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Becoming the Rhizomatic Outsider: A Study of the Narrative Deconstruction of Being in Ali Smith's *The Accidental*

ABSTRACT

Ali Smith's novels and short stories are violently realistic in terms of depicting the hollow and disconnected lives of the postmodern individual. However, they also, albeit obliquely, aspire for hope and change. The loss of a sense of location, direction, and, as a result, a meaningful presence is interwoven in *The Accidental*'s persistent concern with time. Accordingly, in this essay, drawing upon Michael Kane's analysis of postmodern time and space, *The Accidental* is studied with regard to capitalist time and simulacra, the culture of pastiche and spectacle, and spatiotemporal fragmentation. Within this backdrop and informed by Derridean deconstruction complemented with the study's Deleuzian framework, the novel's subversive deconstructions of a metaphysics of *being* and the substitution of fictional *becoming* are explored. It is argued that *The Accidental* corporealizes supplementarity and employs rhizomatic disruptions in the lives of the characters and the structure of the narrative to open up *detrterritorized* spaces for *monoritarian* authenticity, agency, and creativity.

Keywords: time, postmodernism, deconstruction, *différance*, supplement, rhizome, subversion, becoming, Deleuze, Ali Smith

Postajati rizomatski autsajder: študija pripovedne dekonstrukcije obstoja v romanu *The Accidental* Ali Smith

IZVLEČEK

Romani in kratke zgodbe Ali Smith so brutalno realistične v prikazovanju praznih in izključenih življenj postmodernih posameznikov in posameznic. Kljub temu je v njih moč zaznati upanje in teženje k spremembam. Izguba občutka za prostor, smer in, posledično, smiselno prisotnost je v romanu *The Accidental* vtkana v nenehno obremenjenost s časom. Zato na podlagi Kaneove analize postmodernega časa in prostora v tem članku roman obravnavam s stališča kapitalističnega časa in simulakrov, kulture pastiša in spektakla ter fragmentacije prostora in časa. V tem kontekstu s pomočjo derridajevske dekonstrukcije in Deleuzove misli raziščem subverzivne dekonstrukcije *obstoja* in zamenjavo fikcijskega *postajanja* v romanu. Članek pokaže, da *The Accidental* utelesi suplementarnost in z rizomatskimi disrupcijami življenj likov in strukture pripovedi odpira deteritorializirane prostore za monoritarno avtentičnost, tvornost in ustvarjalnost.

Ključne besede: čas, postmodernost, dekonstrukcija, *différance*, suplementarnost, rizom, subverzija, postajanje, Deleuze, Ali Smith

1 Introduction

Ali Smith's novel, *The Accidental* (2005), is comprised of three chapters: "The Beginning"; "The Middle"; and "The End". The ironic juxtaposition of the title of the book and the chapters, which purport to adhere to conventional narrative spatiotemporal linearity, foreshadows the complexities that are put forth in Smith's novel. The first chapter, "The Beginning", is not the beginning, and the final chapter, "The End", does not really end the story, as the first-person voice tells us "we're back at the beginning" (2005, 320). In explaining narrative linearity Kermode claims people are born *in medias res*, but because of their very human need to *belong*, they create "fictive concords" with beginnings and ends (2000, 7), and thus contrive meaningful *middles*. The postmodern era, however, marks not only the end of unified narratives of linear progression, but a foundational change in the spatiotemporal experiences of human beings in a digital world.

Kane observes: "Maybe it was Einstein, or maybe it was the earth-shattering explosions of the First World War, but something seems to have happened [to] the sense of time in Western culture in the early twentieth century" (2020, 70). According to Kane, in literature and art of the early twentieth century clock time seems to function as the controller of an inherent and potential chaos of the mind (2020, 75).¹ The hidden turmoil was the sign of an imminent collapse; Jean-Francois Lyotard calls it the fall of *metanarratives* – the linear and unified stories of progression and completion presuming a past assuredly flowing towards a significant future. In contrast, in the postmodern world the present is "cut...off at both ends" (Bauman 1995, quoted in Kane 2020, 92) leading to the *dislocation* of the subject: "'we do not know for sure' [...] where is 'forward' and where 'backward' [...] the past [...] has all but fallen apart" (Bauman 1995, 95, quoted in Kane 2020, 125). This sense of dislocation in the postmodern era is only intensified by the *instantaneity* and *simultaneity* of perception, a "tele-presence" of everything (Virilio 2007, quoted in Kane 2020, 119) correlative with an addiction to two-dimensional pictures, digital cameras, and the virtual spectacles of capitalist time.

The impact of these changes on the postmodern subject has been fundamental. The omnipresence of two-dimensional appearances has eroded experiential reality. Moreover, the loss of the sense of spatiotemporal location has led to desolation of a *unified self* (Kane 2020, 5), and, since identity requires persistence through time, *personal identity* (Punday 2003, 119), making the master theme of postmodernism "fragmentation" and its most prominent stylistic features pastiche and simulacra.

Although from a pessimistic view this is the end for authentic artistic creation, more optimistic scholars believe we can venture new narrative concords to assign meaningfulness to our human experiences; after all, "[f]ragments can be all we have" (Barthelme, quoted in Punday 2003, 167). Bauman contends: "The work of a postmodern artist is a heroic effort to give voice to the ineffable, and a tangible shape to the invisible... a standing invitation

¹ Kane (2020) points out that in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* we see that when Gregor wakes up in the morning he is worried that the alarm clock on his night table did not ring, which meant he would miss his morning bus, and only later he realizes he has transformed into a beetle. Other examples of the dominance of clock time over mind time in modernist literature are *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Ulysses*, and *The Dubliners*.

to join in the unending process of interpretation which is also the process of meaning-making" (1995, 105, quoted in Kane 2020, 127). Considering the significant role that narrative plays in giving voice to the postmodern experience, it is important to understand how it has adapted to the requirements of the time. In *Narrative After Deconstruction*, Punday studies the contestations addressed to narrative form by post-structuralism and deconstruction, most importantly "seamlessness" and "objectivity", claiming that the task of postmodern narrative is to find a way of "textual construction after deconstruction" (2003, 4). The post-deconstruction narrative has to embrace a new form that correlates with the "arrhythmic temporality" of this new world (Bogue 1990, 408). Hence, metanarratives give way to *local narratives* that foreground subjectivity, contextuality, and multiplicity. In Derridean terms, in order to dismiss the Platonic "one", postmodern narrative has to make room for *différance*.

