

Time Slots in Dylan's Oeuvre

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Throughout Bob Dylan's oeuvre, time is a crucial dimension that is often thematized and examined. "The Times They Are A Changin'" is the title of one of Dylan's signature songs; the concept "Modern Times" is a key to an understanding of his view of the world. *Time out of Mind* (i.e., a very long time ago) is the title of one of his most famous albums; "16 years" is the opening of a mysterious song and "time is an ocean" and "time is a jet plane" are some of his well-known metaphors. Time as an existential relationship, as an aesthetic and dramatic relationship, as a relationship between one's personal lifetime and one's artistic development, and time as shared experience are aspects of the thematization of time we find in Dylan's oeuvre.

Dylan's attention to the dimension of time in art was strengthened by his participation in the art classes of the Russian American artist Norman Raeben in 1974, who, by Dylan's own admission, taught him to break up the chronology of his texts and let the past and present in the texts blend in an unexpected way. Dylan explained Raeben's influence on this concept of time to Jonathan Cott in an interview from 1978. Dylan explains how Raeben taught him to see how a painting brings different times together: "You've got yesterday today and tomorrow all in the same room, and there is very little that you can't imagine not happening." (Cott, 2006, p. 260).

It is my thesis that we can follow his ideas about confronting time intervals in both his visual art, his lyrics, and in his essays on the philosophy of modern song. He makes the temporal dimension complex and mixes different time intervals, what I call time slots or time windows, in an unexpected way with the intention of showing us time as an enigmatic existential reality that cannot be defined but can be experienced and used in the creation of new art works. I have borrowed the concept "time slot" from the language of airports, where the airport controller assigns each flight a time slot, i.e., a time interval, to use the facilities of the airport for takeoff and landing.

In traditional folk songs, the chronology and use of time is often simple. "Little Lord Randall" is designed as a dialogue between Randall and his mother about what happened

during his visit to his beloved. Randall looks back on events and says that he was offered dinner, but that his dogs died after eating the leftovers from the meal, and his mother realizes that he has been poisoned. The riddle of the folk song is not about time, but rather why someone has poisoned Randall – and this motive is not revealed. When Dylan creates his variations of folk songs, this linear dimension of time and chronology often become more complex. One of Dylan's most beautiful folk songs, "Red River Shore" (1997/2008), is a love song about a young man who loves a young woman, the girl from the red river shore, who, however, does not want him. She tells the singer, the "I" of the song, to go home and live a quiet life. But he continues to seek out the places where they met and eventually becomes a kind of ghost who strays and talks about people and stories that no one remembers anymore. In the song, Dylan confronts different time slots, and although the song sticks to an overall chronology, the dimension of time is broken up. There are at least two present intervals: 1. a narrative present where the singer lists existential human conditions, and 2. a present where the singer describes his current life and his grief over the loss of the beloved, his wandering life and his knowledge of a man that can revive the dead. Moreover, there are several time slots of pasts evoked: 1. the past when the singer first met his beloved, 2. the past when she rejected him, 3. the dream of the past and love, 4. the past in which he seeks her out again, and 5. the past as "long ago". In this quotation of the song, I have highlighted the different time indications of the song in red:

Some of us turn off the lights and we lay
Up in the moonlight shooting by
Some of us scare ourselves to death in the dark
To be where the angels fly
Pretty maids all in a row lined up
Outside my cabin door
I've **never** wanted any of 'em wanting me
'Cept the girl from the Red River shore

Well I sat by her side and **for a while** I tried
To make that girl my wife
She gave me her best advice when she said
Go home and lead a quiet life
Well I been to the East and I been to the West

And I been out where the black winds roar
Somehow, though, I **never** did get that far
With the girl from the Red River shore

Well I knew when I **first** laid eyes on her
I could **never** be free
One look at her and I knew **right away**
She should **always** be with me
Well the dream dried up **a long time ago**
Don't know where it is **anymore**
True to life, true to me
Was the girl from the Red River shore

Well I'm wearing the cloak of misery
And I've tasted jilted love
And the frozen smile upon my face
Fits me like a glove
But I can't escape from the memory
Of the one that I'll **always** adore
All **those nights** when I lay in the arms
Of the girl from the Red River shore

