

Pink Floyd's *Time*: an aural metanarrative exploring time through form, lyric, and musical arrangement

Shobana P Mathews¹ & Vishal Varier²

¹Associate Professor, Christ University. ORCID: 0000-0001-9700-9420.

Email: shobhana.p.mathews@christuniversity.in,

²III MA-English. ORCID: 0000-0001-9966-4402.

Email: vishal.varier@eng.christuniversity.in

Abstract

The inability of language to capture the essence of time is a crisis that has been expressed by philosophers starting from St. Augustine to Paul Ricoeur. Appearing on their seminal album, *Dark Side of the Moon*, Pink Floyd's *Time* is a profound artistic attempt which transcends this language barrier by using music to bring the listeners to a more direct confrontation with time; doing so by juxtaposing time as calibrated and as experienced through the music and the lyrics, and by making the reader experience time-based affects such as impatience, expectation, monotony, and such. As a direct function of song, time is experienced as musical time in the song, thereby ensuring that the listener's confrontation with time is immersive, with lyrics that describe the nature of experienced and calibrated time working synchronously with the music to complete the image. In the context of its release in 1974, the 6:52 minute song was in engagement with the concept of time as well, in that it was among the pioneering ones which redefined radio broadcast time beyond the standard 3 minutes afforded to popular music tracks, with the commercially preferred listener span in mind. The matter of time thus becomes a multi-layered formal engagement in the song, at the level of lyric, recording, music and listening, thereby making possible an image of time that is polished and rounded. These aural, lyrical and production-based concepts will be addressed and expanded upon to show how Pink Floyd's *Time* functions as a metanarrative in how it uses and invokes the elements of time to talk about time.

Keywords: Auality, aural narrative, metanarrative, language, aspects of Time

Time and the Crisis of Language

"Language involves reflection and cannot, therefore express the immediate. Reflection destroys the immediate" – Soren Kierkegaard

Recent advances in poststructuralist theory have led to a massive disenchantment with language as a medium for expression of thought, emotions and affect. Jacques Derrida, perhaps the most crucial poststructuralist language philosopher, mourns the loss of memory, identity, and therefore history, because experience and conceptualization, and life in essence are linguistic phenomena. "The *telos* of full recollection is destined to fail", for our attempts to relive the past and articulate the present are mediated necessarily by language (Dooley & Kavanagh, 2007). Milleniums back, St. Augustine seems to have encountered the same problem, in his efforts to understand a very specific human experience – that of time. Like Derrida's, his tone is one of lament, "What then, is time? I know what it is well enough, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is,

and try to explain, I am baffled.” Paul Ricoeur perhaps grasps best at this peculiarity that seemingly ensures that time will always elude descriptive language, asking “How can time exist if the past is no longer, if the future is not yet, and the present is not always?” (Ricoeur, 1983)

It would seem that the relationship between language and time is destined to fail due to their mutually elusive natures; time is a dimension that can never be grasped, and language functions on grasping, grounding and categorizing. Our contention is that art – music in particular- creates new possibilities for the *experience* of time, for not only is it a more fluid, and unmediated form of expression, but the complex ways in which the various elements of song – lyric, aurality, instrumentation, and of course time signatures and tempo interact to allow for multiple layers of symbolization, which is crucial to the understanding of experience. As Bernice Martin writes in “The Sacralization of Disorder: Symbolism in Rock Music” -“The flux of experience is rendered meaningful by the employment of symbols”. (89) A lot of the symbolism is itself time-based in their usage of calibrated time-instruments and its modification and manipulation of rhythm patterns and tempos to reach the intended end; thereby making it a metanarrative on time, in that it uses time to talk about time. Pink Floyd’s treatment of time thus stays away from an objective, impersonal outsider’s view of time and instead mirrors that of 19th Century Romantic Philosophy, which saw time “as subjective, irrational, contingent, individual, and relative—time that more closely resembles, and is modeled upon, human experience” (Rowell 142) Explicating how Pink Floyd’s “Time” uses the various music elements at the band’s disposal as symbolic and metaphoric entities to create a complex *experience* of time meaningfully is the project of this paper.

