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## Sign the Gap : Dialogical Self in Disrupted Times

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## **SIGN THE GAP: DIALOGICAL SELF IN DISRUPTED TIMES**

### **ABSTRACT**

In this article we propose to advance our understanding of dialogical self dynamics by focusing on the experience of time. In order to do so, we treat the dynamics of I-positions as semiotic processes. We focus on an event that threatens the sense of time and causes uncertainty – World War II in England, examined through a case study of a young woman. We show how social and personal time markers normally establish a sense of continuity. Facing ruptures, a person can use further social means to reduce uncertainty – yet these carry normative expectations for I-positions. More personal uses of symbolic resources can also restore a connection to past I-positions, construct present ones, and create alternative future I-positions; they can also create alternative temporalities that enable to isolate or protect vulnerable I-positions.

**Key words:** Time, dialogical self, semiotic process, uncertainty, diary, case-study, symbolic resource

The experience of time is an essential feature of both collective and individual human life. Culture can only exist if collective experience is transmitted through time, and if societies can organize their activities so as to anticipate their future needs. On the personal level, a sense of continuity through time is a core component of a feeling of self-integrity and a condition for psychological functioning (James, 1890; Minkowski, 1933). It is necessary for human action, both for learning from experience and for preparing the future. Dialogical Self Theory is based on the idea that self is produced through dynamics linking a multiplicity of I-positions in an imaginary landscape (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Some of these I-positions can be described as internalised traces of past actions or interactions; others emerge as projected in the future. It appears therefore that human life is made possible by a constant and ongoing dialogue between past, present and future I-positions, transforming these positions and generating new ones. We propose to advance our understanding of dialogical self dynamics by focusing on the experience of time. As ruptures are more likely to reveal important psychological processes, we concentrate on an

event that threatens the sense of time and causes uncertainty – World War II in England. Using a case study, we can see how a sense of time may be restored and developed within a dialogical self thanks to symbolic resources.

## 1. DIALOGICAL SELF, TIME & UNCERTAINTY

The theoretical framework we adopt here is that of cultural psychology. The term “cultural psychology” designates a group of theoretical perspectives which acknowledge the dialogicality of human beings (Cole, 1996; Valsiner, 2007; Wertsch, 1998). These approaches are mainly inspired by the works of Janet (1934), Freud (2001), James (1890), Peirce (1878), Vygotsky (1997), and Mead (1934). Theoretical framework of cultural psychology relies on a few assumptions: 1) the irreducibility of time (things and humans are constantly changing); 2) human persons cannot be considered outside their interactions with others, objects and the symbolic world in which they live; and 3) one of the principal ways in which these interactions find a psychological form is through signs circulating between people or at an intrapsychological level. It is by focusing on processes attached to these signs, or semiotic processes, that we will be able to describe the sense of time in the dialogical self, and dynamics whereby it can be restored when challenged by new events.

### 1.1. SEMIOTIC PROCESSES IN TIME

All experiences that people have are likely to affect them, be they aware of them or not. Interactions with others and with objects, self-understanding, perceptions, but also vicarious experiences enabled by cultural elements – such as a novel or a song – can be described as leaving semiotic traces in people. These traces will constitute the stuff of the person’s experience, knowledge and memory. The notion of semiotic trace thus groups other entities discussed in psychology: representations, models, images, schemes etc. In a new situation, the person will attempt to link occurring experiences with the traces of previous experiences. New experiences may be constituted as semiotic means through these links; in turn, new links can transform existing semiotic traces and their organisation (see, e.g., Pierce 1868a, 1868b, 1878). Semiotic traces become organised and stabilised. Some become dominant, other secondary; some are very general, other very specific (Valsiner, 2004). Thus a form of self architecture is established (Zittoun, 2006).

