Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

New Horizons in English Studies 7/2022

LITERATURE

Julia Kula

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland
Julia.m.kula@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0143-4874

"I am Alone in the Dark, Turning the World Around in my Head" – Space-Time Creation in Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*

Abstract. The primary aim of the article is to examine Paul Auster's metafictional novel – *Man in the Dark* – in reference to the represented reality and imaginary spaces which play a crucial role in the development of the action. I will be focusing on the diverse levels of the spatio-temporal dimensions of the novel – the primary story and the embedded one – and their mutual relations and interactions. The created worlds shall be analysed in reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. While discussing *Man in the Dark*, I shall explore the ways in which particular chronotopes affect individuals immersed in them. I will also prove that the text's dominant story, recounted by the protagonist, August Brill, transgresses the spatial and temporal borders of the main character's world, and, consequently, becomes completely separated from what is quotidian, known, and experienceable for him.

Keywords: metafiction, Auster, *Man in the Dark*, narratological levels, embedded texts, chronotopes

1. Introduction

The postmodern novel raises a considerable challenge for the reader due to its specificity. On the one hand, the literary and narrative techniques applied by postmodern authors, such as the fragmentation of a narrative, the stream of consciousness technique, or intertwining of diverse temporal orders, may not significantly depart from those employed in earlier literary movements. On the other, their juxtaposition with the key concerns of postmodernism, such as the importance of contingency, the sense of identity, or blurring of the border between what is real and what is imaginary, gives

DOI: 10.17951/nh.2022.7.73-86

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

postmodern fiction its unique character. Another frequent feature of postmodern literature is the change of the dominant[1] from the epistemological to the ontological one. Consequently, the focal point of the dominant is the world created by the author.

Examining the specificity of postmodern works, Bran Nicol draws attention to the most representative features of the postmodern novel, enumerating, among others, the highlighting of the fictional status of the text as a literary construct and "an implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing a fictional 'world'" (Nicol 2009, xvi). In comparison to the representative works of realism, postmodern texts do not "sustain the illusion that the fictional world we view or read about is a plausible version of the real one, replicating how it looks, how people in it behave, the kind of things which happen to them" (Nicol 2009, 18). In other words, the reader is cognizant that the imaginary spaces in a particular text, even though apparently reflecting the real ones (or created on their basis), are governed by entirely different ontological principles. As a consequence, postmodern texts should not be regarded as offering direct insight into their readers' quotidian reality. Instead, authors tend to construct their works so as to make the audience aware of their role in the interpretative process. All these aspects mentioned above assign a self-reflexive character to postmodern texts and, therefore, make metafiction "the main technical device used in postmodern fiction" (Nicol 2009, 35).

In her book devoted to the concerns of metafiction, Patricia Waugh expounds that it "is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2001, 2). In other words, a metafictional novel creates a relation between the author and the reader who, from the very beginning, is aware of the fictionality of the text. Metafictional techniques differ in their forms and structures – they may create references to the author's previous works, they also happen to introduce characters who are cognizant of being only a part of the fictional world. Also, extensive footnotes are common in self-reflexive works; their function is either to explain threads omitted in the main text or to complement them. As the key premise of the metafictional novel is to foreground the ontological concerns, some texts rely on frame breaking – a narratological technique that infringes the frames through which the reader confronts the world of fiction. As Waugh points out, one of the most effective ways of realizing the discussed method is to make the author of the text one of the characters. It creates an impression as if they were transferred from the position of the extradiegetic narrator from outside the text to the diegetic level of the represented world. However, the most common manifestation of metafiction is the introduction of the protagonist who creates a story himself and, consequently, draws the reader's attention to the creative process as such.

[1] Roman Jakobson defines the dominant as the focusing component of the narrative which "rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" (105), ensuring the integrity of the work.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

Paul Auster, whose *Man in the Dark* is the postmodern novel under discussion, employs in his novels the metafictional techniques mentioned above. Consequently, he creates an impression that the borders between his authorship and the protagonist's authorship collide and, as a result, become blurred. To provide a few examples, in *Leviathan*, the first-person narrator recounts his acquaintance's life story after the man died tragically while construing an explosive device. Throughout the story, the reader is aware of the fictionality of the text due to statements such as:

> Where was I? Owen Brick … Owen Brick walking down the road to the city. The cold air, the confusion, a second civil war in America. A prelude to something, but before I figure out what to do with my befuddled magician, I need a few moments to reflect on Katya and the films, since I still can't decide if this is a good thing or a bad thing (Auster 1993, 14).