Gilles Deleuze is another philosopher who, especially in his fruitful collaborations with Felix Guattari, has contributed significantly to delineating ways of outgrowing the exclusions and hierarchizations of dominant articulations, to the extent that his notion of *rhizome* has become one of the key terms of postmodernism. According to Punday, what Derrida's *différance*, Lyotard's *local narratives*, and Deleuze and Guattari's *rhizomatic* have in common is a concern with "the creation of temporary spaces of conflict and exchange" (2003, 129) in which the Platonic unified being is deconstructed to make room for the becoming of the other. Accordingly, the subversive postmodern art welcomes difference and sidesteps predefined controlling interpretations by becoming rhizomatic.

As a significant, postmodern novel, *The Accidental* has received considerable critical attention and studied from the perspective of different approaches. Tew (2015) and Horton (2012), for instance, have studied the novel as an example of traumatic fiction and against the backdrop of terrorist attacks of 9/11. From a different perspective, Orr (2019) argues that Smith recognizes the dominance of the culture of spectatorship of her time and encourages active and critical scrutiny of the detachment and passivity enforced from the outside. Lea (2016) acknowledges Smith as one of the outstanding British writers of the twenty-first century and believes in her works she illustrates the hollowness and sense of disconnection of the postmodern individual in a world of oppressive capitalism in a diverse manner, yet always with a hope of transformation. In Lea's words, the works of Ali Smith are "balanced between pessimism and optimism: pessimistic that the price of being in the world will be too high, but optimistic that the moments of transcendent connection and empathy will compensate for the erosive action of subjectivity" (2016, 28). Tancke (2013) in a very different approach refers to the destructive and violent consequences of the "virtual intrusions" of the fantastic in the real and describes *The Accidental* as a critique of this postmodern condition. O'Donnell (2013), however, uses Kristeva's notion of "the stranger" to argue that this intrusion is both destructive and constructive in terms of the identities of the characters. As these studies testify, Smith's stories do not merely take a reflexive and hopeless standpoint towards the enforced inauthenticity of our age, and instead attempt to criticize constructively and aspire for change.

In this study, it is argued that Smith's *The Accidental*, as a brilliant example of subversive postmodern narrative, and in search of new ways of assigning meaning to human experience,

casts off metanarrative linearity and deconstructs the logocentric assumptions of *being* in order to substitute them with subversive rhizomatic *becoming*. In the course of this article, first, postmodern narrative and the incorporation of *différance* is discussed drawing upon related theoretical scholarship. Then, informed by Kane's comprehensive analysis of postmodern time and space, the spinal role of spatiotemporal being in *The Accidental* is studied in relation to its contemporary context. In applying Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic structure to *The Accidental*, significant features of Smith's work are revealed extending from the level of her story to the overall structure of the narrative. It is concluded that Smith's novel employs supplementarity and rhizomatic narrative possibilities in order to find a way out of the dominant molar lines of capitalism via *minoritarian becoming* and embodying *différance*.

2 Postmodern Narrative and Deconstruction of Being

Punday notes that today narrative acts are becoming increasingly important as local narratives are being used to assign meaning to minor experiences that were formerly rendered silent (2003, 1). He believes this "narrative turn" is not a turn against Derridean deconstruction and its denouncement of narrative linearity, but an outcome of deconstruction's "linguistic turn" and the emphasis on subjective contextuality (2003, 4). Thus, by welcoming *différance*, narrative form is not only able to dismiss two of its foundational suppositions that are renounced by postmodernism – "the supposition of a pure, undivided origin and the supposition that the ensuing fall into difference was a process of linear consecution whose events could be excluded from the origin itself" (Currie 1998, 83) – but also become the perfect medium for deconstructing the metaphysics of being and incorporating the excluded other.

Central to Derrida's *différance* is the deconstruction of the metaphysics of present (time) correlative with presence (place). In his critique of the Platonic being, Derrida is very much indebted to Husserl's changing the classic definition of time as a procession of *nows* to a vanishing present that is perpetually constituted in being divided between the retentions (memories) and the protentions (anticipations). Derrida takes a step further and deconstructs the "metaphysical baggage" (Currie 2007, 95) of phenomenology and displaces it with *Grammatology*, declaring "*il n'ya pas de hors-texte*" (Derrida 1974). He adopts Husserl's notion of the vanishing present, and declares the word *present* does not refer to but is constituted in *différance*. Derrida claims that since the present moment, or "what is", is constituted by the absences of the past and the future, "what is not", the "undivided presence" and its purity are illusions (Currie 1998, 82), and the present is always "complicated by non-presence" (Lawlor 2022). Consequently, the *origin* that marks the pure moment of undivided self-presence is discarded and substituted by the primacy of the *supplementary*: "a possibility" that "produces that to which it is said to be added on" (Derrida 1973, 89). At the heart of Derrida's *différance* is an emphasis on the future as the supplement. As Currie explains:

It is possible to view Derrida's treatment of Husserl's notion of protention, or the concept of *différance* as a claim that all language exists in a condition of waiting to find out if its prophecies are fulfilled or not. (2007, 44).

Therefore, the word present does not refer to a *present* inner object of consciousness expressed in the sign, but is constituted in being deferred to a possible future. In other words, the

present is produced by the possibility of a future, for the supplement “does not follow the origin”, but it is the possibility that becomes “the origin of the origin” (Currie 1998, 84).