Auditory Episodes in Pink Floyd’s “Time”

Pink Floyd’s “Time” contains auditory “episodes”, which are overshot with their own peculiar sonic indices and elements which have their symbolic and metaphoric functions with respect to the song. The song is made up of three auditory episodes: the overture of clock and pulse, a lyric supported narrative, and a final calm reverie episode.

Auditory Episode 1

The first of the episodes toys with and inverts Susanne K. Langer’s distinctions between clock-time and subjective-time; the former of which is the one-dimensional, impersonal understanding of time as understood by humans through calibrated instruments like clocks, and the latter is a more personal, subjective experience unbound by any such constructed notions or conventions - as experienced while listening to music for example (Alperson, 1980). By beginning the song with a juxtaposition of multiple different ticking clock sounds, alarm bells, metronomes and other calibrating devices which subdivide time in unique durations, Pink Floyd is able to disrupt any simplistic calibrated notions of time; creating instead, a subjective chaotic experience of time *using* clock- time. The very beginning of “Time” thus forces the listener into a direct, complex confrontation with the theme of the song—the track begins by calling forth those instruments which one most conventionally associates with time; it does so however, in a manner that is jarring, perplexing and confusing in its chaotic assemblage of these clock-time referents. The experience of time as being one that cannot be essentialized into simplistic categories or calibrations is thus conveyed by the band by ironically rendering clock-time as the very agent of chaos. Bernice Martin suggests that the notion of disruption and ambiguity between subjective and calibrated time that is conveyed at the outset is typically characteristic of rock music both in its formal, musical context and its cultural implications.

Rock music has been a cultural battleground over which the principles of order and disorder fight, re-group, form fragile alliances, change their colors and generally behave in confusing, ambiguous but far from random ways. (Martin,1979)

Once the chaotic calibrating markers fade out, they give way to a short section involving repetition, order and constancy. A slow, tolling bell marks the invocation of this section, eventually giving way to the insistent ticking of a metronomic pulse which is punctuated by regular kick drum hits. While the repetitive nature of this short section is reminiscent of the ticking of the clock, it would seem that the metaphorical implication is that of the body, with the pulse rhythm implying the human pulse and the kick drum pattern resembling the human heartbeat in time-feel and tempo. If the very beginning of the song seeks to harshly direct the experience of time away from clock-time, the repetitive section that follows seeks to redirect time back into the realm of subjective experience. Here then, there is a novel signification implied by the song through a conscious projection of time into the realm of subjectivity and the body. With the pulse and heartbeat pattern still continuing their ticking, the instruments come in to create the final part of the first episode – a long, drawn out melodic and rhythmic interplay between the instruments on the record – drums, bass, guitar and keyboards. The projection of the experience of time into subjectivity is given more depth in this section, with the focus moving on to the creation of time-associated affects and emotions. The monotony of the section's spaced out alternations between the same chords over the ever present pulse and heartbeat pattern makes the section seem endless and indeed seeks to create impatience and frustration in the listener. This final part of the first auditory episode thus takes the projection of time into the realm of experience to its furthest end; human experience is mediated by emotions and affects, and affects such as impatience, frustration and expectation that this section calls forth are intrinsically time-based and time- dependent(Geoffard&Lucchini, 2010).

The auditory episode as a whole thus casts the conception of time away from the realm of constructed clock-time and tries instead to capture its essence through time-related symbolic acts and significations. The “feelings and moods, abstract ideas and conceptions, and even music itself”, that are symbolized”(Lippman 1953) contribute to creating an overall *experience* of time that is bodily, subjective and emotive.

The narration of the song as done by the lyrics also signify and stay true to this grounding of time in experience; a narrative of time's ever marching presence is intertwined with a narrative of man's failure to appreciate its importance. The instrumental episode clearly mirrors this message – by creating a section that is monotonous and repetitive with no release in sight, the listener's experience of time is one of impatience and of expectation of a release. In this process of waiting however, one has failed to experience and live the present in all of its monotony (as represented by the episode), and time lost can never be gained back.