The protagonist of *Mr Vertigo* and, at the same time, its first-person narrator recounts from the time perspective the story of his life. At the end of the novel, Walt confesses: "I thought about getting away from Kansas for a few months and seeing the world, but before I could make any definite plans, I was rescued by the idea of writing this book" (Auster 1992, 275). What is more, the title of the novel corresponds to the title of the manuscript prepared by the protagonist, which results in blurring the border between Auster's and Walt's authorships. In *Man in the Dark*, the metafictional conventions seem to be more subtly delineated than in the novels above; however, they turn out to be much more complex. The main character, August Brill, who also performs the function of the narrator, during the night creates in his mind diverse spaces. Although many planes intertwine in the story, such as analyses of cinematic spaces or retrospections, the focus will be on August's imaginary 'manuscript' and its relation to the situation depicted in the man's autodiegetic narration,[2] other stories will be disregarded or commented upon only in passing. The application of the first-person narration in the story makes it the protagonist's fictional autobiography and, what follows, puts him in the position of the character. Such a situation makes him a double narrator – the intradiegetic one, who, apart from focusing on his current predicament, also recounts his distant personal memories, and the extradiegetic creator of the embedded text.

1. Narratological Structure of *Man in the Dark*

To start with a concise overview of the storyline, August Brill lives with his daughter and granddaughter; both women, similarly to the protagonist, have also experienced the loss of the closest ones. The man, after a serious car accident, suffers from recurring pain which, in turn, results in insomnia. In order to detach from painful reality,

[2] As Gerald Prince explains, the autodiegetic narration the one in which the protagonist is also the narrator (2003, 9).

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

he indulges into the realm of imagination: "I lie in bed and tell myself stories. They might not add up to much, but as long as I'm inside them, they prevent me from thinking about the things I would prefer to forget" (Auster 2008, 2). The action takes place during one night, when the protagonist intersperses his personal retrospections with his story about Owen Brick. The imaginary man has been mysteriously transported from his world to the alternative United States, a country in the state of domestic war. Owen faces an improbable task whose successful completion is to guarantee the termination of the damaging conflict. The story created by August, to some extent, mirrors his predicament, even though it is separated from the traditional concept of space-time.

Taking into consideration the narratological levels in the novel, the primary fabula of *Man in the Dark*, featuring a man reliving his traumatic experiences, and the key embedded story set in the dystopian future United States provide fertile ground for explorations of war. Consequently, the novel is frequently analysed as an example of the Post-9/11 literature. Among the critical works prioritising this reading is, for instance, "Auster's Narratives of Traumatic Temporality" by François Hugonnier, where the author juxtaposes *Man in the Dark* with Auster's other trauma-focused texts. David Deacon's "Ethical Imagination, Complicity and Trauma in Auster's *Man in the Dark*" also delves into the novel's tragedies as seen on both personal and imaginative levels. "The insistent realism of Don DeLillo's 'Falling Man' and Paul Auster's 'Man in the Dark'" by Ugo Panzani is another comparative analysis of novels oscillating between the horrors of 9/11 and their aftermath in Iraq. However, in my analysis, instead of making references to Post-9/11 fiction, I shall focus more on the chronotopic dimension of the novel and its connection with the present/past dichotomy.

Due to its narratological structure (the combination of a primary text and multiple embedded narratives), *Man in the Dark* can be regarded as a metafictional representative of a story within a story, which is characterized by complex narrative levels. Referring to the construction of the novel, Hugonnier points out that

> *Man in the Dark* is built around an impossible vision, a traumatic act of violence which is sort of displaced blind center, a black hole disorienting characters and narrators through unstable narrative and time frames […]. Stories within the story and film descriptions produce a choral of dialogic voices, orchestrated by the narrator from the depth of his unmappable, timeless wounds. (2015, 143)

As William Nelles explains, a story within a story is a structure in which "a character in a narrative text becomes the narrator of a second narrative text framed by the first one" (2012, 134), they may also find a manuscript, or a letter, or watch a movie. As is common in case of novels applying this literary device, the stories making up the entire work are more or less related to each other. Together with the primary one, the embedded texts create a logical and coherent storyline. To exemplify, in *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade invents new tales in order to save her life, constructing a wide range of imaginary spaces belonging to her intradiegetic narration. Narratologi-

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

cal levels fashioned by August do not have the disembarrassing function, as in the case of Scheherazade; instead, they are instrumental in depicting his mental state.