Evinced by Derrida’s increasing interest in the form throughout his career, narrative fiction plays a very significant role in deconstructing the myth of pure origin and foregrounding the supplementary (see Punday 2003). In clarification, Derrida refers to the shared root of the word “fantasy” and “phantasm” – a ghostlike appearance, something that is neither present nor completely absent (Derrida 1986, quoted in Hobson 2009, 140). By overturning Plato’s condemnation of false appearances, Derrida demonstrates literature is the manifestation of the logic of supplement: “what we call a likeness, though not really existing, really does exist” (Plato 240b, quoted in Derrida 1986, 209–10). In Derrida’s critique of Platonic mimesis, the dividing line between the ontological real – the origin – and the “phantasmatic” copy is broken and the superiority of the former questioned. Miller maintains: “Literature is for Derrida the possibility for any utterance, writing, or mark to be iterated in innumerable contexts and to function in the absence of identifiable speaker, context, reference, or hearer” (2001, 59). According to Derrida fiction, with its detachment from an ontologically present origin, is the demonstration of the illusion of division between the presence and the representation (see Hobson 2009). By foregrounding the supplement instead of the origin, narrative fiction is able to deconstruct being, and become the medium “in which a structure of exclusion can be opened up to difference” (Currie 1998, 84). In other words, in narrative deconstruction of presence the excluded other can be restored and incorporated.

Another important Derridean term associated with narrative fiction’s detachment from ontological presence is the *secret*. As Derrida asserts: “The secret is nothing—and this is the secret that has to be kept well, nothing either present or presentable, but this nothing must be well kept” (Derrida 1992a, 205). Miller continues: “Literature is the place specially to look for the secret because it is by convention detached in special ways from its ‘transcendence’ or referential gesture” (2001, 73). Ironically, Miller maintains, the secret in the spectre of fiction makes it an act of “survival” and “living on” after death (2001, 72). Thus, by embodying the secret, a narrative act becomes a defiance of nothingness, exclusion, and death.

Consequently, contrary to the assumptions that saw narrative form at odds with postmodern subversion, by making the absence of self-presence and origin corpuscular in narrative form and storytelling, narrative deconstruction becomes an act of subversion and survival:

It is that the possibility established in the fictional domain, the possibility of surface without depth, is a possibility that the other model, of surface as the externality of depth, cannot get away from ‘the possibility of non-truth in which every possibility of truth is held or is made’. (Currie 2007, 135; Derrida 1992b, 153).

In Currie’s words: “In order to tell the truth about a lie, one must tell a lie about the truth” (2007, 63). Having discussed the narrative deconstruction of being, its subversive responses to the postmodern condition and the capitalist time and space will be examined in what follows.

3 Postmodern Time, Simulacra of Capitalism, and Subversive Art

Jameson associates the postmodern period with a “waning” of the sense of time (1993, 72). Kane defines “waning” as an inability “to see and interpret the present (and the future) as part of a wider historical context” (2020, 69). In contrast to Jameson, Virilio believes that the technological advances of our age in media, communication, and mobility of information have abolished “the reality of distance” by eroding spatial intervals: “Here no longer exists; everything is now” (2005, 116, quoted in Kane 2020, 93). This “now”, however, in its perpetual presence loses its distinctiveness, “no sense of time passing” (Kane 2020, 5). The postmodern “now”, in other words, is time flattened in a “continuous present” (Bauman 1995, 89, quoted in Kane 2020, 92). Both critics, therefore, in their seeming difference are referring to a fragmentation of spatiotemporal perception in the postmodern world. Jameson believes that postmodern capitalism “has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (quoted in Kane 2020, 9). With the subject not being able to locate herself in a cognitive map of here and now, her presence as the *a priori* unified perspectival locus is undermined as well resulting in becoming decentred. Kane refers to the *Communist Manifesto*’s observation of the consequences of capitalism in the previous century: “All that is solid melts into air” and asserts “One could perhaps pointedly rephrase Virilio’s line thus: ‘Here no longer exists; everything is air!’” (2020, 9). Whereas the modern metanarratives strived to embody meaningfulness in their promise of *the* significant future, the postmodern flattened present attaches itself to a fleeting poster like advertisement of *a* future, making time a spatial simulacrum.

The defining feature of a simulacrum is its hollowness and two-dimensionality. Baudrillard borrowed the term from a story by Borges in which the cartographers create a map that is so detailed that it covers the real territory. Baudrillard claims in the postmodern world the two-dimensional picture has substituted the reality, and we are living in a world of “simulacra and simulations” (1983; quoted in Kane 2020, 101). Kane adds the modernist master theme of “alienation” of the individual that implies an inner being thus becomes obsolete in the capitalist society and is displaced by the theme of “fragmentation” (2020, 71) which is two-dimensional and superficial.

Furthermore, Kane, drawing upon Jameson, associates the postmodern world’s simulacra and flashing advertisements with “an addiction to the photographic image” (2020, 114), or in Currie’s words, an archive fever (2007, 88). Jameson labels this intensification of immersion the “society of the spectacle”, in which, quoting from Debord, “the image has become the final form of commodity reification” (quoted in Kane 2020, 114–15)²; in capitalist time, the present is archived in order to be sold in the future (Kane 2020, 89). Detached from the reality of things, the virtual world of pictorial spectacles with its fast-paced propagation is the perfect medium for the deceptive theatricality of capitalism and its myopic fixation with future profit – a system in which nothing has value “in itself” but only in being exchanged.

² Kane believes the pervasiveness of the dominance of photographic representation in television, the internet, and digital cameras is so deep that instead of being immersed into culture, we are now “gazing at it” (2020, 116).

In a brilliant analogy, Bauman assimilates the sense of direction in metanarratives of modernity to a pilgrimage towards a meaningful purpose and significant destination and the modern individual to a pilgrim. In the postmodern era, however, and in a world “inhospitable to pilgrims” (Bauman 1995, 83, quoted in Kane 2020, 138) new archetypes emerged. Among these postmodern archetypes, the tourist is the most prominent. The tourist moves around restlessly according to a pre-planned itinerary with aimless and short-term interests. She buys and then duplicates experiences and archives them randomly with her camera as a proof of her presence. For the tourist the present is experienced only in relation to how it would be presented in pictures and videos in the future. The tourist is constantly persuading herself that “[i]f this is a ‘selfie’, there must be a ‘self’ in it” (Kane 2020, 144). However, unlike the smiling tourists featured in pictures and advertisements, the postmodern subject is a tired tourist depleted by inauthenticity, dislocation, and disconnection.