Auditory Episodes 2 and 3

The second auditory episode enters a more conventional rock form, with the introduction of vocals, a steady rhythm, and the instruments performing multiple functions to create a verse-form. The various instruments and the vocals subdivide time in their own ways; the drums keep a steady backbeat, the bass skips around the bars' upbeats and downbeats along with the rhythm guitars, while a second guitar constantly punctuates the spaces and pockets left behind by the other instruments. Here, there is a conscious gestaltic engagement with time and rhythm, which each instrument (including the voice) engaging with the general meter, tempo and beat of the

song, and with each other in their own unique ways. By creating in this episode, a complex “impression of tones moving in time and the kinetic interplay of tonal phenomena”, the episode is best indicative of how Pink Floyd’s “Time” becomes an “art of time” in itself (Alperson1980).

The entrance of the third auditory episode is signalled by a noticeable slowing down of tempo and a decrease in the interplay between the instruments and the vocals, with an increase in space and room between bars. Musically, the song reverts to the form of an earlier song in the album, ‘Breathe’, further signaling the intent to redirect time to subjectivity and the body as in the first auditory episode. The difference however is in the presentation of time; the first auditory episode starts off with a chaotic inversion of clock time followed by a section that is repetitive, the third is almost an experience of timelessness, pure subjectivity and pure experience in its lulling, serene production. The lyrics accompanying this episode reinforce an imagery of comfort with references to “softly spoken magic spells” and being home, creating a dreamlike time-space where the passing of time is barely felt but always experienced. If the repetition of episode 1 created monotony, impatience and discomfort, the spaced out production combines with the lyric in episode 3 to create an air of comfort and solitude.

The three auditory episodes that envelop the song are unique engagements with the experience of time. As an “art of time”, Pink Floyd exploits the musical resources at their disposal to create various symbols and significations which seek to represent time not as an objective reality but as “a succession of distinct qualitative moments, subject to infinite compression or expansion” (Rowell 2004), coalescing eventually to form a complex image of subjective-time, grounded in the experience of its experience.

Horology in Verse: Supplementing Auralty through Lyrics

One of the norms of the songwriting tradition is for the musical composition to be driven by the composition of the lyric. This convention is disrupted in “Time”. Written by bassist Roger Waters, the enigma of the lyric lies in its lack of overt histrionics and hyperbole, maintaining thereby the appearance of a straightforward simplicity. However, on closer scrutiny of the verbal text, the lyrics offer a scaffolding that serves to supplement rather than drive the song in performance.

Like the face of the watch belies the complexity of its mechanism, “Time” presents itself as a smooth verbal unit of a song until one encounters the complexity of the underlying movement inherent in the verbal composition or lyrics. Central to the functioning of a clock is its ‘movement’, the mechanism consisting of multiple gears, wheels and pinions, coils and springs. Interestingly all of these are rotating parts imbuing a circularity of movement on the mechanism. In clock-making, all these rotating parts are governed by an oscillating device, the heart of the clock, its pulse.

While the aural experience of the song is marked by chiming clocks, alarms and a simulated heartbeat that locates the narrative in a bodily lived episode, the lyrics add the rotation and oscillation through lexical, syntactic and semantic arrangement ultimately leading to a notional and mythic understanding of time, lived and experienced.

Measured through movement of shadows, of sound, of material objects, the calibration of time is often the impact and the imprint of its passage. Its auralty is reinforced by using words like ticking, kicking, fritter, which are entirely or partially onomatopoeic. The words by phonetic structure and syllabic arrangement echo the sound of the clock. ‘Fritter’, used here to indicate the

wasting of time by disrupting the otherwise efficient and precise workings of the words, presents an aimless motion among all the other purposeful interaction of gears.

The mechanical and extraneous sticking, chiming sonic indices are slowly overlaid with the quickening and intensifying sonic indices of heartbeats and footsteps thus locating the site of the soundscape in the body. This situating of the narration in the body and thereby in human experience is verbally echoed by using words like 'fritter and waste', 'waiting' and 'tired'. The connotation is one of unproductive usage of time, thereby lacking in value in commercial terms. However, in terms of lyric composition, these are spaces of reflection. They offer a caesura or pause in an otherwise frenzied pace of living. These lexical structures reset the pace and slow down the composition.