For societies, continuity through time as well as the measurement and mastery of time are conditions for surviving. Groups need to accede to knowledge and experience acquired across generations; therefore they develop means to retain and transmit memories. Also, they have to share tasks, organise roles, and plan their activities in space and time. To structure this collective life and enable social interactions, civilisations have developed complex techniques to punctuate and measure time, such as stars, calendars, celebrations, watches, etc. Through remembering the past, anticipating the future and punctuating the present, groups have developed a sense of time and history (see, e.g., Whitrow, 1988). This sense of time can be said to be created, and enabled, by semiotic means. Learning time thus requires the mastery of a specific semiotic system (Wydhamn & Säljö, 1999).

It is in turn shaped according to the semiotic means that have been used: some groups, relying on the cycle of the seasons or on the stars, have elaborated a cyclical metaphor of time and history, while others, keeping track of the succession of generations, have developed linear metaphors of time (Van Geert, 2006; Yamada & Kato, 2006).

On a more personal level, a sense of self-continuity appears to be a condition for health and good enough life (Erikson, 1968; James, 1890). Conversely, drugs and torture that distort the sense of time can profoundly affect a person's sense of self-integrity. A personal sense of time is also concretised and enabled by a variety of semiotic means. It is partly enabled by deeply internalised semiotic means, some being physiologically rooted – such as one's own heart beat, which becomes an object of attention and a sign when it varies (e.g., with strong emotions) – some other being primarily social and cultural, such as the structure of language, but also, the regular passage of the 11 o'clock tramway in the next street. Individual sense of time can also take different shapes, in different spheres of experience: it can be perceived as linear or circular, and can be affected by various events (Hviid, submitted paper; Yamada & Kato, 2006).

Because sense of time enables social cohesion and the smooth organization of activity, the everyday environment in which people live is deeply marked by time indications. The public space is organised around time marker: in Europe, churches and main squares usually have their horloges; streets and public transports signal time; at school and workplace time is strictly structured, companies and school produce schedules and planning, mark breaks and holidays, punctuate lectures and learning sequences. In the private space of a contemporary home, TVs, microwaves, phones, computers, diaries, all remind people of the punctuations of time. Thus, the individual sense of time continuity is necessarily constructed through socially shared semiotic means.

## 1.2. DIALOGICAL SELF IN TIME

Dialogical self theory studies the dynamics of relations between a variety of I-positions within the imaginary landscape of the self (Hermans, 1996). Within our semiotic frame of understanding, we describe I-positions as specific groups of semiotic traces associated to a sense of self-definition. These are likely to be defined or modified through reflective acts. Reflective acts occur primarily as mediated acts (Gillespie, 2006), for example through interactions with others or with cultural elements, or through introspective techniques (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch, 2002). I-positions can thus be said to be stabilised semiotic groups that become salient when questions of self-definition, relation or feeling come to the fore. They can include self-attributes, memories, values, specific memories, wishes, or hopes. For example, traces of the numerous situations in which a person is studying, writing essays, reading books, passing exams, having brilliant ideas, or blushing when humiliated in front of other students, can be stabilised into a general sense of “me as a student”, an I-position that is easily mobilisable in conversations about occupation.

I-positions are located in time. Some I-positions result from past interactions with the socially shared reality, other people and objects, through internalizations of experiences and further internal dialogue. Yet through these experiences, the person also sets goals for himself/herself, elaborates projects, plans the next days' activities, or imagines them in ten years. I-positions can also be imaginary: based on traces of previous experiences, they are placed in a hypothetical future, and count as if they would be realized (Abbey, 2007; Josephs, 2003). Past, present and future hypothetic I-positions are similarly constituted through semiotic processes. In sum, I-positions are semiotic constructions which give the person the possibility to extend his/her present experience into the past and future, in time and space (Gillespie, 2007).

Three main functions of I-positions are of interest for our discussion about the sense of time. Firstly, the sense of time and self-continuity is elaborated through a constant dialogue between past and future I-positions. Secondly, dynamics of I-positions enable this striving for future; future I-positions generate the tension – motivation, intention – sustaining personal change (Gillespie, 2007). Thirdly, past I-positions constitute the knowledge-base, the semiotic reservoir, which helps to recognize new events, understand them and link to past experience. Thus, when the immediate future resembles the past to some extent, I-positions are economic ways to guide everyday lives; they are part of the semiotic means through which humans turn the unknown into the known.