It is in this crisis that postmodern art goes against the grain (Kane 2020, 126), creates a new sense of authenticity, and finds a way out of the simulacra by exposing the artificiality of its imposing signifiers. In the same vein and in his counterhegemonic divergences from western philosophy and culture, Deleuze champions subversive art and declares:

The more our everyday life appears to be standardized, stereotyped and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the more art must be injected into it in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition, [...] in order that Difference may at least be expressed [...]. (1994, 293)

For Deleuze this new form of art is rhizomatic.

In their interpretation of Kafka and other artists that stand outside the authority of the alleged state, Deleuze and Guattari value the “minor” artists who “deterritorize” themselves and break away from the forceful interpretations and codifications of the dominant culture. They believe the artist who is marginalized by the system is able to reinvent herself as the minoritarian outsider and thus sidestep being subordinated by the molar imperatives of the state (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 17). May explains: “To become minor is to jostle the reins of the majority identity in order to investigate new possibilities, new ways of becoming that are no longer bound to the dominant molar lines and their abstract machines” (2005, 150). Two points should be noted with regard to the minor literature: first, the attempts of the minor should not be seen as liberative, but “a matter of line of flight, escape...an exit, outlet” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 13); the nomadic minor does not aspire for metanarratives of liberation, but is in a constant unravelling of limits and interpretation. Second, as Deleuze himself asserts, the active becomings of the rhizome are not to be judged with criteria of “justness” or “falsity”, nor in terms of “success or failure”, “but simply as an act the outcome of which is unknown” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 14). It is the constant rejection of fixity and counterhegemonic reinvention that maintains the subversiveness of the minoritarian.

In a world where the senses of coherence, connection, and progress towards a meaningful destination are lost, the rhizome substitutes metaphysical location with nomadic superficial becoming. Thus, the Derridean *différance* aligns with Deleuze’s rhizomatic subjectivity

in postmodern narrative's dismissal of linearity of being and the corollary metanarrative seamlessness and unity (Weedon 1987, 105–6). As a rhizome that rejects the arborescent form (“a system of derivation: first the roots, then the trunk, then the leaves”), the postmodern artist denounces identity, unity, and essence and reinvents diverse selves in multiple, random, and parallel offshoots that reject the sequence from the beginning to an end; thus substituting being with “a local affirmation of becoming” and conjunction (Bogue 1990, 404). In this manner, the exemplary subversive text of postmodernism is rhizomatic (Leitch et al. 2010, 1448), with the postmodern individual becoming a “site of *différance*” (Punday 2003, 129) and “body without organs” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) rather than a logocentric being. As the world is no longer holding on to the myths of depth, the work of art has to be authentically two-dimensional. On a par with Derrida's *text*, the rhizomatic art in its two-dimensional and superficial form dismisses the illusion of depth of alleged simulacra and is thus able to unveil the deceptions and hollowness of signifiers of presence in its no-root structure and break with the exclusive rules of identity in its diverse emergences.

4 The Hole at the Heart, Deceiving Signifiers and Absent Signifieds

Smith's novels and short stories respond to the central issues of our time in both their structure and thematic concerns. Her characters voice their exclusions, disconnection, loss of centre, and entrapment in a flattened world of flashing signifiers. Yet like her characters, Smith's works aspire for hope. As Jelínková asserts: “underlying all of her work is a deeply human ethos, which emerges in her trademark carefully poised endings on a note of tentative reconciliation and qualified hope for the future” (2019, 9). In line with Punday's observation that postmodern narration is an act of “linguistic construction after deconstruction” (2003, 4), in her novels and short stories Smith has a philosophical concern with unveiling the illusion of false appearances by disturbing the givenness of the familiar and replacing it with the interruptive unfamiliar. In this way, Smith's works strive to “deterritorize” the postmodern individual and find a way out of the capitalist simulacra by forging new forms of meaningfulness. In some of her works, such as *Hotel World* (2001), Smith's illustration of the oppressions and marginalizations of Western capitalism is more apparent, and in others, such as *The Accidental*, it emerges more implicitly in the way they penetrate into the details of the mundane everyday life of the middle-class families who are unaware that they are surrounded by surveillance cameras, social and academic values, and rigid “standards”.

Smith wittily chooses her narrative metaphors to expose the artificiality of capitalist signifiers and their promises of equality and prosperity. It was noted above that Bauman compares the postmodern subject to a tired tourist wandering around with no authentic sense of direction, distracted by transient spectacles, and consuming advertised attractions. In *Hotel World*, for example, we see that the hotel represents the Western world and how it enforces the hierarchization and exclusion of those who cannot afford it, and also the schizophrenic confusion of its wandering inhabitants. The hotel is a simulacrum like the world that completes its name. However, at the heart of the hotel there is a hole, a lack that haunts the dazzling spectacle of its colourful surface. Lea maintains:

This metaphor of emptiness at the heart of a rigidly determined and policed space speaks well to Smith's criticism of the hollowness of capitalism, not just in a moral sense but as a system for providing order and meaning that encompasses all members of a society. (2016, 44)

The void at the centre of this grand structure discloses the absence of the base, the *inner* essence that was supposed to stabilize and hold the appearance together.

In *The Accidental*, however, the simulacra of deceiving authorial signifiers of capitalism are conveyed in the depthless and two-dimensional world of digital cameras, virtual impositions of the internet and academic clichés that purport "truth". The Smarts are a twenty-first century middle-class family, well-educated, and up-to-date not only in terms of the scientific and technological demands of their time, but also in the elitist tastes of their class. Astrid's recurring use of the word "substandard" in her evaluations of her surroundings is an example of the resoluteness of rules of acceptance in a society which assigns validation through language and hegemony. Despite their intelligence, money, and social status, the Smarts have lost their sense of connection with others, the external world, and their own authentic being: "Each is solipsistically engaged in pursuing justifications for their own worldviews and is consequently blind to the desperate need of the others" (Lea 2016, 48). Immersed in screen-based technology, streaming images, and news, they are not able to feel, sympathize, and respond. When Astrid is thinking about the "tragic news" she is constantly hearing she ponders:

It is all everywhere all the time, it is serious, animals with ribcages and children in hospitals on the news with people somewhere or other screaming because of a suicide bomber or American soldiers who have been shot or something, but it is hard to know how to make it actually matter inside your head, how to make it any more important than thinking about the colour green. (2005, 141–42).