Describing the relationship between the primary text and the embedded text, several types of relations can be distinguished, the most common among them involving a situation when "[e]ither the embedded story explains the primary story, or it resembles the primary story. In the first case the relationship is made explicit by the actor narrating the embedded story; in the second the explanation is usually left to the reader, or merely hinted at, in the fabula" (Bal 2009, 58). In other words, with the development of the action, the narrator himself may aspire to explain the relationship between the existing situation and the created story, or the status quo may be reflected in the embedded text. The narratological situation in *Man in the Dark* is not as complex as in *One Thousand and One Nights*, where, as Mieke Bal maintains, the story expands "sometimes until the eighth degree" (2009, 57). However, there is a noticeable connection between the primary fabula of August Brill's sleepless night and the embedded story in which Owen Brick tries to make his way in the alternative United States.

As Brian McHale demonstrates, such strategies (whose aim is to embed additional spatio-temporal levels), are usually "interrupting and complicating the ontological 'horizon' of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction" (2004, 112). Indeed, as the action develops, the reader is offered insights into August's process of creating the impossible world, in which the ontological borders also tend to blur. The alternate realm created by the protagonist bears the stigma of his traumatic reminiscences as Brill "digs into the past, picking events from the war paradigm in order to speak of the unspeakable events" (Hugonnier 2015, 140).

The primary fabula in *Man in the Dark* takes place in the confined space of the room and lasts several hours at night, until the morning. It is a first-person narration of a man who involuntarily takes advantage of his insomnia to delve into primarily the death of Titus – Katia's, his granddaughter's, former boyfriend and his past, as well: his marriage with the late Sonia or the death of Titus – Katia's, his granddaughter's, former boyfriend. The embedded texts, on the other hand, appear in Katia's cinematic analyses, Brill's stories heard during the trip to Europe, or, primarily, in the imagined story featuring Brick's adventures. All these embedded threads, although seemingly unrelated, overlap and create a coherent narrative, and can be discussed through the prism of their spaces. However, for the purpose of the analysis, I shall focus solely on the specificity of space-time prevailing in the story – the dominant chronotope(s) – August's room and the alternative America.

In his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin refers to the concept of the chronotope in literature – the artistic interconnection of spatial and temporal dimensions, where both components are considered inseparable. As Bakhtin explains, in a chronotope, "[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (1981, 84). As the critic also notes, these spatio-temporal continuums are highly organized structures in which the action is in-

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

itiated and within which it unfolds; it is the chronotope that shapes the plot and determines the recurring themes and motifs. Consequently, the chronotope also exerts a considerable influence upon protagonists. For instance, the chronotope of the road is usually associated with freedom and detachment from what is quotidian and familiar; the chronotope of the city in detective fiction, on the other hand, offers skilled observers invaluable clues. Their appropriate deciphering enables detectives to successfully solve mysteries or to terminate investigations. Taking into account the specificity of chronotopes and their role in the novel, while analysing the space-time in *Man in the Dark*, I shall refer to the chronotope of the room that determines the primary fabula and the chronotope of the city that dominates the embedded text, with considerable emphasis placed on their spatial dimension.

