he dies; perhaps in part, he has chosen to write the autobiography as the only way he can fix a momentary image of her. Certainly, his hope has been attained, because he seems to have succeeded in visualizing Albertina in words. His words, however, do more than he might have expected; his writing eventually functions as a tool for killing his desire for her, in that his autobiography, as he himself remarks, has functioned to terminate his life.

If we analyze the last scene of the novel in this light, then the last sentence of the whole novel, ‘Unbidden, she comes’, might be open to a new interpretation. Previous critical studies analyzing this last scene have interpreted the ‘she’ in the last sentence of the novel as referring to the image of Albertina, as it appears in Desiderio’s mind. In the context of this paper, however, I would argue that the ending points to something that has been left out of the hero’s attempt to describe his desire. This last scene may well mediate the following: as soon as old Desiderio leaves the scene with a new, unidentifiable narrator taking over his job, the desire that has eluded the act of old Desiderio’s description reappears from somewhere invisible. In light of old Desiderio’s symbolic death, desire thus revives with no particular anchorage to a specific person. Thus, in the light of this interpretation, the ending assumes an ironic tone, in that as long as Desiderio continues...
to chase what he desires, something he does in the act of writing about the journey, he never gains it; whereas, once he has given up the hunt, the treasure he has been seeking appears. If we follow this line of thought, it might also be said that the reader, asked a hypothetical question as to what they were after while reading *IDM*, would be able to provide an answer to this question, as long as it did not have to be expressed in words.

**Conclusion**

This paper has focused on the theme of timelessness in *IDM*, a theme that emerges through the specification of the hero’s desire. *IDM* seems to have been written on the presupposition that every perception the hero has reflects his desire. Some readers of *IDM*, though, may have the impression that the Doctor’s schemes are too extreme, in that he tries to create a desired reality only; they would say that objective realities exist, other than those that are simply desired. It is a plausible position, but at the same time, readers taking this position may find themselves asking the same question that Desiderio does, in response to Albertina’s indication of his desire. As sections III and IV of this paper have shown, one of the salient points of *IDM* is that once one’s desire has been stipulated, that stipulation begins to look like an objective fact of life. In fact, as long as this transformation works, it becomes impossible for us to differentiate two kinds of reality. If we relate desire to a sense of future, then, the idea may be that any specification of desire by means of a narrative will deprive us of the sense of future. However, despite this negation of the possibility of grasping desire in its original state, *IDM* also seems to suggest that if we can refrain from any expression of our desire through language, we might be able to obtain a state of desire that is continuously active, as manifested by old Desiderio’s image of Albertina, an image that had been haunting him until the moment he completed the autobiography. As long as desire is active, Carter’s text seems to suggest, we might find a temporality that differs from that expressed in the time order of the capital in *IDM*, as well as one that differs from the timelessless expressed by a narrative that specifies one’s desire.
Notes

1 For one of the few studies focusing on time in Carter’s works, see Lee 16-22.
2 Bonca 61.
3 See Connor 134.
4 Some scholars have pointed out that Carter’s characters’ sense of loss can be analyzed in relation to their background. Linden Peach, for instance, argues thus: ‘Indeed, in her early novels, [Carter] depicts a Britain which is in what one school of psychoanalysis might call ‘a depressive condition.’’ Peach 13.
5 For a study that examines each stage of Carter’s entire creative career, including her realism in the 60s, see Tucker 7-23. Also, for Carter’s themes from the end of the 70s to the 80s, see Palmer 180.
6 The female protagonist of Nights at the Circus feels the same horror as the journalist when she sees her ice-made likeness melting away in the house of a duke who has invited her over. Her horror may be regarded as a fear of the passage of time that will wash away something fixed.
7 Motoyoshi Irifuji has analyzed the fixation and passing of events. The phrases Irifuji uses to clarify his points, such as ‘the for-the-time-being-ness’ and ‘the each-time-ness,’ seem to be usefully applicable to analyses of Nights at the Circus.
8 The way the word ‘timelessness’ is used in this paper follows the OED definition. It is defined as ‘not subject to time; not affected by the lapse of time; existing or operating without reference to duration; eternal.’
10 See, for example, Gamble 115; Gąsiorek 126-31; Sage 34.
11 Elaine Jordan points out that Carter has always hated cultures based on such a concept of time, regarding them as ‘coherent societies where belief, ritual and social practice offer no space for individual doubt and speculation.’ See Jordan 34-5.
12 The incessant stream of images, on the other hand, bores Desiderio; he wishes that they would stop, at least for the time being. He says: ‘In those tumultuous and kinetic times, the time of actualized desire, I myself had only the one desire. And that was, for everything to stop’ (11). The content of the images, as described by Desiderio, initially appears able to last for a certain period of time but, in fact, as he points out, they are superseded by different images that arrive at the capital. This continuous transmission may do much to make people forget the fact that, even if past images can be revived, they soon return to the past again following their revival.
13 One of Carter’s three novels written in the 60s (often called ‘The Bristol Trilogy’), Several Perceptions (1968), deploys a protagonist who works at a hospital and treats dead bodies. He suffers much because he does not know what he should think about the meaning of life becoming non-existent. His inner feelings are somewhat close to those of the Doctor, who tries to ignore one of the inevitable processes of life.
14 Alison Lee, after noting the chaotic condition that is created when desire is easily satisfied, suggests that, at the end of such a state, a static condition will emerge that will be close to history. See Lee 68.
15 Whether there are samples may make no difference to those who receive the images. Hisaki Matsuura has labeled the images in the former age as ‘projective realism’, thereby differentiating them from the images of contemporary electronic media. While Matsuura focuses on the major differences between computerized, unmediated images and those projected at a movie theater from behind the audience, Matsuura claims that what the latter aims at is the postponing of desire. See Matsuura 115-22.