Bombarding people with pictures and news, the intensification of mobility has eroded the "reality" behind experiences and the possibility of emotional response. The same emotional detachment can be seen in Eve, Astrid's mother when, for example, looking at the tragic photos of death and torture in the newspaper, she realizes

the more she looked at them the less she felt or thought. The more pictures she saw, the less they meant something that had happened to real people...She didn't know what to do about the looking, whether to keep on looking or to stop looking [...] She was living in a time when historically it was permissible to smile like that above the face of someone who had died a violent death. (2005, 199)

In recognizing the pervasiveness of pictures, digital technology, and screens, *The Accidental* is modelled on ocular narration; characters are constantly "gazing at" the culture (Kane 2020, 116, also see Baudelaire 1964), yet, similar to the hotel in *Hotel World* that is built upon a void, the objects and people in *The Accidental* are only fleeting appearances, disconnected and meaningless.

5 The Lost Concord, the Smart Family in Search of Sequence and Direction

As discussed above, one of the main features of postmodern time is its loss of direction and, as a result, sequence. Immersed in simultaneity and instantaneity, Astrid is constantly trying to locate the beginning by using her digital camera to go back and forth in time. She has taken multiple shots from the moment of dawn signifying “the beginning” of the day, but is not able to capture the signified in the outer world. It is *as if* the signifieds of time are absent; the correlative beginning and end are missing and without them the middle seems accidental and meaningless. Astrid notices the omnipresence and control of CCTV cameras over the lives of people when, for example, thinking about the woman working in the shop being recorded all day she wonders:

when the woman gets home at night and sits at dinner or with a cup of coffee or whatever, does she realize she is not being recorded anymore? Or does she think inside her head that she still is being recorded, by something that watches everything we do, because she is so used to it being everywhere else? (2005, 124)

Astrid sees the world through the viewer of her camera, believing she is taking an active and critical stance towards it, yet she is not able to “deterritorize” her point of view. She is only copying what she thinks the world is doing to her, apathetically yet constantly watching.

Astrid’s obsession with the beginning of day and “of things” (2005, 15), is a search for the moment of *origin*. Currie, in explaining the Derridean deconstruction of origin, writes:

An origin is the first moment in an historical sequence. It is, in a sense, an easier moment to mythologise as presence because nothing comes before it and, at the time it occurs, it has not yet been marked by subsequent moments. This means that when you want to explain something, its origin is a useful bedrock for the explanation, very often narrating the history of that something from the point of originary purity and self-presence. (1998, 82)

In a world plagued with disconnection, Astrid is constantly trying to pin down beginnings and ends to make connections with the confused middle in which she finds herself. Without *the origin* her own origin and, as a result, her identity, become null and her story disjointed. In Astrid’s point of view, as seen in the section opening “The Beginning”, she imagines that the summers in the past, “before she was born”, were much better and more meaningful: “they were perpetual beautiful summers from May to October” (2005, 19). In her loss of continuity, Astrid yearns for a “time before fragmentation” (Punday 2003, 165). Before her beginning, the sequence of time seemed to be still in place and her family along with it. In all her attempts to find the beginning, Astrid is detached from her own origin, her mother. Like all other members of her family, she is entrapped in a meaningless, insignificant, passive, and flattened middle, unable to find the beginning and grasp or comprehend the end.

Astrid’s search for the moment of origin and the beginning, as Currie infers, also reminds us of St. Augustine’s musings on the flow of time and the indeterminacy of the beginning. While

in St. Augustine the unquestionable presence of logos – as the pure moment of origin and the absolute truth leading to identicalness of the signifier and the signified – is able to constitute the connection between the word and the world, Astrid's camera and all her attempts to locate time end in absence and postponement, or in Currie's terms: "anticipation of retrospect" (Currie 2007, 113) when her shots would become meaningful and significant in the future, making her present and presence worthwhile: "In a hundred years' time these latches may not exist anymore and this film will be proof that they did" (2005, 24). This again reminds us of Bauman's comparison of the pre-postmodern "pilgrim" with the postmodern "tourist", the former moving towards a significant goal while the latter restlessly, in Kane's words, "darting all over the place" (2020, 138), constantly archiving her present in the hope of it having a significance for future spectators. However, since the future is as absent as the past, the present is rendered null as well. Lea maintains: "[the Smarts] regard their experience of the world as the negative to a rewarding, meaningful, and connected positive print" (2016, 51). Consequently, Astrid's contemplations can be seen as a postmodern pastiche of St. Augustine, turning what used to be sacred and meaningful into a superficial replica in postmodernism's society of spectacle (see Kane 2020, 114).

The disconnectedness and apathy of the Smarts does not only emerge in their immersion in the depthless transience of images and news, it also shows itself in their failed attempts at recounting real events. For example, Magnus, Astrid's teenage brother, in narrating the events that lead to the suicide of a female schoolmate whose face was photoshopped into a pornographic picture and spread in the school as a joke, says: "First they. They then. Then they. Then she" (2005, 48). Despite his role in the tragic event, Magnus like the rest of the Smarts is not able to feel anything or sympathize with the situation: "What really shocks him is that nothing happens. Nothing happens every time he thinks it. Didn't it matter?" (2005, 49). He too tries to find solace in signifiers that promise certainty, filtering the reality in calculus, yet he fails at articulating his emotions. Like the other members of his family, he wonders about the past, his past as the "hologram boy" (2005, 48). Describing it as an artificial three-dimensional appearance, Magnus used to be unaware of the illusions of the world and his own being, and now with the erosion of the hologram boy he has not been able to conjure a new self for himself and, disillusioned from his artificial beginning, is left with hollowness, formlessness, and nonexistence.