Well we're livin' in the shadows of a fading past
Trapped **in the fires of time**
I tried not to **ever** hurt anybody
And to stay out of a life of crime
And when it's all been said and done
I **never** did know the score
One more day is another day away
From the girl from the Red River shore

Well I'm a stranger here in a strange land
But I know this is where I belong
I ramble and gamble for the one I love
And the hills will give me a song
Though nothing looks familiar to me

I know I've stayed here **before**
Once a thousand nights ago
With the girl from the Red River shore

Well I went back to see about her **once**
Went back to straighten it out
Everybody that I talked to had seen us there
Said they didn't know who I was talkin' about
Well the sun went down **a long time ago**
And doesn't seem to shine **anymore**
I wish I could have spent **every hour** of my life
With the girl from the Red River shore.

Now I heard of a guy who lived **a long time ago**
A man full of sorrow and strife
That if someone around him died and was dead
He knew how to bring him on back to life
Well I don't know what kind of language he used
Or if they do that kind of thing **anymore**
Sometimes I think nobody ever saw me here at all
'Cept the girl from the Red River shore.
(Dylan, 1997/2008)

“Never” and “A long time ago” are the most frequently used time indications. The narrative time seems to illustrate the song’s central verse about man being trapped by time: “Well we’re livin’ in the shadows of a fading past/Trapped in the fires of time.” The different time intervals are put together almost like a set of children’s Lego bricks in a way that shows how the singer is tied to his sorrow over lost love and has therefore become a ghost. He was only seen as who he is by the woman who did not want him. In the quotation of the song, I have highlighted the different pasts and presents in different colors: **The existential present**, **The singer’s present life**, **The existential past**, and **The singer’s past life**.

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The tragedy of the singer is found not only in his loss of love, but in the loss of self. While the singer says that a Jesus-like figure can bring the dead back to life with his special language

and thereby overcome time, the singer himself can keep his love alive through the words of his song that are also eternal. The use of different time intervals or time slots expresses the existential point of the song. The present and past spin into each other, forming a kind of temporal oxymoron that traps the man in his emotions, his pain, and his hopes. Saint Augustine, a founding father when it comes to philosophy's understanding of what time is, argues it is the condition of being human to be torn between times:

But I have been torn between the times, the order of which I do not know, and my thoughts, even the inmost and deepest places of my soul, are mangled by various commotions until I shall flow together into thee, purged and molten in the fire of thy love. (n.d., book 11, chapter XXIX)

As mentioned previously, Dylan learned to use the dimension of time in a new way at the painting classes of Norman Raeben. He became a visual artist himself and he has had international exhibitions of his paintings since 1994. He sometimes works several times with the same motif, and he has used a corner flat motif in several paintings from 2007 and 2013.



Dylan, *Corner Flat* (2013)

The same elements appear several times: a human figure turning his/her back on an external world and is engraved in reflection, perhaps over the book he or she has read. It includes a table with a telephone, a book, and a candlestick, a lamp, and heavy curtains. Outside the windows you see a busy street with traffic and people moving. Inside and outside, two different times prevail: the busy time of urban traffic and the time of personal introspection. The telephone, book, and candlestick on the table also suggest different uses of time: the immediate conversation (the telephone), the long contemplation (the book), a meditative or religious time (the light), and the rhythm of day and night (the lamp).

Although the subject varies, it is a combination of different times and spaces that structure the motif and gives it depth. The painting maintains a situation, but at the same time makes its viewer think about the figure's past and future. One can imagine that the different figures (at least three) reproduced in the respective paintings reflect on events in their lives, on their perception of the book—their looks are introverted and melancholic—and the three objects on the table suggest that they can choose different uses of time—the quick and direct communication, the continued slow contemplation, or the meditation in which the experience of time takes on a spiritual dimension. Here, too, Augustine's discussion of time puts Dylan's use of time slots into perspective:

Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation. (n.d., book XI, chapter XII)

We discover that we can imagine three present times in the painting, but we also discover two presents that are contrasted: the time of the traffic and the time of the solitary people. Time cannot be understood or explained, but its complexity can be experienced in the artwork. Dylan uses the oxymoron of contrasting time slots to study this complexity.

