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THE ABSENT ONES: CHRONOTOPE OF  
DISAPPEARANCE IN *THE BODY ARTIST*  
BY DON DELILLO AND *LJUBAVNA PESMA*  
BY SRĐAN SRDIĆ

**Abstract:** Bahtin (1989) introduces the concept of chronotopes – specific realms of time and space within which several concepts, such as history and culture, intersect. Specifically, the chronotope of disappearance is defined as a “place and time within which something is to vanish” (Đurić Paunović 2014: 49). This chronotope, thus, can be defined as a depiction of absentees – whether we are discussing people, ideas, communities or any other such entity. In *The Body Artist* by Don DeLillo and *Ljubavna pesma* by Srđan Srđić, the chronotope of disappearance is realized on multiple levels, mostly through the depiction of the protagonists and their absent spouses. In DeLillo’s novel, Lauren Hartke mourns the death of her husband, whose suicide triggers her escape from civilization and, thus, a symbolic disappearance. In Srđić’s novel, Kastor embarks on a voyage to Egypt, where he waits for the arrival of his partner and symbolically disappears from his usual environment, but reality, as well, given that much of his existence becomes reduced to dreams and performance. This paper compares and contrasts the mutual interest in the chronotope of disappearance in Serbian and American contemporary literature and parallels the way the concept is explored on different levels of human existence.

**Keywords:** chronotope of disappearance, Bahtin, death, *The Body Artist*, *Ljubavna pesma*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Elusive literary devices, chronotopes have long evaded every attempt at finite definition. Coined and described by Bakhtin, they represent fictional realms that are joint points of several aspects, creating a fictional reality, a “reality of paper and ink” (DeLillo 2011: 16). A chronotope is an “artistic imaging of human life as always concretely embodied within a specific temporal-geographical location” (Morris 2007: 18). We might further define a chronotope as a point of intersection of time, space and socio-cultural or historical implications within a literary text. Such a point would not be stationary, however; chronotopes are related to the process, rather than to the background or setting. Falconer writes that “the chronotope is best understood as a theory of becoming and not of being” (Falconer 2010: 111). Similarly, Bemong and Borghart observe this process as the construction of literary worlds within the scope of the text. They note that “Bakhtin’s basic assumption” the text is that it is not “only composed of a sequence of diegetic events and speech acts” but, first and foremost, “of the construction of a particular fictional world or chronotope” (Bemong & Borghart 2010: 4). Thus, chronotopes are perceived as a fluent category and as active elements that participate in constructing and developing a literary text. Bakhtin’s own description of the term seems to confirm this interpretation, in which he states:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused in one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope (Bakhtin 1981: 84).

Therefore, a chronotope might represent a specific bubble of reality, or a fictional realm (inspired by or rooted in the real world as we know it) connected by a common theme, symbol or motif. Indeed, different texts testify that “Bakhtin on occasion uses the terms chronotope and motif as synonyms” (Bemong & Borghart 2010: 6). In other words, a chronotope denotes a joint point marked by spatial, temporal, cultural, thematic and several other aspects of a given fictional world. The motif, if we use the term synonymously with the chronotope, is thus determined and marked by all of these axes. Holquist claims that a chronotope “always combines spatial and temporal factors with an evaluation of their significance as judged from a

particular point of view” (Holquist 1990: 152). Its borders expand throughout the scope of the story, with numerous potential developments and expansions in whichever direction the story chooses to go. In other words, chronotopes might be defined as fictional realms of reality with complete authority and autonomy regarding the command of events, plot development or character control. In a fictional work, different chronotopes might overlap; namely, one fictional work does not necessarily inhabit only one chronotope, but it is rather a point of intersection of chronotopes, as well.

When we discuss the chronotope of disappearance, we might describe it in general terms as a domain into which characters are set in order to disappear. It refers to the literary realm located in a specific time and place, as well as in a specific society, which all provide a suitable ground for a character to disappear. This chronotope is deeply marked by three prominent motifs: “loss, transience and absence”<sup>1</sup> (Đurić Paunović 2014: 28). In these terms, we might denote it as a negative chronotope, or a negation of a chronotope, considering that it is primarily marked by the negation of elements (places, characters, topics, objects). Đurić Paunović describes it as a “motif with a negative sign” since it requires a “place and time within which something is to disappear” (Đurić Paunović 2014: 49). Ginsburg also writes about this negative chronotope, highlighting the significance of its spatial aspect. Namely, within this interpretation, space is seen as the element that “signals the absence that points to a frozen time” and renders “disappearance into nothingness artistically visible” (Ginsburg 2006: 211). However, this claim might be overly simplistic, as it is possible to claim the same thing for the temporal, as well as for other axes that constitute a chronotope. Perhaps a more specific claim should be the perception that it is possible for disappearance to occur within one axis and be signaled by another, but it should be highlighted that none of the axes seem to be more significant than the others within the scope of a literary text.