The following lines, owing to their internal parallel structures, evoke a staccato sense of oscillation, central to the movement of the clock and in this lyric, to the passing of time:

"kicking around on a piece of ground in your home town"

"so, you run and you run to catch up with the sun but its sinking"

"the sun is the same in a relative way but you're older"

Gilmour (vocalist) delivers hard hitting truths, musingly, reflecting on the nature of time:

"And then one day you find
ten years have got behind you
No one told you when to run
you missed the starting gun."

An ominous reminder of the irreversible finality of the passage of time, cyclic movement of time is implicitly conveyed.

"So, you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking
Racing around to come up behind you again.
The sun is the same in a relative way but you're older,
Shorter of breath and one day closer to death."
Every year is getting shorter never seem to find the time." (Waters, 1974)

The lines cited above evoke the cosmic passage of time that is understood in the rotation and revolution of the earth that mark time in human life as days and years. The futility of running to catch up with the sun evokes the breathless circadian rhythms in a proportion as mythic as that of Sisyphus. This controlled, tightly coiled action of time displayed through human behavior is set against the larger, ponderous revolution that presides over the years inevitably ushering us 'one day closer to death' reflected in the bodily response of the 'shortness of breath'.

Like the heliocentric structure of the universe, the face of the clock displays a central fixed point from where the hands of the clock move in a steady, rhythmic repetition. The cosmic 'music of the spheres' or the rhythmic, steady movement of the planets on their own axis and around the sun are evoked in these movements of running and circling the sun, in a relative way. The rhythms of this cosmic choreography are captured in the lines:

So, you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking

Racing around to come up behind you again.

The sun is the same in a relative way but you're older (Waters,1974).

Present in these lines are Chronos and Kairos (Tempus), cosmic and personal manifestations of time in pre-Socratic memory. Running, an act of speed, indicates human action and agency, the seizing of the moment - thus representing personal time or Kairos. On the other hand, the fixity of the sun exerts control over the planets. If the sun appears to change over the course of the day it is a sleight of relative positionality, that is, one's point of view defines the image of the sun over different times of the day, much as the phases of the day are also defined by one's relative position.

Plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines

Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way

The time is gone, the song is over,

Thought I'd something more to say. (Waters, 1974)

The rhythmic, measured tolling of the iron bell, calling the faithful to the time-defined rituals of worship as opposed to faith and spirituality which are beyond time's constraints creates a wistful reverie that concludes the performance:

"It's good to warm my bones

Beside the fire

Far away

Across the field

Tolling on the iron bell

Calls the faithful to their knees

To hear the softly spoken magic spell..."(Waters,1974)

The panoramic visual captures wide-open vistas, zooming into the close focus of the cottage fireside thus establishing a spatio-temporal chronotope that is at once momentary and timeless as the section ends on a note of hushed sibilance 'To hear the softly spoken magic spell...'.
'.

In conclusion, the lyrics uphold the aural composition in *Time* by engaging with the manifestations of temporality. Since song and poetic composition are time driven through beat, tempo, rhythms and syllabic arrangements, this song therefore is a sonic performance of time supplemented by lyrics that provide the various movements of time. From impatience, anxiety, contemplation and weariness, the listener is transported through a polished *experience* of time through the music and the effect it has on them, suggested through the lyrical content and the choice of language, and thus conveyed effectively in the musical form.

Works cited

- Alperson, P. (1980). "Musical Time" and Music as an "Art of Time". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 38(4), 407-417. doi:10.2307/430322
- Dooley, M. & Kavanaugh, L. (2008). *The philosophy of Derrida*. Acumen Publishing Limited.
- Geoffard, P. Y., & Luchini, S. (2010). Changing time and emotions. *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological sciences*, 365(1538), 271-280. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2009.0178>
- Grow, Cory. "Roger Waters Talks 'Us + Them' Film, Why Pink Floyd's Songs Remain Relevant." *Rolling Stone*, 30 September. 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/roger-waters-us-them-film-interview-889933/>. Accessed 7 December 2019
- Lippman, E. (1953). Symbolism in Music. *The Musical Quarterly*, 39(4), 554-575. Retrieved October 25, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/739856>
- Martin, B. (1979). The Sacralization of Disorder: Symbolism in Rock Music. *Sociological Analysis*, 40(2), 87-124. doi:10.2307/3709782
- Pink Floyd. "Time." *The Dark Side of The Moon*, Harvest Records, 1973. Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3TO7bbrUKrOSPGRTB5MeCz?si=KQzXoFYeS7aRWb-CgtWhzg>
- Ricoeur, Paul. (1984). *Time and Narrative* (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans.). The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1983).
- Rowell, L. (2004). Time in the Romantic Philosophies of Music. *Indiana Theory Review*, 25, 139-175. Retrieved October 25, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24045284>
- Wright, Jeb. "Spend Time on 'The Dark Side of the Moon' with Alan Parsons." *Goldmine Magazine*, 13 May. 2013, <https://www.goldminemag.com/articles/spend-time-on-the-dark-side-of-the-moon-with-alan-parsons>. Accessed 9 December 2019