My third example of Dylan's use of time slots comes from Dylan's new book, *The Philosophy of Modern Song* (2022). In this book, Dylan uses different genres: lyrical short prose, analytical prose that also contains historical reflections, and prose of personal confession. It is a great book and a very energetic, provocative, and critical book in which Dylan tries to

express his experience of the mood and idea of the songs in question. The dimensions of time play an important role. We are at once in the modern age, in Dylan's childhood, and we come further back—to the time of his parents and grandparents. We move from early jazz to the beginning of punk music. Many times and places are spun into each other, but it is important to note that Dylan analyzes how the course of a song, its evocation of different time slots, can move through different times and still catch a special, present moment. Such is the case with Sonny Burgess' song "Feel So Good," recorded in 1957/1958 and only published later. In the introduction to his essay about the song, Dylan writes: "In this song you're feeling as good as can be, and don't need to be convinced. You never felt better, and you have a hunch you're going to feel this way for the rest of your life." (2022, p. 219).

The song captures a wonderful time of well-being. But it also changes its sense of time, and both the singer and the listener move through time, all the way back to the beginning, the moment of creation: "You're gonna boogie on back to where it began, to the birth of creation, unlock the laws of the universe—bone shaking and burning liquid fuel, you're lathered up, electrified and leaving nothing un-licked" (Dylan, 2022, pp. 276-278).

The experience is erotic, seductive, and psychedelic. Dylan clearly considers the song to be politically subversive because it mixes Black and white culture and is sexually transgressive, and he praises these qualities. The article concludes with an analysis of how America as a nation has collapsed from drug addiction. The drugs may recreate the experience of music but are fundamentally different because they lead to death and destruction.

The song, on the other hand, creates a life-giving, erotic time interval that lifts the musicians and the listeners out of their usual time experience. It's an extended now, a sexual act, and it's liberating: "You're freed up and going flat out." (Dylan, 2022, p. 279).

The feeling of an extended "now" resembles the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's idea of a decisive moment in time where the eternal and the temporal touch each other. The moment is portrayed as an absolute now, which occurs when a human being experiences how the non-temporal, i.e., the eternal, intervenes in the temporal. In his dissertation, *The Concept of Anxiety (Begrebet Angest*, 1844, transl. 1980), Kierkegaard discusses "the moment" in a Christian and psychological context: "The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of temporality is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time." (1980, p. 89).

While Kierkegaard focuses on the psychological significance of the spiritual moment, Dylan's point of departure is the bodily experience of the spiritual moment. But to Dylan as well as to Kierkegaard the decisive moment is a moment of spirit. In Dylan's analysis, the song and dance are connected, and Dylan's observations also reminds the reader of the T. S. Eliot's poetry about time and dance in "Burnt Norton" from *The Four Quartets* (1936). Eliot writes about the still point of dance, where past, present, and future become one: "At the still point, there the dance is:"

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
[...]

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
[...]
(1936, n.p.)

In Dylan's interpretation of the time slot, we get to the beginning of time, the eye of the hurricane – this is where the dance begins. But the decisive moment of dance is not a still point – the dance creates a fluid experience of time where dimensions of times and places blend. For Dylan, dance and its time slot are also characterized by desperation.

What experience does Dylan's use of time windows open the way for? A glimpse into a real now, an experience of a decisive moment, a special spiritual dimension of existence, a mood, or an experience of something eternal?

In this essay, I have tried to show that in Dylan's oeuvre different time intervals are confronted to reveal that time dimensions are interconnected and that human beings are constantly living in multiple time dimensions.

Dylan also demonstrates that time may be impossible to define but that art reveals the conditions under which people experience time.

In his memoir, *Chronicles* (2004), Dylan tells the story of how he as a young man was fascinated by the watch brand Bulova and relied on its precise timings (p. 50). He spells the brand "Boliva"—a typo or a deliberate misspelling? We can't be sure, but in *The Philosophy of Modern Song* he deliberately misspells "Rolox"/"Rulex" to describe how brands are copied and bought by the poor who can't afford the "Rolox" and the rich who are afraid that their "Rolex" will be stolen if they wear the watch in public.

The brand Bulova is not a luxury good—it is a quality watch for everyday use linked to American history, both to pilots during World War II, to moon landings, and to discoveries on the seabed. And you can still buy some of the historical version of the brand. Dylan's story about the Bulova watch shows that the time dimension also implies a lifestyle. To wear this watch is a reference to the presence of the past: "Well, we're livin' in the shadows of a fading past/Trapped in the fires of time".

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