The said disappearance within the chronotope might refer to physical disappearance, as well as psychological (losing one or several aspects of one’s personality), and it can be equally partial and total in realization. In these two novels, the disappearance of protagonists is achieved primarily on two levels: the protagonists are either completely absent from the story, but they serve as a significant influence on the remaining characters, or they exist in a state that somewhat resembles absentness, mainly reflected in their

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<sup>1</sup> Every quote from Đurić Paunović 2014 is translated by the author of this paper.

purposeful isolation from society, withdrawal into their own world (heavily fictionalized in comparison with the real one), and removal of personal traits characteristic for their unique, individual personas. When Baer discusses photography and its role in fighting the disappearance of significant memories, he discusses Nothingness in terms of a realm resembling the chronotope of disappearance but abstains from ascribing entirely negative aspects to it. He writes that within photography, “we do not find spiritual, ontological, or existential Nothingness or ‘nothing’ but the sense – the premonition or uncanny aura – that something has disappeared, that the place has not been changed and yet is somehow less than it was before” (Baer 2002: 77). Similar can be claimed of a literary text. Within the chronotope of disappearance, we do not necessarily discuss solely the fact that something no longer exists, but rather observe what has been there previously and what its effects on the environment were previous to its disappearance. Smethurst suggests a similar reading, noting that “the symbolic power of the place [but other elements as well] can resist this disappearance” (Smethurst 2000: 56). In these terms, in *The Body Artist* and *Ljubavna pesma*, we discuss the absent elements (people or their individual traits) in terms of the remaining environment and what effects the act of disappearance or absence has on those who are left behind.

In *The Body Artist*, DeLillo structures the plot around the subject of personal loss and coping mechanisms as a response to personal trauma. The protagonist of the novel is Lauren Hartke, a renowned artist, whose husband Rey (equally famous artist in the film industry) has recently committed suicide. Dealing with a personal loss, Lauren decides to retreat into their home located in an obscure location in the middle of nowhere, a long way from any urban centers and booming communities, in order to assess her grief and to deal with it properly. In such an endeavor, she opts for a safe haven within her art – she decides to compose a performance inspired by the idea of reduction of human life to the bare minimum of activity, or in other words, a reduction of a person to their quotidian functions, such as turning on the light, hailing a cab, touching something or other and alike.

The chronotope of disappearance in this novel, therefore, is realized on multiple levels. The most obvious level of realization is the concept of physical absentness, in this case, embodied by Rey’s absence. Such absence implies an element of violence, of the violent removal of a person from an environment. Rey dies of suicide, committed in a physically violating manner, and in that way aggressively brings about his disappearance. In

this novel, therefore, we can discuss the violent aspect of the chronotope of disappearance. The process of disappearance here does not occur gradually (albeit with some previous hints as to what might soon occur, as confessed by the people who were close to Rey, such as his ex-wife). Rather, it happens all of a sudden (especially from Lauren's perspective), in a brutal manner, thus functioning both as a shock and an appalment. Furthermore, the disappearance in question is final, irreversible, and life-altering, as it determines not only the destiny of the one that has disappeared, but also the destiny of the one left behind to deal with the consequences.

Another aspect within which the chronotope of disappearance is realized in DeLillo's novel is the disappearance of the protagonist herself, which occurs diametrically different from Rey's disappearance. Lauren Hartke disappears in several ways in the novel. Hers is not as violent a disappearance as Rey's is. Physically, she is alive and well (for the most part). However, this does not mean her disappearance does not have a physical aspect, too. She does disappear from society and the public; namely, from their perspective, she is also physically absent. Yet, her disappearance is neither final nor brutal. It is limited to its being temporary isolation, a non-permanent absence from the quotidian of the society. Apart from this, her disappearance is established on several other aspects in the novel, namely: absence from communication, language, Self and art.

However, in *Ljubavnapesma*, Srdić roots his plot in the motif of a journey, which is in itself one of the incarnations of the chronotope of disappearance – those who depart on a journey are absent from their regular environment, at least for the time being. His protagonist, the mysterious and mischievous Kastor, embarks on a vacation to Egypt, more precisely, an exotic resort at which he is to organize his wedding with a bride that is, supposedly, on her way there. During his vacation, he assumes various performative identities, within which he behaves as several persons or personas (he acts as a successful and influential man, a teacher, a cantankerous old-man, and he also assumes the role of the bride herself at one point, as well). These masks that he assumes provide him with a safe haven, the same one Lauren finds in art in *The Body Artist*, for example. For both of them, their performances function as forms of escapism, presumably as subjective ways of dealing with personal trauma, however grave it may or may not be.