References

- Beaver, A. (2008). Brodsky and Kierkegaard, Language and Time. *The Russian Review*, 67(3), 415-437. Retrieved August 18, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/20620805
- Brenneis, Donald and Steve Feld. "Doing Anthropology in Sound". *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2004, pp. 461-474
- Camilleri, Lelio. "Shaping sounds, shaping spaces". *Popular Music*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2010, pp. 199- 211
- Clements, G.N. "Feature Economy in Sound Systems". *Phonology*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2003 pp. 287-333
- Coates, Norma. "Missing the (Popular) Music for the Screens?". *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2008, pp. 123-130
- Ferranti, Hugh de. "Relations between Music and Text in "Higo Biwa": The "Nagashi" Pattern as a Text-Music System". *Asian Music*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1994-1995, pp. 149-174
- Johnson, Bruce. "Hamlet: Voice, Music, Sound". *Popular Music*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2005, pp. 257-267
- Kostelanetz, Richard. "Text-Sound Art : A Survey (Concluded)". *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1978. Pp. 71-84
- Kramer, Lawrence. "Metaphor and Metaphysics". *The Musical Times*, Vol. 145, No. 1888, 2004, pp. 5-18
- Kun, Josh D. "The Aural Border". *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 52, No.1, 200, pp. 1-21
- Mathews, Shobana. "Pink Floyd's "Time" : An Aural metanarrative that explores aspects of time through lyrics and the disruption of music memory.", Gedragen Organisatie, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2020.
- Morley, Griswold S. "Sound Teaching and Sound Texts". *Hispania*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1993, pp. 1-9
- Nuckolls, Janis B. "The Case for Sound Symbolism". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 28, 1999, pp. 225-252
- Polashel, Timothy D. "Beyond Babble: A Text- Generation Method and Computer Program for Composing Text, Music and Poetry". *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 15, 2014, pp. 17-22
- Samuels, David. W., et al. "Toward a Sounded Anthropology". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 39, 2010, pp. 329-345
- Scanner. "Remembering how to Forget : An Artist's Exploration of Sound". *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 11, 2001, pp. 65-69

Tsay, Chia-Jung. "Sight over sound in the judgement of music performance". *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 110, No. 36, 2013, pp. 14580 - 14585
 Walsh, Lorraine. "Sound Lines". *Leonardo*, Vol. 43, No. 5, 2010, p. 502
 Zender, Karl F. "Faulkner and the Power of Sound". *PMLA*, Vol. 99, No. 1, 1984, pp. 89-108

Appendix

Lyrics – "Time" by Pink Floyd, 1974

Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day
 Fritter and waste the hours in an offhand way.
 Kicking around on a piece of ground in your home town
 Waiting for someone or something to show you the way.
 Tired of lying in the sunshine staying home to watch the rain.
 You are young and life is long and there is time to kill today.
 And then one day you find ten years have got behind you.
 No one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun.
 So you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking
 Racing around to come up behind you again.
 The sun is the same in a relative way but you're older,
 Shorter of breath and one day closer to death.
 Every year is getting shorter never seem to find the time.
 Plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines
 Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way
 The time is gone, the song is over,
 Thought I'd something more to say.

Home

Home again
 I like to be here
 When I can
 When I come home
 Cold and tired
 It's good to warm my bones
 Beside the fire
 Far away
 Across the field
 Tolling on the iron bell
 Calls the faithful to their knees
 To hear the softly spoken magic spell