16 Note that the state in which a mother and child are not separate can be elaborated only after they have been separated; the concept exists only after the fact.

17 No matter how many descriptions of the child as a separate being may have been prepared, they would not be enough to represent what the description as a whole signifies. By means of Russell’s paradox of ‘the impossibility of a group which consists of all groups’, Lacan explains this thus: ‘[I]n a universe of discourse nothing contains everything, and here you find again the gap that constitutes the subject.’ Lacan, Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever 37.

18 On the relationship between ‘demand’ and ‘want,’ see, for example, Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, XII, Section 2.


20 Sally Robinson points out that Desiderio begins to cast doubt on the value of a ‘master-narrative’ that has supported him thus far, and to evince castration anxiety, once he sets out on the journey. She offers a persuasive analysis of Desiderio’s journey in terms of fetishism. See Robinson 159-75.

21 Lynn Wells also employs Lacan’s theory of desire, and of ‘metonymy’ in particular, to analyze the progress of Desiderio’s journey: ‘Drawing on psychoanalysis, readers can discern the interrelations among Desiderio’s experiences, in particular how they combine to form an archetypal pattern that ultimately fails to restore the originary loss and bring the metonymic slippage of desire to a meaningful stop.’ Wells 50.


23 Elizabeth Bronfen points out that the real reason why the protagonist kills Albertina is that he has had his ideal image of her shattered by the intrusion of her real image. See Bronfen 423. In my opinion, however, it seems that the protagonist feels, at this point, a great fear that her presence might swallow his whole existence.

24 See, for instance, Day 90; Gąsiorek 131; Peach 103.

25 Desiderio’s bystander-like attitude also appears in his desire for Albertina. Clearly, it is not the case that he positively longs for her; rather, it is just that a series of failures to meet her in the first half of the journey functions as a reason for him to see her as his dearest lady in the latter half of his journey.

26 Suleiman 107.

27 Subtle differences exist between the samples and the events that Desiderio encounters and sees. He finds them ‘teasingly different’ (110). Owing to such discrepancies, he cannot make a final decision as to whether there is a complete correspondence between the samples and his sight.

28 Lee 66.

29 Lynn Wells comments on the possibility that the reader of IDM might become aware of his or her reading processes by a means other than that of the nar-
erator’s reminder: ‘One of the ways in which IDM evokes readerly self-scrutiny is by openly reworking exemplary modernist intertexts which are themselves allegorical representations of reading.’ Wells 44.

30 Lee 69. By contrast, Sally Robinson argues that where male violence towards females appears in IDM, the reader has difficulty finding something that they can identify with. The aim of Carter’s text, Robinson claims, is to position the reader outside the novel. See Robinson 164. I would suggest, however, that the reader desires such violence without necessarily being conscious of that desire.

31 Transference is the process by which a patient, whose desire is unknown to himself or herself, tries to fulfill their unidentified desire by something that the Other (the analyst) desires. Lacan analyzes this process and regards the theory of transference not as ‘a defense of the analyst,’ but as ‘the desire of the analyst.’ Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 158 (Chapter XII, Section 3).

32 Mark Currie analyzes the ending of the novel Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde where Jekyll narrates the laying down of the pen by which he writes his confession. The phenomenon happening there is similar to one occurring in the last scene of IDM thus: ‘The end of the narrative is emphatic, ending as it does on the word ‘end’, and yet the simultaneity of Jekyll’s end and the narrative’s end is spoiled by the fact that the sentence draws our attention to Jekyll’s continuation beyond the end of the sentence in the act of sealing the confession.’ Currie 123.

33 It is difficult to regard the pronoun ‘she’ as referring to the physical death of the narrator since, normally, people seldom utter such a sentence at the point of their death.

Works Cited