Much like Rey in *The Body Artist*, the unnamed spouse (or at least spouse-to-be) is largely absent from this novel, too. The mysterious bride fails to appear throughout Kastor's stay at the hotel, and there are numerous

hints in the novel that her arrival is never to take place. The element of an absent spouse here is less violent than in DeLillo's novel, since there is no explicit claim of death (although there is a hint that Kastor is on vacation as prescribed, potentially also as a coping mechanism post-trauma, or at least after a stressful event). Her total physical absence might not imply her death. Still, it may raise a question of whether she exists at all since she never calls, never sends a letter or establishes any kind of communication with the protagonist. In the light of one interpretation (the one offered by the author himself, which sees the novel within the framework of the movie *Last Tango in Paris*), this absence might just suggest the termination of their relationship, which Kastor refuses to come to terms with. Either way, her physical absence from the novel is as complete as Rey's is from *The Body Artist*, as she never arrives physically to that vacationing spot, as promised.

Similarly to Lauren in *The Body Artist*, the protagonist of *Ljubavna pesma* achieves a level of disappearance, as well. Physically, he is absent from his place of residence. Moreover, he is at an exotic place, a unique place that functions as an element of defamiliarization in literature (especially within the genres of adventure or picaresque novels, for example). Therefore, he exists within some sort of a fantasy surrounding, thus making him absent from the so-called real world. Another level of defamiliarization in the novel is his constant dreaming and hallucination, which gradually see him operating on a level at which he cannot distinguish between immediate reality and dreams or hallucinations. Frequently, he repeats that what is perceived as the real world is "wrongly named real"<sup>2</sup> (Srđić 2020: 11). Therefore, he is mentally dislocated from the traditional level of reality, thus being absent from the scope of "normal" human functioning<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, Kastor achieves a certain level of disappearance in other aspects, as well. In the same way as Lauren, he disappears from other people, communication, language and Self, albeit in a slightly different manner.

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<sup>2</sup> Every excerpt from *Ljubavna pesma*, Srđić, 2020 is translated by the author of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The term normal is introduced here under quotation marks, as it is a problematic expression. There is no firm definition of what is normal human behaviour, and attempts at describing and prescribing it have long shown to be controversial and potentially more harmful than beneficial. The author uses the term normal here to denote a commonly accepted behaviour within a society of Western civilization, within which the person who can clearly separate the state of being awake from the state of sleeping or dreaming is perceived as a generally healthy (in psychological terms) and functional individual.

## 2. ABSENT SPOUSES

The most direct level at which the chronotope of disappearance operates in these two novels is the element of absent spouses. In *The Body Artist*, the absent spouse is Rey, who commits suicide off the pages of the novel. His death is regarded and approached solely from the perspective of the remaining spouse and her grief. In *Ljubavna pesma*, the absent spouse is the unnamed bride-to-be, whose arrival Kastor and the rest of the resort expect with starkly different assurance. Her absence is not related to death *per se*, but it does involve the element of non-existence since she does not exist in the real world for the reader of this novel. The only time a female which might embody her appears in the novel is within one of Kastor's dreams towards the ending of the novel, when a woman ponders upon the issue of a love relationship or affair in front of the mirror. As a result, we can discuss the chronotope of disappearance in these two novels through the element of death or non-existence, more specifically, the utter physical absence of an individual. Within this chronotope, such level of disappearance mainly occurs gradually (as in Auster's *City of Glass*, for example, in which the protagonist discards his personality step by step, and only finally disappears completely at the end of the novel). Moreover, such total absence usually comes as a result of existing within this previously established chronotope, whereas in these two novels, it seems to motivate the plot from the beginning and offer it a semblance of dynamics. In *The Body Artist*, Rey's death marks the beginning of the plot and an agent which directly changes Lauren's life. In *Ljubavna pesma*, Kastor's bride's absence also serves as the initial impulse of the plot, given that it is the preparation for the upcoming wedding that motivates Kastor's journey to Egypt (or at least he has the reader believe so).

The element of the absent spouse is ominous, and it looms large over the entire course of the novel. In other words, their physical absence does not include their complete absence from their partners' respective lives. Both of them exist on an alternative level, or rather on multiple ones. In both cases, there is something or someone that embodies them. In *The Body Artist*, Rey is represented by employing an entirely different person who reproduces fragments of Rey's speech. It is Mr. Tuttle, an escaped psychiatric patient, who has been hiding in Lauren's home, memorizing random sentences from conversations Rey and Lauren previously had. Lauren immediately becomes aware that "it was Rey's voice she was hearing" (DeLillo 2011: 63). By repeating Rey's words, albeit in a fragmented way, with broken syntax