Unlike Astrid and Magnus who are questioning the givenness of signifiers and their magical power in conjuring the *truth* of the world in the word, Michael, their stepfather, is still faithful to clichés. In the first section told from his point of view we read: "Dr Michael Smart had been reduced to cliché" (2005, 69). He *believes* a cliché is "true, obviously, which was why it had become cliché in the first place; so true that cliché actually protected you from its own truth by being what it was, nothing but cliché" (2005, 70). He is articulate in analysing and theorizing a cliché ("he could crack a cliché wide open with a couple of properly pitched words") and citing canonical titles and eminent seminars on it. However, Michael, too, feels the difference between the past and the present and recognizes the recent depletion and dysfunctionality of *old truths* that once looked authentic and timeless. He ponders on how in the past everything felt newer, when he was "a fresh-faced (cliché!) twelve-year-old", unlike the twelve-year-old Astrid for whom "nothing was new and everything was so already known

and been and done and postmodern-t-shirt regurgitated” (2005, 70–71). He is yearning for a time when the acceleration of use had not made everything over-used and “misted by overexpression” (2005, 69), a time when clichés were still “fixed impression[s]” (2005, 270), unquestionable and eternal. With the fall of metanarratives, postmodernism with its strength to reproduce and propagate in great numbers and short time is constantly pasting the leftovers and contriving new unities that are inevitably hollow, like Astrid’s “empty pear peel” that resembles the real one (2005, 28). Even Magnus’ pornographic creation that makes him God (2005, 50) is a cliché. Clichés are clown-like pastiches in language; residues detached from depth and meaning, they grotesquely hover around in language unaware of their hollowness. Michael, like his clichés, rambles on trying to deny his obsolescence and dysfunctionality.

Eve, the middle-aged mother of the family, shares the feeling of depletion and inauthenticity. As her name suggests, she is supposed to be the beginning and the beginner, the origin of all. Eve was previously married to Adam, another beginner, yet she is now severed from her original story and entrapped in an insignificant and flattened middle in her life, her marriage, her motherhood, and her career. Kermode believes the linear conception of time inaugurated with the Bible and with its story of *the beginning* – Adam and Eve, and the story of *the end* – apocalypse: “It begins at the beginning (‘In the beginning...’) and ends with a vision of the end (‘Even so, come, Lord Jesus’); [...] Ideally, it is a wholly concordant structure, the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end” (2000, 6). However, with the metanarratives of linear stories of concord between the beginning, the middle, and the end fallen from their credibility in the postmodern era, we need new concords to escape the idea that the end is our death and nothing more (2000, 58). As a postmodern individual, Eve has lost her sense of agency and authenticity for she feels like an insignificant, random presence in the middle, “cut off at both ends” (Bauman 1995, quoted in Kane 2020, 92), with no beginning and no overview of a meaningful end. She describes the last words of her mother before her death as “meaningless” (Smith 2005, 302), like the meaninglessness of the absolute end itself which is approaching closer. The middle for Eve means being dropped into predefined roles and subjugating “standards”:

It is very very hard work indeed [...] to be a woman and alive in this hemisphere in this day and age. It asks a lot, to be able to do all the things we’re supposed to do the way we’re expected to do them: Talent. Sex. Money. Family. The correct modest intelligence. The correct thinness. The correct presence. (2005, 97).

She collects the stories of the people who have died “before their time” in the Second World War, and gives them “a voice – but a voice that tells his or her story as if he or she had lived on” (2005, 92). Eve is not able to find the purposeful sequence in these real life-stories, and attempts to create fictional stories, narrative concords, in order to defy the absurdity and futility she sees in them; new stories that would obliterate the morbid randomness of the real end, “the absolute end” (2005, 225), and displace it with a new beginning, middle, and end that would perhaps make the life narrative a meaningful and significant whole. Despite these attempts to create and change, Eve is not able to write; she, too, is consumed by emptiness, inauthenticity, and passivity. It is to this world with the hollow existence of things and people that Smith introduces another character: Amber.

6 Rhizomatic Subversion and the “Creative Possibility of Ambiguity”

Lea claims that if we want to summarize Smith’s fiction in one word, it would be “but”. As one of her fictional characters puts it “‘but’ [...] always takes you off to the side, and where it takes you is always interesting” (Smith 2012, 175; Lea 2016, 26). This questioning of fixity is more perceptibly conveyed in Smith’s use of diverse characters and point of views “to reflect the crumbling of singular, authoritarian voices in contemporary discourses” (Lea 2016, 17). However, ambiguity in Smith’s novels and short stories goes beyond this stylistic feature and is her artistic signature. Smith’s works are built upon, borrowing Lea’s words, the “creative possibilities of ambiguity”, suggesting that her works aim at eradicating the set lines of long established definitions and certainties and thus opening up new and diverse outlooks.

In most of Smith’s works it is with the entrance of an “outsider” that the barren solipsism of individual point of views (Lea 2016, 48) is interrupted and the dysfunctional narrative conventions are displaced by creative divergences. Amber in *The Accidental* is a stranger who arrives at the door of the Smarts’ holiday house. No one knows where she comes from, but all the Smarts are amazed and influenced by her. Amber is the interruptive, accidental, and impossible (for she is not wholly real) character who emerges in the lives of the Smarts and exposes the hole behind their cardboard walls; as Lea asserts “Amber exemplifies a familiar trope in Smith’s writing: the external catalyst propelled into the world of the narrative in order to make apparent to the protagonists the limits of their ingrained vision” (2016, 48). Examples of other works by Smith in which a character who is not completely material or physically present emerges and through his/her ghostlike presence/absence or impossibility exposes the unreality of the world of the characters include the ghost of Sara Wilby in *Hotel World* (2001), Miles in *There But For The* (2011), the spirit of a Renaissance Fresco painter in *How To Be Both* (2014), and Alhambra/Amber in *The Accidental* (2016, 48).