### 1.3. UNCERTAINTY AGAINST SENSE OF TIME

The experience of time, created through the regular return of things, normally provides people with a sense of continuity and a basic trust in the world: people do know, without having to worry, that certain things will occur in due time (e.g., dinners, rest, seeing friends). This trust in the stability of time, constructed through experiences of recurrence and duration, is a condition for individual and collective creativity (see also Winnicott, 1971). Regularity enables to link present I-positions (e.g., self dining at this table) to past ones in similar situations (e.g., self dining yesterday at this table, as well as last week, two years ago, etc), and supports the projection of similar I-positions in the future (e.g., self can easily be imagined dining at this table tomorrow). A rupture of regularities is likely to create uncertainty, a state in which one does not know what to expect. For example, in a hotel in an unknown town where a foreign language is spoken, a person might wonder how to get a dinner – what is missing is a future I-position to guide the actions required to obtain a dinner. The person might go to a local restaurant, choose randomly a dish on the menu, eat an unrecognisable food, and then realise having eaten dog meat. Reflecting upon it, the person might produce a new I-position – I as dog-eater – that was never expected. How to associate it with existing I-dog-friendly position? Uncertainty can thus be described as either due to the lack of future I-position, or the lack of link between new I-positions and existing ones. In that sense, uncertainty is the negative of the sense of continuity in time (see also Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007, for a further elaboration).

#### 1.4. SYMBOLIC RESOURCES TO SIGN THE GAP

Culture and personal experience provide people with semiotic means to ordinarily sustain their sense of time (Wyndhamn & Säljö, 1999). In case of rupture imposing uncertainty, however, culture might still offer elements which might help them to restore their sense of time. For example, during the periods in which people have many things to do in a very short time, they start to use lists and diaries to organise this time; in periods of mourning, they can return to religious practices that, through ritual, reorganise time. Our proposition here is that culture provides people with many elements which can be used to restore some sense of continuity, be these objects culturally meant to structure time, or not.

Cultural elements include social knowledge that can be formal (institutional discourse, media, etc.) or informal (discussions, gossip, etc.) (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie, Aveling, in press), as well as artefacts such as films, novels, religious stories, historical narratives etc., which are complex constructions of semiotic units. These cultural elements can be experienced (when listening to the music, watching a film, etc.). They can also be used intentionally by a person in relation to something which exceeds it – such as when a person listens to music in order to remember some past event, or watches a film in order to prepare a trip to a foreign country (Gillespie, 2007); they are thus used as symbolic resources (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson & Psaltis, 2003; Zittoun, 2005, 2006).

In what follows, we explore how usual semiotic markers support a person's sense of continuity between past, present and future I-positions. We examine how people use symbolic resources to create new I-positions in time in periods of uncertainty, and how symbolic resources might also facilitate the linking of these new positions to existing ones.

#### 2. A CASE STUDY: UNCERTAINTY AND SIGNS IN TIME OF WAR

We focus on the experience of a young woman, June, during World War II in England. June, like most people, experienced war as a series of ruptures (Zittoun, Cornish et al., in press). In England, the whole country had been asked to support the war effort; a major "home-front" was created. Men were conscripted, and women were called to participate in the war effort. The war thus broke up families and social networks, deprived people of taken-for-granted commodities, and deeply modified people's everyday life.

The war demands the creation of new I-positions in a situation of uncertainty (e.g., how to imagine I-positions during an air raid, if one does not know what an air raid is?); it can also stimulate the creation of new I-positions difficult to link with existing ones (e.g., how can the idea of "I-as-soldier" be connected with the present "I-as-humanist"?). So how can symbolic resources be used by people to maintain a sense of continuity, to create new future I-position, and to preserve dynamics between I-positions?