and at times with reinvented meaning, he establishes himself as a significant character in the novel, a trigger for Lauren's healing and acceptance of her trauma and grief. Di Prete discusses Mr. Tuttle as the "phantom" of the story (Di Prete 2005: 484), but his influence in the novel is undeniable. Mr. Tuttle embodies Rey through his words, but the messages he conveys are not necessarily Rey's. He contemplates time, language and reality, thus acting as an element of spiritual guidance. At one point, she even calls him "a Zen master" albeit sarcastically (DeLillo 2011: 57). To an extent, Mr. Tuttle is another example of how DeLillo employs the chronotope of disappearance, given that he is a person defamiliarized from the normative outlook and mental mindset. He is "absent" from the traditional patterns of thinking and behaving, and he operates on a different level of reality – the one available to what the center perceives as a psychological margin, i.e. to the mentally challenged. Lauren refers to him as a man who "experiences another kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after, and he moves from one to the other shatteringly" (DeLillo 2011: 68). Mr. Tuttle manages to bring Rey back to Lauren's life by eliminating the spatial-temporal aspects of the chronotope of disappearance and operating exclusively on the level of memory and verbalized experience. In a more loose interpretation, Mr. Tuttle is the null chronotope – chronotope void of firm links with space, time, history and culture – that Rey temporarily inhabits, or rather, within which Lauren manages to catch glimpses of Rey. Mr. Tuttle is a physical embodiment of Rey, but only on a tiny, extremely fragmentary level. In spite of this, he symbolizes another level of existence that Rey will inhabit, and that is the level of memory.

In *Ljubavna pesma*, the physical embodiment of the absent spouse is a significantly less engaging element of the plot, as it is an inanimate object – her wedding dress. Kastor brings it to the resort and keeps it diligently in his hotel room, taking care of its perfect state. As his ties with reality loosen and the grip of his dreams and hallucinations becomes more robust, he will interact profusely with the wedding dress, first sleeping with it in the bed next to him, and finally putting it on, in an attempt to capture his evasive and elusive partner. The wedding dress here operates almost as a totem, it is the only physical embodiment of the bride that Kastor will ever have a chance to interact with. It triggers his thoughts and dreams about her, but it also serves to him as a body of proof, with which he attempts to guarantee the veracity of his story. In other words, he uses the dress as an ocular proof, which manages to persuade others and himself, in equal parts, of the lady's



eventual arrival. As his desperation rises, Kastor will interact with it more and more, until he finally decides to put the dress on himself, in a feverish attempt to merge with his absent partner, to achieve a “fusion of identities” (Svirčev 2020: 217). Symbolically, he does become one with her by putting on the gown, but this act contributes to breaking his illusions. After this, even Kastor seems reconciled with the idea that she is indeed not coming, was never coming to marry him. This interpretation is further confirmed by the dream he has after this point; the one of a woman in a bedroom, who sits in front of her mirror and contemplates relationships and love. At one point, she announces her non-existence, as she refers to “the time after the time in which there was no us” (Srđić 2020: 277). This scene finally affirms her absence, which was, at best, firmly assumed throughout the novel, but vehemently denied by the protagonist himself.

The physical embodiments of the absent spouses do manage to personify them to a certain extent, but neither of the examples does manage to bring them to life in the immediate reality inhabited by the two protagonists. In other words, their existence, even when personified by another element, is strictly rooted in the chronotope of disappearance, within which several aspects are totally disjointed, or even eradicated. Rey and Kastor’s bride do not manage to materialize within the spatial and temporal reality of their spouses, and even their fleeting appearance through indirect means is deeply marked by disappearance. The indirect physical embodiment would have been moot were they to appear before their partner, or even better, not have departed in the first place. This said, in both novels, the “totems” do manage to bring them to existence, but on a separate level of reality. Rey and Kastor’s bride exist primarily on the level of memory. In *The Body Artist*, each statement uttered by Mr. Tuttle will initiate fond memories of her husband in Lauren. This does not imply that she would not have access to her memories of Rey without Mr. Tuttle. Yet, Mr. Tuttle here serves as an engine, a swift portal that manages to transgress her sorrow and grief and allow her to cope better with her loss. To confirm this interpretation, we might employ Bonca’s words that “he functions in the novel as a kind of prompter for [Lauren’s] slowly renewing sense of her relationship to Being” or, in other words, to life and Self (Bonca 2002: 64). Through and by Mr. Tuttle, she is guided in her thinking, and a preferable perspective of her circumstances is suggested to her. Also, she manages to access the memories because Mr. Tuttle helps her understand a profound truth of grief – that the lost ones are still alive in our memories. Moreover, it can be said that Rey’s

existence in the novel might be related to another level: the level of language. This level is highly significant for Lauren's coping with trauma since it is "the site where knowledge about death and life, loss and recovery, trauma and survival, and the mysterious possibility of their coexistence emerge" (Di Prete 2005: 500). Although Mr. Tuttle functions as a character on his own, even when he uses Rey's words exclusively, the words themselves seem to directly bring Rey into life, both for Lauren and the reader. Lauren feels that Rey is yet again available and close to her once she recognizes his words. Therefore, we can say that language is another level of his existence, besides memory in this novel.