With the entrance of Amber, the reader gradually comes to realize that “Amber ‘is’ Alhambra” (Currie 2007, 116). Of the five characters that spend the summer in the holiday house throughout the story, Amber is the only one who does not have a point of view section assigned to her. On the other hand, as Alhambra and an immaterial voice she is the only one that has a first-person point of view. Alhambra is a conjured spirit of classical cinema. Her memories are those of the history of the cinema since its invention and fragments of all the famous movies that have shone on the screen and more:

I was formed and made in the Saigon days, the Rhodesian days, the days of the rivers of blood. DISEMBOWEL ENOCH POWELL. Apollo 7 splashdowned [...] I was born in a time of light, speed, celluloid [...]. The eidoloscope [...] The silver screen. The flicks. [...] Misty watercolour memories. (2005, 13)

Lea believes “Amber’s lack of definition is key to her catalytic impact on the family.” She is the ambiguity that inaugurates creative possibilities (2016, 63). In other words, borrowing from Currie’s Derridean observation, she is a lie that tells the truth about a lie (Currie 2007, 49). Amber/Alhambra’s nonphysical emergence, representing the Derridean “possibility of surface without depth” and “Phantasma” subverts the logocentric and *a priori* rules of the being

built upon the first-personal presence as the locus in time and space. Like the Derridean supplement, Alhambra/Amber is the absence that exposes the ontological lack of the origin and becomes more real than other characters and their deceiving reality.

Currie asserts Alhambra/Amber's multiplicity undermines linear temporality which applies only to unified beings (2007, 119). Her wristwatch has stopped at 7, suggesting that the time does not apply to her. It cannot be established that she is or is not. She is not a zero or a nonbeing, or if she is (echoing Magnus' confused calculations: "what does $0 = ?$ " (2007, 176)) she is a zero that equals one, and two, and more. She is the embodiment of Derridean inventive impossible and secret, for "an invention must announce itself as invention of that which would not appear possible" (Miller 2001, 69) to be an invention. When contemplating on her name, Eve says: "Amber was an exotic fixative. Amber preserved things that weren't meant to last. Amber gave dead gone things a chance to live forever. Amber gave random things a past" (2005, 166). Like the secret that is an "act of survival after death" (2005, 72), Amber in her phantasmatic in-betweenness becomes the source of survival and regeneration for the Smarts.

As an outsider, Amber defies all the authorial rules in Smarts' lives. In the larger scale of the overall form of the story too, Alhambra's impossible first-person point of view, talking about her *beginning* before the chapter entitled "The Beginning", interrupts the spatiotemporal narrative conventions. Acting like the liminal Derridean *parergon* that reinforces the supplement and deconstructs the ontological division between in and out, Alhambra/Amber deconstruct the spatial relation between the centre and the periphery and temporal beginning and end. Currie connects these features of Amber with another Derridean metaphor, the paradoxical notion of a pocket larger than the whole:

Amber's externality to time, like the word 'beginning', has a graphic dimension. ... She is a framing device for the novel as a whole [...] she is, in Derrida's words, 'invagination', or 'an internal pocket which is larger than the whole' (Derrida 1992b, 228; Currie 2007, 117).

Amber/Alhambra encapsulates Smith's spatiotemporal deconstruction by *being impossibly both within and without time and space* of her story (Currie 2007, 119). As Derrida maintains "deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting, destabilizing foreclusionary structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other" (2007, 45); it is by unravelling spatiotemporal location and unity that spaces are opened for the emergence of the "multiplicity of voices of the other" (2007, 61). In this way, Amber/Alhambra as the indefinite is able to disrupt the defined realms of presence in her incorporeal multiplicity, and the beginning and end in her timelessness and thus "preserve".

Amber and Alhambra's superficial yet inventive presence with no ontological depth can also be associated with the rhizome. In their impossible presence, they function as the sites, bodies without organs (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), welcoming difference and temporary becomings. Unlike the three-dimensional structure of a tree developing an interconnected and concordant whole, the rhizome "has no beginning: no roots. It has no middle: no trunk. And it has no end: no leaves. It is always in the middle, always in process. There is no particular shape it has to take and no particular territory to which it is" (May 2005, 133–34).

Both Alhambra and Amber treat set definitions and divisions of time and space as clichés and open up spaces for accidental and parallel emergences of *becoming* both within the lives of the Smarts and the overall narrative; as Alhambra says: “I’ve had the time of my life and for all we know I’m going to live forever” (2005, 105). The Alhambra/Amber character does not unfold in a unified way with narrative beginnings and ends, but in constant transformations, with a lack of identity and random plural sprouts: “The tree imposes the verb ‘to be’, but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and ... and ... and ...’”. This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb ‘to be’” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 25). Multiplicity is not only conveyed in Amber/Alhambra’s already mentioned deconstruction of one beginning and one end, and hence the verb “to be”, but also in them being conjunctive parallels (at the end of the story Eve, too, joins them in parallelism).

Accordingly, if the postmodern world is inevitably two-dimensional, the simulacra of capitalism takes on an arborescent form in order to enforce the hegemonic standards of the majority, while the rhizomatic superficiality is creative and “minoritarian”. As the rhizome emerges “from a variety of perspectives that are not rooted in a single concept or small group of concepts” (May 2005, 134), it is able to grow outside the “molar lines of the majority” and become minoritarian and subversive “in favor of difference as yet unactualized” (May 2005, 150). Lea quotes Murray in saying “the force from outside is also a force from inside that reveals to Smith’s characters that they have the choice of ‘opening [their] world out into wider worlds or different forms or different notions’” (quoted in Lea 2016, 49). In cracking the illusive walls of simulacra, “deterritorialized” spaces open up for new forms that stand outside the boundary of dominant lines before the eyes of the characters who are so used to watching and being watched within the lines that they no longer see.

For instance, Amber rejects becoming a part of Michael’s cliché fantasies (Smith 2005, 86). By throwing Astrid’s camera from the bridge and breaking it, Amber forces her to dismiss both the capitalist technological imperatives of world time and the logocentric signifiers in language, in order to experience time authentically and in an accidental way. Magnus abandons his blinding and dysfunctional signifiers of logic and is able to finally *feel* sad: “Is there a calculus for sadness? Calculus enables you to reach the correct answer without necessarily knowing why. Is there a calculus that lets you understand why and how you reached a wrong answer? The letters had come. It was the end result. Something was wrong with it” (2005, 249). Furthermore, with Amber he directly experiences what he used to “watch” in the false reality of pornographic clichés. Eve, on the other hand, leaves her family and all the imposed roles she had to fulfil at the end and becomes another Amber to a strange family by arriving unexpectedly at their door. Instead of uselessly looking for contrived concords in her *reinvented real* stories, she changes role with Amber and becomes fictional, yet more real than what she used to be in becoming dynamically inventive. Amber, in robbing the Smarts’ house and emptying it of all their possessions, even taking away the doorknobs that mark the safety and security of their simulacrum, seems to have, as Eve believes, brought about the “absolute end” (2005, 225), but ironically in her annihilation of false appearances and signifiers, she creates a new beginning and a blank page for diversity, circularity, and *becoming-minority*. Amber is the rhizomatic empty pocket that cracks the walls of the framing simulacra and makes room for the outside and subversive, and Alhambra the liminal parergon that exposes the void at the heart of the narrative linearity and the story of the moment of *origin*. By

joining the Alhambra/Eve nomadic non/existence, Eve *becomes* a minoritarian site of struggle rather than an ontological being (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and only then is she able to survive eradication.