The data on which the present study is based are diaries drawn from the Mass-Observation (M.O.) Archive (Sheridan, Street & Bloome, 2000). Mass-Observation was established in Britain in 1937 with the aim of creating a “people’s anthropology” to redress the relative neglect of ordinary people’s perspective in social science (Bloome, Sheridan & Street, 1993). Following public appeals by the founders of Mass-Observation, several hundred ordinary people across Britain volunteered to keep daily diaries about their lives and their communities and to respond to regular survey. Such data are doubly interesting from the point of view of studying change and dialogical processes. Firstly, it offers rich longitudinal data; this analysis is based on the case of June, a young woman who wrote about one page of diary everyday during five years of the war. Secondly, it enables to document the social and historical context in which the diarist lives - her partners of interpersonal and internal dialogue (Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling & Zittoun, in press). The diary was transcribed and the digital files were shared among a team of researchers (Alex Gillespie, Flora Cornish, Emma-Louise Aveling and Tania Zittoun). Qualitative analyses were conducted through a dialogical process and mediated by the software Atlas.ti. In order to guide our interpretation of the data, we examined the diary of June’s sister Bella, as well as information related to the historical and political context and the social knowledge to which the two sisters were exposed. We also engaged in a collaborative case study, each of us pursuing his or her exploration of the same set of data on the basis of his or her theoretical perspectives, and each of us commenting on others’ interpretations (Cornish, Zittoun, & Gillespie, 2007). For the present analysis, attention was given to time markers, be they social (e.g., events) or personal (e.g., significant memories) to a wide range of cultural elements and to occurrences of personal pronouns and self-definition.

June started to send her diary to Mass-Observation in August 1939, aged 18, and continued until the war ended in 1945. At the outbreak of war, June lives at home, in a small, close-knit village on the East Coast. She lives with her mother and sister, and works in a small village garage and shop owned by the family. In April 1941, following Labour Minister Bevin’s call for women to enter the workforce, she moves to the south west of England, where she trains and works as a gardener. In March 1943 June and her sister move to be head gardeners at a war hostel, charged with producing vegetables to feed factory workers and the hostel staff. After several months, June suffers from appendicitis, and takes up a position as shop assistant and “front desk” receptionist in the hostel, where she stays until the end of the war.

### 3. SOCIAL AND PERSONAL MAINTENANCE OF A SENSE OF TIME

Although war might be seen as disrupting the continuity of everyday life, society offers means to structure time so as to maintain its stability and regularity. Semiotic time markers can create points from which I-position can be established, and link between present, past and future can be generated and guided. In her diary, June uses and creates both culturally shared and private

semiotic time markers to sustain her sense of continuity, which takes various shapes.

### 3.1. SOCIAL TIME MARKERS

In June's sphere of experience, basic biological and social needs, such as eating, sleeping, working, having leisure, are always socially ensured, even though with some slight variations. As these activities are shared, the sense of time is collectively marked and structures a linear time. For example, one war-specific time marker is the time for the radio news: people organise their shared activities so as to be sure to be back home on time for the BBC news. In other words, one might say that everyday, a person can confront his/her present I-position with the position of I-as radio listener, indicated by his/her watch.

Important long-term time markers are holidays like Christmas, New Year and birthdays. June has specific diary entries for these days. These signal cyclical events and their regular return enable comparisons between similar events occurring in different contexts. Present I-positions can be compared to past I-positions in comparable times of the year. Thus, cultural time-markers confer regularity on events even in uncertain times, and thus maintain some basic sense of continuity; however, change is not excluded. For example, for Christmas, June always writes whether people in her direct environment remember it, what gifts are exchanged, and what food is available. New Year and various birthdays are for June occasions to reflect upon her past year, her current situation, and her future. Such writings reveal dialogical dynamics between I-positions. At the beginning of war, June writes in the name of the nation ("Who is sorry to see the last of this grim & anxious year? We have certainly lived history this year. How we have wondered & puzzled what the news in the next week would bring") (1940) but in the following years she focuses on an evaluation of her own situation, such as in 1941:

"I have had many happy hours in 1941 & I do not regret any experiences. It is a good thing another war year is over. I am where I never dreamt of being this time last year. Doing what I never imagined. I am not sorry. The time passes so much quicker with something to do all day. Goodbye & good riddance to 1941! I shall not forget the year I became a land girl. I wonder where 1942 will find me."