In *Ljubavna pesma*, Kastor's bride also primarily exists on the level of memory, yet her existence seems vaguer, despite her being alive presumably, especially when we compare her to Rey. In DeLillo's novel, memories of Rey are vivid, specific, and they occur in different people, they have several perspectives (Lauren, Mr. Tuttle, Rey's first wife etc.). In *Ljubavna pesma*, however, the unnamed woman is known and remembered solely by Kastor, and another perspective or memory of her never appears in the novel. Considering that Kastor is an unreliable source of information, to say the least, her entire existence is questionable, and she appears to be more a figment of fiction or imagination than an actual person. Even if we limit ourselves to the framework of *Last Tango in Paris*, she is still as much of an imaginary element as she would be if she did not exist at all. The lost lover that has violently cut ties becomes Kastor's obsession, one that he idolizes and, therefore, modifies in his memory. This separates her from any actual person and confines her solely to the fictional reality. Hence, we can discuss her existence within the level of memory and imagination, but also subconsciousness, as she also inhabits Kastor's dreams and hallucinations. Each of these levels is directly related to his mind, although not necessarily its conscious part, making her existence (and, in turn, disappearance or absence) directly defined by him and his personality. This might be another level of interpretation for the scene in which he puts on her wedding dress. By doing so, he invades her physical embodiment, as well, thus commanding all levels of her existence in the novel. None of these can be read as violence or ill-willed dominance, though. Kastor is not motivated by selfishness and possessiveness, his motives seem pure and rather tragic; he is an anti-hero in love whose desperate longing for his lover drives him insane.

### 3. ABSENT PROTAGONISTS

The chronotope of disappearance in *The Body Artist* and *Ljubavna pesma* does not extend solely to the absent spouse. On the contrary, it includes the two leading characters, as well. Although their disappearance is not as drastic, it is still palpable in the novel, as both protagonists seem to experience fragmentation of Self and disjoint several aspects of existence within the novel. On the spatial and temporal level, their existence is firmly rooted, although they seem to thwart the temporal one occasionally. For example, Lauren dwells on memories and past times, thus disassociating herself from the present at times. "Time is supposed to pass," she notices (DeLillo 2011: 81), somewhat with regret, it seems, as she yearns for a reality in which past, present and future could merge into one for her, too, not just Mr. Tuttle. Kastor will gradually lose control over his distinction between the real world and dreams, thus making him slightly dislocated from the present, especially towards the end of the novel. He perceives time as something defining, as he frequently notices that "there is a time for everything" (Srdić 2020: 90). When Boxall writes about *The Body Artist*, he highlights that it happens „in the time of mourning, in a kind of evacuated time which has lost its narrative quality" and highlights that it can „neither inherit the legacy of the past, nor move towards the possibility of a new and undiscovered future" (Boxall 2006: 216). He further writes that the novel focuses on „a time which has lost its sense of identity" (Boxall 2006: 216). In these words, we can easily find a basis for comparison of the mentioned time with the chronotope of disappearance, within which there is indeed a sense of identity missing from the protagonists, although they are very much present both in the story and their surroundings. In other words, physically, the protagonists do exist in both novels. This aspect of the chronotope of disappearance is positively fulfilled, despite his being a negative chronotope. The negative aspects of the chronotope are seen in these two novels on levels of society, communication, Self and reality.

The most apparent level at which the chronotope of disappearance can be seen in these two novels is concerned with the social sphere of the protagonists' lives. Both Lauren and Kastor disappear from social life in one aspect or another. In Lauren's case, this is achieved through her seclusion from society. She isolates herself in her cottage and remains remote from society for the majority of the novel. Her absence from society is sudden and extensive; after Rey's death, she immediately cuts ties with the world,

leaving her home only to go for a walk in nature and buy groceries. Her return to society occurs once she has created her art performance and is supposed to stage it, as the novel approaches its final pages. In Kastor's case, his disappearance from society has both physical and symbolic aspects. Physically, Kastor disappears from his hometown (the one we know nothing about). Therefore, from his everyday environment, he disappears physically. Moreover, there is a suggestion that he lives perpetually absent from all places, as he is constantly on a journey, "for years and years he has been living a migration" (Srđić 2020: 264). He does remain in contact with society, but an unknown one – he stays at a resort in Egypt while on his vacation and does interact with the hotel staff and occasional travelers, but in a manner that is rather superficial. The lack of meaningful communication and his constant performance-like speeches about nonconsequential topics suggest that he does not truly interact with society, but that he uses speech to hide, to isolate himself. Furthermore, the community of the resort hardly qualifies as an example of society – it is a temporary mixture of people who only visit it during the season for a short period of time and who, presumably, do not act as they would if they were home and not on vacation. For this reason, the very fleeting character of this gathering cannot be proclaimed to be an example of social involvement, as it holds no substance and dedication to people either from Kastor or from the rest of the resort.