In its recognition of the foundational impact of visual technology and the culture of spectacle in the postmodern conception of time, *The Accidental* breaks its generic frame and merges with cinema. Deleuze claims after the Second World War, and as a result of the spatiotemporal crisis discussed earlier, cinematic productions outside the mainstream developed *time-images* (Deleuze 1989),³ leading to the emancipation of time from action, agent, meaning, and sequence of movement-images (Deleuze 1986, *Cinema 1*) that were based on determinacies of time and space. In time-images the central “being” of action dissolves into the “may-being” of time, and the spatial metaphor of surface and depth transform into the temporal metaphor of all-becoming and everywhere stretched (1989, 31). Deleuze, following Derrida in introducing his notion of time-images, asserts everything is indeed a mere sign and time-images function like language (1989, 22): on the surface and without depth. “Crystal-image” is one of the main stylistic features in which these transformations are envisaged: “For there to be a crystal-image, the actual and the virtual must become indiscernible” (1989, 68–92).⁴ In the simultaneous presence of parallels, the dividing line between the real and the virtual is obliterated. Alhambra as the time-image collage of fragments of movement-image cinema and Amber as the outside of time are crystal-images that gradually obliterate the reality of Eve and make her another parallel replication. Within the narrative structure of the story at the end, and unlike the conventional completion in movement-images, we go back to the beginning in circularity: “We see in the crystal the [...] non-chronological time” (Deleuze 1989, 81/108–9). Amber is simultaneously Eve’s past (she is like a younger Eve), present, and future (Eve becomes Amber). The conjunctive structure of the rhizome in Alhambra “and” Amber “and” Eve “preserves” time in *becoming*, which is also a *becoming minor* to the authoritative system of thought. As we can see, the rhizomatic art is able to change the passive postmodern archetype of the tired tourist to rhizomatic archetypes: the forger, the player, and the “deterritorized” artist, embodied by Smith’s Amber, Alhambra, and at the end Eve who are able to disrupt and make change. Lea’s observation that Smith’s works are embodiments of “but” that leads to “creative possibilities of ambiguity” can thus be explained in *The Accidental*’s rhizomatic form.

7 Conclusion

In this study it was described that with the temporal crisis of the postmodern era and the fall of metanarratives of meaningful progression, human beings were severed from a historical context, lost the concord between the beginning and the end, and, as result, were reduced to flattened insignificant middles. Like a tired tourist who satisfies herself with constant archiving as a validation of her identity, the postmodern subject aimlessly wanders around living advertised and preplanned experiences, finally being reduced to dead clichés.

³ Deleuze’s examples of time-images in cinema include Orson Wells’ *Citizen Kane* and *The Lady from Shanghai* and works by Fellini and Antonioni.

⁴ Other types of time images are *opsigns*, *sonsigns*, *chronosigns*, *noosigns*, and *lectosigns*, which are omitted here due to the focus of the research.

In this context the postmodern narrative becomes an act of survival by dismissing its suppositions of linearity and seamlessness and remains a source of assigning meaning to the individual human experience. Philosophers such as Derrida claim the two-dimensionality of fiction is the perfect medium for deconstructing the *metaphysics of presence* and thus welcoming the emergence of the excluded other. In line with Derrida's deconstruction of *being*, and informed by Deleuze's rhizomatic creative *becoming*, it is argued that postmodern fiction dismisses the arborescent structure of presence with its need for beginning and end, and replaces it with diverse, superficial, incorporeal, and accidental emergences. As the postmodern narrative is able to corporealize the Derridean supplement and Deleuzian "deterritorized" rhizomatic in its ontological deconstruction, it becomes the perfect medium for inventing forges that break the framing walls of dominant signifiers and open up blank spaces for authentic, minor, and subversive emergences.

Through rhizomatic characters of Amber and Alhambra that deconstruct the metaphysics of being and origin, and in line with the Derridean potentials of the non-truth of the fictional, *The Accidental* undermines the organic form of narration that lead to exclusion and hierarchization, and develops characters that emerge not from essences and roots that are prior to language but on the surface of language and fiction with no claim to depth and truth. Their fictive emergence seems to be supplementary to the real and the present, but they lead to "creative possibilities of ambiguity" that undo paralyzing codifications. Alhambra and Amber are not truly born, they are "fictional" and "impossible", yet they engender multiple births and beginnings like themselves. As the paradoxical yet creative force, freeing Eve from her walls of assigned roles and fixating definitions, they obliterate the distinguishing line between real and virtual and substitute the verb "to be" with its certitude and temporal centrality with "becoming" as the possible supplementary. Perhaps the rhizomatic form is the new concord of our era, helping us to survive the depthlessness of our world, and to continuously reinvent ourselves as active agents. In Smith's optimistic glance to the future, the postmodern archetype of the tired tourist is substituted by a "deterritorized" and "minoritarian" nomad artist and forger who, in a Deleuzian vein, embraces randomness, multiple presences, and the destructive yet creative state of becoming.

At the end it is worth mentioning that in *The Accidental* authenticity is found outside the walls of the flashing and fleeting spectacles of the simulacra, and within a more direct and creative encounter with the world and others. Since the first publication of the book in 2005, the virtual culture of spectacle has expanded even more and worked its way even deeper into our existence, marking another digital revolution. This makes us wonder if once again a new concord is required, perhaps one that uses the inescapable simulacra rhizomatically to subvert it.

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