A cyclical event, New Year reveals changes in I-positions associated with the experiences of war – from a socially defined one to a more personal one. At the latter level, June reflects upon the difference between present I-positions ("I am where") and past I-positions ("I never imagined").

If New Year becomes a way to locate oneself in time, birthdays are the occasion to evaluate one's personal achievement over the lifespan. A given state of society promotes ideal-type life-lines (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2005): in pre-war Britain, there is an age in which one is supposed to be married, and one is supposed to keep a decent life until then. Internalised by June, such



ideas seem to have created prototypical possible I-positions (e.g., “June married age 21”), which should be met by real I-positions in the present. However, wartime radically changed life conditions, and it renders the achievement of age-related norms very difficult. June’s annual writings are often negative when she compares her present I-position to such normative prototypical I-positions – recurrently, she writes about her fear of becoming an old-maid, a socially stigmatised I-position.

### 3.2. PERSONAL TIME MARKERS

Beyond socially shared celebrations and birthdays, June also creates personal celebrations: the anniversaries of important events, such as leaving home, starting to work, are also signalled in her diary year after year. Like birthdays, these are occasions for self examination, enabling both continuity and change between present and past I-positions. It appears that these personal celebrations escape the heaviness of social norms. June decided to celebrate what is important for her, and evaluates her progress and loss in these dimensions. Personal celebrations are thus a personal re-creation of a cultural means (celebration), which enables one to take a distance from social norms, and to assess the reality of actual experiences. They create a space in which present and past I-positions can be articulated, in the absence of socially prototypical I-positions.

## 4. THE CREATION OF I-POSITIONS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Usual time markers might maintain a sense of continuity in war times. Yet war imposes ruptures that question the taken for granted, and this might render the creation of I-position difficult. In this section, we explore how uses of symbolic resources can support the creation of I-positions in a diversity of imaginary time-spots.

### 4.1. USES OF SYMBOLIC RESOURCES TO ANCHOR I-POSITIONS IN THE COLLECTIVE PAST

Although war is a new element in June’s life, and leads to an unthinkable future, it can be included in a collective history. June and her sister have been exposed to discourses from their father, mother and teachers about First World War (directive of replies, 01.40). Their parents used to promote the idea that this war was meant to end wars. June will apply the very same idea to the present situation. The motto “a war to end war” previously used by her parents is taken out from its original past context, and is used as a resource to determine the overall meaning of the current war. In particular, with this motto the idea is promoted that knowledge is a weapon against war (Zittoun, Cornish et al., in press). Thus, it seems that June can define her present I-position (e.g., “I-at-war”) by linking it to imagined I-positions corresponding to the perspectives of her parents and teachers in the past. From this perspective, the motto “a war to end war” and the idea that knowledge is a weapon are promoted, and guide current I-positions, within the field of actual possibilities.

#### 4.2. USES OF SYMBOLIC RESOURCES TO SUPPORT COLLECTIVE HYPOTHETICAL I-POSITIONS

In times of uncertainty, the future brings events which are unknown; as people cannot draw on their past experience, they cannot give a shape to their future I-positions (e.g., “what will I do if a bomb falls close to my house?”, “what do I do if a German soldier breaks in?”). In June’s diary, we learn that people engage in discussions with neighbours and family members and mobilise Air Raid Protection (A.R.P.) leaflets. Such social knowledge supports the collective creation of representations of “what might happen”, and with it, of acceptable hypothetic I-positions (“what I might do if this happens”) (Zittoun, Cornish et al., in press). Resources facilitating dynamics that links present I-positions to hypothetic future ones might also guide actions to attain preferable future (e.g., prepare an air-shelter). They are thus resources for pre-adaptation.