In relation to social disappearance, the protagonists of these novels isolate themselves from communication, as well. Namely, they inhabit the chronotope of disappearance by negatively performing the aspect of communication. In DeLillo's novel, Lauren abstains from communication almost entirely. Apart from the conversation with Rey's ex-wife and Mr. Tuttle, she seems to disengage from communication to an extreme level, especially once she undertakes the experiment that is to produce her new artistic performance. Such an experiment sees her reduced to minimum interaction with the world outside and expansive silence. Therefore, she disappears from communication and language. It is only more striking that language will prove to be one of the rare levels at which she can still gain somewhat of access to Rey, when Mr. Tuttle appears in her life. Her silence is in an almost perfect juxtaposition with his words – the absence of language versus the spiritually-charged use of it. However, Lauren's disappearance from communication will bring fruitful results, as it will give birth to her art performance. As an artist, her chief task in the novel, as claimed by Giaimo, is "to preserve [...] her integral self, predominantly made manifest in the

ability to communicate in language and live in mortal time” (Giaino 2011: 162). She fulfills this task by finding new ways to communicate her trauma. In other words, by disappearing from one manner of self-expression, she will produce another way of communicating, one that is more unique and deeply personal – her art is her way of communicating both with herself and with the world.

In Srdić’s novel, Kastor once again seems to be overly present in the aspect of communication, as well. His love of giving speeches will at times be slightly overwhelming. However, despite his flamboyance in speech, he also disappears from communication and language since there seems to be slight substance in what he actually says. He talks about a lot of different things, but he does not seem to say anything true and meaningful, especially in regard to himself. He employs humor and various other rhetorical devices to make an impression on the meager number of people he interacts with, to the extent that it seems that he is deceiving everyone in the process. His speeches resemble performances, and his love of monologues (and rather dramatic ones) thwarts any idea of real communication, as it usually requires people exchanging arguments in order to be successful. When he does engage in conversation with others, he seems to seek stimulants only, an impulse from others that will propel his nagging, instructing or preaching in a fresh direction.

Absent from communication and society, it is only logical that Lauren and Kastor will also disappear from their own identities, as those are primarily formed in relation to one’s environment and personal interaction with it. The chronotope of disappearance is, therefore, also achieved on the level of Self. Lauren’s identity is dulled by her grief; her loss engulfs her, and she sinks into a stupor which Boxall describes as her “nontime of bereavement” (Boxall 2006: 216). Once she begins her experiment, through which she creates her art performance, her identity is reduced to a bare minimum of existence. She strips herself of excessive traits, both physically and psychologically. It is almost a ritual through which she endures harsh conditions, clothes and movement, discarding all vanities and comfort. In isolation, she has little to no opportunity to express her identity, mostly due to the fact that she disappears from two levels required for this – that of society and communication. Furthermore, on those occasions when she does return both to society and communication, she prefers to limit her identity to her art and grief. Her artistic Self is a type of performative identity, quite literally in this novel since she is a body artist, an artist who performs art

using the body. Performative identity can be described as a type of temporary identity, more a role than a set of personal traits, a unique mask to hide behind. Lauren both hides behind her art and uses it as a coping mechanism – it both obscures her and liberates her through the course of the novel. As opposed to her, Kastor's disappearance from *Self* has seemingly no positive sides. He is no artist like Lauren, but he does employ several performative identities. He spends the entire novel as if on a theater scene, delivering his monologues to anyone willing to listen or to pretend to listen to him. His performative identities indeed function as masks; he hides behind his pretensions and uses his lengthy speeches to obscure the fact that he does not share any private information that can be trusted or considered true. He acts as a teacher, entertainer or grumpy client to different members of the hotel staff, whom he names randomly and generically, seemingly to add to the distance between them. Confirmation for such an interpretation could be found in rare moments when he is depicted on the border between dreams and reality, or when he is unsure of whether he is lucid or he hallucinates, like in the scenes in which he is drunk, has smoked hashish or dreams about being thirsty. At those moments, his personality seems different and there are hints which suggest that he is, like Lauren, in grief over an unknown cause.

Finally, the protagonists of these novels disappear from reality in general, albeit on different levels. The chronotope of disappearance functions as a true negative chronotope on this level since it resembles a void within which everything is uncertain, and no definite roots in time, space or society can be claimed with certainty. In *The Body Artist*, Lauren's reality is seemingly the reality of everyone else, a standard realistic environment, slightly archaic and naturalistic, at best. However, she manages to surpass the borders of the real through her art. By engaging in an experiment during which she develops her performance, she transgresses the regular level of existence, as she lives almost entirely through her art. Physical determinants of her reality remain the same, much as her actions and activities do so, as well, but her perception of reality changes profoundly, as she seems absent from her immediate reality, contemplating how Mr. Tuttle perceives reality and trying to grasp it herself. She submerges herself in her art completely and diligently, thus inhabiting the idealistic artistic sphere of existence – one within which the artist is completely dedicated to the process of artistic creation, without any concern for the human, mortal, mundane aspect of her life. Furthermore, under the influence of Mr. Tuttle, she contemplates

reality and whether “there are times when we slide into another reality but can’t remember it, can’t concede the truth of it because this would be too devastating to absorb” (DeLillo 2011: 120). In *Ljubavna pesma*, the chronotope of disappearance is more direct regarding the level of reality. Kastor also uses his performances to escape immediate reality, by creating stories that strongly appear to be false and deceiving people around him about his true life story, or the story of his absent fiancée. However, a much more transparent level at which Kastor disappears from reality is through his dreams. Dreams and hallucinations function as elements of both heterotopia and heterochrony. Namely, they represent other planes of existence, time and space separate from the real world. In the novel, the author technically disassociates these multiple realities by using separate sections when introducing narration that crosses the border between different levels of existence. At one point, he even contemplates the construction of reality, as seen in the following excerpt:

There was no more space in reality and there was nowhere, because reality was shrinking, it has shrunk and narrowed, and he couldn’t rip reality and use the ripping to create some new reality, and now that’s why the demotion took place, the demotion into the dream, so now he is some kind of reality, whatever that reality may be. (Srđić 2020: 96).

As the novel progresses, however, Kastor’s perception becomes troubled, and he loses track of the separate worlds, so much so that he starts wondering whether he is awake or asleep, and whether something is actually happening to him or he is merely hallucinating the entire scene, including the people he interacts with. This merger of realities within his perception simultaneously removes him from all of the planes of existence since he is never completely present in one as the novel approaches its ending. True Kastor, much like his absent bride, remains never to be met to the very last sound of his love song.

One aspect that connects these two novels in terms of the protagonists’ disappearance from reality is simulation. Both Lauren and Kastor employ simulation in their stories. Lauren simulates mundane activities and mechanical movements of the body for the sake of her performance, whereas Kastor simulates his life story while sharing it with the hotel staff (to what extent remains unknown, since we have no means of determining when he is lying and when he is telling the truth, although we can say almost with certainty that it is impossible for a single person to live through all



of the experiences he mentions throughout the novel). Simulation implies pretense, or in other words, a departure from the truth, forging, false imitation. Therefore, this aspect of the novel also contributes to their disappearance from reality, and by choice. Simulation stands as a negative element as opposed to reality, much as the chronotope of disappearance. Through their simulation, different parts of their personalities become absent, whether temporarily or permanently. In Lauren's case, such absence implies reinvention, whereas in Kastor's case, such absence implies non-existence.

#### 4. CHRONOTOPE OF DISAPPEARANCE AND THE MOTIF OF DEATH

As a negative chronotope, the chronotope of disappearance at first glance represents a lack of presence, which in turn might signify an emptiness, nothingness, vacantness of existence. In these terms, it can easily be discussed parallelly or in relation to the motif of death. Death, as a concept, is an example of disappearance, a rather extreme one, but as such, perfect for illustration. In these two novels, the motif of death does occur, both literally and symbolically, and in every case, it is relevant to the chronotope of disappearance. In *The Body Artist*, death is most literally realized in Rey – his death is the initial trauma of the novel and its protagonist, and it will mark both Rey's and Lauren's disappearance, albeit on different levels. DeLillo approaches death in the novel personally, dealing with an individual's coping with death and trauma. Death here is not a destructive force that signals the apocalypse; it is rather a choice. Rey chooses death and disappearance, as it probably serves as a way of liberation to an extent. Although DeLillo does not elaborate on Rey's reasons for suicide (even though he does share that it is something Rey wanted to do for a long time), this element has a significant role in the novel, as it serves as an initial impulse for the plot and highlights the element of deliberateness in the motif of death in the novel. Much like Rey's death was deliberate, every other aspect of disappearance (symbolic death) in the novel will be a choice, to a large extent a conscious one. Bonca notes that the "shock of death, the loss of love, throws off the rhythms of ontic everydayness which grounded the revelations of Being on which her consciousness previously thrived" (Bonca 2002: 63). Lauren disappears from society, communication, Self and reality, respectively, on purpose because she needs the comfort of isolation in order to deal with her grief.



In each of these aspects an aspect of her dies, along with her grief (although never completely), as she transforms herself through art. Her performance provides a symbolic rebirth that ultimately triumphs over death, teaching her that death is not a final parting with loved ones.

In *Ljubavna pesma*, the motif of death is not as explicit as it is in DeLillo's novel. Srđić never refers to the death of any of the characters, but we can discuss the presence of this motif in regard to the element of absence. Absence signifies the lack of presence, much like death, only in this case, it is usually temporary. However, the absence of the unknown heroine of the novel is permanent, she never appears, and there is a strong suggestion that she will never appear (for reasons not explained). Therefore, although she is not officially dead, her absence is as strong as it might have been in the case of her demise. Furthermore, Kastor cannot reach her or see her any more than Lauren can see Rey, as their rupture is permanent and definite, in spite of Kastor's denial. Therefore, her absence is as definite as death; for Kastor's world, she stopped existing as if she died. Furthermore, Kastor's disappearance from society, communication, Self and reality might imply the motif of death, as well. Somewhere along with his constant performances and hallucinations, even the hope of ever meeting Kastor's true personality dies, if ever such a thing existed in the first place. Furthermore, he experiences symbolic death in all of the aforementioned aspects as much as Lauren does in DeLillo's novel. When we compare the two, the issue with Kastor's disappearance is that it serves no purpose to him in the novel. Lauren casts off layers of existence she no longer needs, or those that no longer serve her any purpose. In the process, and through her art, she manages to reinvent herself, both as a woman and as an artist. As opposed to her, Kastor experiences no such rebirth. As the novel progresses, he only becomes more and more lost, losing track of the boundaries of the real and the dream. For him, death is not a prerequisite for creation, it is an agent of oblivion.