#### 4.3. USES OF SYMBOLIC TO REINFORCE PRESENT I-POSITIONS

Works of fiction might become symbolic resources to elaborate emotional, personal conscious and unconscious experiences in a time of blurred future. June and her sister are novel readers, and have an easy access to public county libraries during the whole war – they borrow about 2 books a week, mostly novels. As she answers to the question “Which books that you have read during the past six months have made most impression on you? Why?”, June answers:

“*How Green was my Valley* – Richard Llewellyn impressed me considerably, because now I work on the land I can more appreciate the nearness to the soil and the beauties of an outdoor natural life, especially as I have worked in Suffolk” (Directive of replies, 10.42).

Here, June explains how the poetic description of the countryside enables her to see differently the surrounding nature to which she is quite sensitive, as he works in the field. The poetic I-positions that the novel makes her experience thus contaminates her present working I-position, and enables her to see the nature from a new perspective. Working in the field is not only legitimated by the government’s perspective, promoting a socially acknowledged I-position as “participant in the war effort”; the use of a book enables June to re-appropriate her work as a personally defined poetic I-position.

#### 4.4. USES OF SYMBOLIC RESOURCES TO SUPPORT PERSONAL PAST I-POSITIONS AND THEIR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

June is a big consumer of films during the whole war (over 110 films are mentioned in the diary). Among these films, one group is clearly meant to depict the reality of everyday life in Britain during World War II. These are (among others): *Mrs Miniver*, *Silver Fleet*, *The Gentle Sex*, or the *Canterbury Tale*. *Mrs Miniver* “describes the impact of the war on an ‘average’ middle-class family in England, the raids, marriages and deaths, the local people, the alteration of outlook” (Richards & Sheridan, 1987, p. 293). For June, it is first of all a semiotic means to present her past I-positions to her current colleagues: she, like *Mrs Miniver*, (and unlike them), has been exposed to air-

raids (Zittoun, Cornish et al., in press). However, disappointment characterises June's reactions to most films which resemble her own experiences of the land work, or of her home community. It can be understood as unfulfilled expectations to see some aspect of her past or current I-positions accurately represented. Such representations would enable these elements to be articulated and socially acknowledged. For example, June is still looking for ways of thinking about her I-position as a "liberated" young woman-worker, and obviously these films do not provide her with appropriate semiotic means.

#### 4.5. USES OF SYMBOLIC RESOURCES TO SUPPORT FUTURE PERSONAL I-POSITIONS

What resources can support an imagination of a possible future in time of uncertainty? June is asked by M.O. about what she uses to think about the future in October 1942:

I) "How do you think you have come to hold your present beliefs or forebodings about what things will be like after the war?", and (b) "How have you formed your own plans and desires about what you want after the war?"

June's answer: "a) Imagination, what I have read, heard & what it was like [overwrites 'life'] after the last war. b) Imagination again, personal experience & other peoples experiences books". In effect, among the books June reads are autobiographies and biographical novels, for example about Tom Harrison, one of the leaders of the Mass Observation project. Books about other people's lives and international politics can render intelligible her present situation; offering a full narrative, they might also be used as templates for one's action in the future (Zittoun, 2006), that is, to design future I-positions. Additionally, knowledge in itself is seen as a means to prepare that future; June writes to the directive of replies that in order to avoid further wars, everyone should have "more education in democracy and current history" (Directive of replies, 04.42).

### 5. THE MAINTENANCE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN I-POSITIONS

Uncertainty might impede people's ability to generate new I-positions, as we have just seen. It can also bring people to create new I-positions which are very difficult to link to other past and present I-positions, thus threatening to break down internal dynamics of the self. In such a situation, culture provides people with techniques for differentiating and reshaping times, so as to avoid confrontations of this kind between usual and threatening I-positions.

#### 5.1. USES OF SYMBOLIC RESOURCES FOR BRACKETING TIME

War forces June to live in a worker's hostel, full of young soldiers, where all celebrate parties, dance and drink. This brings June to define a new I-position which she quite enjoys, but which is rather incompatible with the positions that she used to hold as a "decent" woman in her pre-war community (Zittoun, Aveling, et al. in press). Thus, a conflict appears between socially expected and actual I-positions. To protect herself against this conflict, June uses linguistic social knowledge to bracket the current situation out of the usual flow of time, and from the social norms and expectations time carries:

“More work and at night O took me to celebrate his birthday to the factory club dance. There was a party of us from here & we had a good time. I seem to be leading rather a high life these days, but after all I shall only be young once & it won’t last long now.” (02.45).