## 5. CONCLUSION

DeLillo's *The Body Artist* and Srđić's *Ljubavna pesma* appear to share the approach to the chronotope of disappearance. As a denominator of powerful motifs, including loss, absence, non-existence and death, this chronotope serves as a fertile soil on which the authors discuss the disappearance of

both the significant other and one's own personality, or Self. The chronotope is seemingly employed in a similar manner, and we can discuss two levels at which it is realized in these novels. The first level is concerned with the element of absent spouses, or partners. It implies death, although it is not equally explicit in the two novels. In *The Body Artist*, Rey's death is as certain as it is shocking; his disappearance is violent and total. In *Ljubavna pesma*, this element is only hinted at, although the absence of Kastor's bride seems as permanent as Rey's death is. This enables us to perceive the two characters as permanently absent, symbolic representations of death. The second level at which we might observe the chronotope of disappearance in these novels is related to the protagonists themselves, and the disappearing aspects of their personalities, as well as their active presence within society, communication and reality. Lauren and Kastor experience symbolic death only at a fragmentary level; they never engage in full disappearance as their partners do. Their disappearance is depicted in the novels through their isolation from society, departure from substantial communication and transgression of the borders of reality.

DeLillo and Srđić depict their protagonists in different manners, yet with a strikingly similar principle. Namely, Lauren's isolation from society is different from Kastor's because he is surrounded by people, whereas she is not. He constantly talks with the people he encounters, while Lauren refrains from any and every conversation she can. Finally, Kastor experiences a direct merger of the real and the dream or hallucinations, where Lauren only contemplates her perception of reality and makes adjustments to her approach to it for the sake of her art. In other words, the realization of common topics and motifs is somewhat different with the two authors, but it is meticulously parallel, demonstrating a common understanding of the chronotope of disappearance. Both novels seem to suggest that the authors do not approach this chronotope as an exclusively negative entity. The chronotope is not incorporated solely as a locus of death and destruction, but as an examining platform, which is to highlight the presence of the protagonists and their true identities. Although not both protagonists draw the same conclusions from such a quest for Self (Lauren rediscovers herself, while Kastor seems to become completely lost), it is up to the reader to perceive the common ideas of death and disappearance existing tightly

interwoven with life and presence, and that they are just different sides of the same coin.

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ONI ODSUTNI: HRONOTOP NESTAJANJA U ROMANIMA *BODI ARTIST*  
DONA DELILLA I *LJUBAVNA PESMA* SRĐANA SRDIĆA

**Rezime:** Bahtin (1989) u teoriju književnosti uvodi pojam hronotopa – jedinstvenih fiktivnih stvarnosti određenih vremenom i prostorom u okviru kojih se susreću i presecaju različiti društveno-kulturološki aspekti društva, poput istorije, sociologije, kulture i drugih. Kada je u pitanju hronotop nestajanja, o njemu možemo govoriti kao o mestu i vremenu u kome će nešto nestati (Đurić Paunović 2014: 49). Tako ne bi bilo pogrešno definisati ga kao predstavu odsutnih – bilo da razgovaramo o ljudima, idejama, zajednicama ili nečemu sličnom. U romanima *Bodi artist* Dona DeLila i *Ljubavna pesma* Srđana Srdića, hronotop nestajanja prikazan je na različitim nivoima, i to pre svega kroz dvoje glavnih likova i kroz njihove odsutne partnere. U DeLilovom romanu, glavna junakinja Loren Hartke u žalosti je nakon smrti supruga Reja, čije će samoubistvo uticati na to da se ona izoluje od civilizacije i, na taj način, simbolično i sama nestane iz sveta. U Srdićevom romanu, glavni junak Kastor odlazi na putovanja u Egipat, gde priprema venčanje dok iščekuje dolazak svoje voljene. Ovim on nestaje iz svoje uobičajene stvarnosti, ali i stvarnosti uopšte, jer će njegovo postojanje kroz čitav roman biti obeleženo snovima i halucinacijama kojima je podložan. U ovom radu, posmatra se sličan pristup hronotopu nestajanja koji nesumnjivo spaja srpsku i američku savremenu književnost. Ovaj hronotop u DeLilovom i Srdićevom romanu pojavljuje se, čini se, sa sličnom idejom, ali na različite načine.

**Ključne reči:** hronotop nestajanja, Bahtin, motiv smrti, DeLilo, *Bodi artist*, Srdić, *Ljubavna pesma*