In order to reconcile an I-position defined while drinking and dating many men with a pre-war decent woman position (Gillespie et al. in press; Zittoun, Aveling et al., in press), June defines her current life as time-bounded: it is a period which “won’t last long now”, a temporary state of exception. Thus, society fixes norms, but also offers semiotic means (the idea of a state of exception) enabling June to bracket current I-positions out of the strict cyclical and linear time shaped by social norms.

## 5.2. USES OF SYMBOLIC RESOURCES AND THE SAFETY OF OUT-OF-TIME

Rather than bracketing problematic time-sequences, other uses of symbolic resources enable to create time sequences that escape the flow of time. Among the films mentioned by June, there is a series of tale-like stories. June is deeply moved by Walt Disney fantasy productions. She sees twice *Dumbo* in May 42 as she works as a gardener: “I liked it immensely but not as much as *Snow white*. The music is not so catching, though *Baby Mine* brought tears to me”. *Dumbo* is the story of a baby elephant whose mother tries to reassure him despite the fact that he has enormous ears, and the song mentioned by June promises unconditional love in time of adversity (Zittoun, Cornish et al. in press). Fantasy can be said to create a “safe” space, remote from the demands and rules of the socially shared reality (Winnicott, 1971). One possible interpretation of June’s resonance with such film and music is that they offer a safe space to host, shape and reflect on her most vulnerable I-positions – these associated with the experience of being lost, afraid and lonely. These I-positions have no chance to be recognised in the social space, which demands heroic and collective war-effort. The time and space of fiction welcomes these I-positions which can thus be experienced in a vicarious mode, where their emotional weight can possibly be elaborated by semiotic means.

## 6. CONCLUSION: SYMBOLIC RESOURCES TO SIGN THE GAP

We have proposed a semiotic understanding of the self that enables to consider I-positions in terms of groupings of semiotic traces. The experience of time has been defined as including a sense of continuity, articulating past I-positions in connection with present and future ones. On the basis of one case-study, we have identified symbolic resources used by a person to protect and support this sense of time.

Firstly, everyday time is organised and structured thanks to collective and personal semiotic time-markers. Annual events, turned into celebrations, enable to link the present with equivalent moments in the past. Such cyclic shaping of time facilitates person’s comparison of present I-position with past I-positions, and thus, her sense of time. However, these marks of time also carry social norms; they bring the person to compare these present and

past I-positions with generalised or prototypical I-positions, triggering social comparison. We have seen June creating personal celebration to create a space of comparison between present and past I-positions out of the shadow of socially expected positions. Secondly, we have examined June's uses of resources when uncertainty challenges the creation or the linking of I-positions. We have shown how she could use available cultural elements to generate imaginations of past, alternative or future I positions. Thanks to uses of symbolic resources, such mediated positions repair, maintain and sustain her sense of time. Thirdly, we have seen that when uncertainty threatens a person's sense of continuity by rendering difficult the creation of links between I-positions, culture also provides resources to bend time so as to isolate threatening I-positions, or create safe imaginary spaces for vulnerable I-positions. Such uses of resources modify the linear and cyclical socially organised shapes of time: they create parallel times, or pockets in the flow of time (see also Koepping, 1997; Obeyesekere, 1990).

We all live in a plurality of times, and today uncertainty – of the present, future, and of our relation to the past – is increasing. Society provides groups and individuals with means to create, stabilise and unify I-positions. The belonging to specific societal sub-groups or niches can offer semiotic systems that offer such stability in time (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). Here, we have shown how individual people can also actively identify, reject, combine and use other semiotic means at their disposal, and thus invent their own present I-positions, and combine them with other present, past, future, and alternative I-positions.

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