2. "Each world is the creation of a mind" – the Play with Spaces in the Novel

At the very beginning of the story, the narrator of *Man in the Dark* informs the reader about his predicament: "I am alone in the dark, turning the world around in my head as I struggle through another bout of insomnia, another white night in the great American wilderness" (Auster 2008, 1), which refers to both – his metaphorical journey into the past and into the fictional world of the invented narrative. The chronotope of the room lacks any in-depth descriptions of its interior as more crucial seems to be its function rather than physical surroundings. In other words, 'how it looks' has been replaced with 'what it conveys' in terms of its chronotopic character. At this point, it is possible to define the Austerian chronotope of the room as space created according to the principle of binary opposition between the hermetic character of the room and the endless possibilities of August's imagination. The room, as enclosed space, carries the connotations of privacy, intimacy, but also of limitation and separation from the outer world. All the events occurring inside the room are visible and comprehensible only for the individuals sojourning in it. Hence, only the protagonist is the witness of his nightly returns to the past as well as of the manipulations with his imagination. Sleepless nights lead to August's painful realisation of his isolation, even though his remaining family languishes upstairs. At the same time, however, the man in his mind travels to the American wilderness represented by the alternative world in his story as well as his traumatic reminiscences. Although a hermetically closed space, the room enables movement through time and space. As such, the place embodies a variation of the motif "of containment and self-incarceration, a motif simultaneously associated with liberation, physical self-deprivation and creative plenitude" (Shiloh 2015, 183).

Yet, from Brill's perspective, the limitation imposed by the room has also another dimension, namely the physical one. For the protagonist, as a person injured in an accident, the room represents a prison, a place which has taken over the function of the centre of his personal 'universe'. In other words, August's reality "has shrunk to the size

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

of his room for him and for as long it takes him to understand it, he must stay where he is" (Auster 1988, 83). Moreover, referring to his desire to spend time with his granddaughter, he remarks: "But I can't climb the stairs in a wheelchair, can I? And if I used my crutch, I would probably fall in the dark. Damn this idiot leg" (Auster 2008, 13). The room, thus, also seems to symbolize loneliness resultant from the lack of mobility.

Therefore, to avoid distressing memories, Brill, doomed to a nightly 'imprisonment' in the room, delves into the process of creation of imaginary worlds. Referring to the picture of the author locked in the private space of his room, Markku Salmela points out that "[t]he room, containing the writing subject, epitomizes the metaphysical space in which the fictional text comes into existence, grows, and assumes a life of relative independence" (2008, 135). Such a claim may also be applied to the situation depicted in *Man in the Dark*; the only difference is constituted by the character of the created work. Whereas Salmela refers to the actual author producing a manuscript, in Auster's novel it is a former literary critic creating a story in his mind. Although August's room is a place of authorial, 'divine' creation, no immortalization of the word occurs. The manuscript, thus, although 'conceived' and developed in the creator's private space, will never become an independent product as it remains confined to his mind, and, consequently, is doomed to disappear overnight.

Yet, as the man confesses: "[c]oncentration can be a problem, however, and more often than not my mind eventually drifts away from the story I'm trying to tell to the things I don't want to think about" (Auster 2008, 2). At this point, the chronotopic nature of the room is noticeable as diverse temporal orders intertwine in its space; they become, as Bakhtin points out, artistically visible (1981, 253). Linear and chronological time stretching up to a few hours when the action unfolds collides with the fragmentary time of the past, retrospections epitomising concerns that the protagonist would prefer to disregard. The chronological time encompasses August's struggle with his past as well as the story up to the moment when the protagonist and his daughter are ready to confront the video from Titus' assassination. The man's psychological time refers primarily to the moments evoked from memory, when years condense into minutes in his internal monologue, when slices of time re-emerge and take over August's consciousness. As such, it is evident that his "mind cannot accommodate itself to chronological, or mechanical time, but is constantly moving blocks of time from past-to present-to past, and without regard for logical sequence" (Edel 1955, 100). The Austerian room, thus, becomes the place of the intermingling of the present with the past. However, the third temporal dimension cannot be ignored as it is created by the protagonist himself – time defining the ontological dimension of the imaginary space in the embedded story.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (1994) defines home as "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams" (6). The consolidation of reminiscences or desires in the hermetic space of the house, apart from separating them from the outer, public space, at the same time refers to openness and freedom. Their evocation is associated with returns to the past or projections of the

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

desired future, which disrupts the linearity and chronology of time. Hence, Austerian chronotope of the room is always dualistic in its nature – on the one hand, it enforces some limitation; however, on the other hand, it offers the protagonist creative freedom, allowing him to move through diverse spatio-temporal continuums. As Auster writes in *The Invention of Solitude*,

> our thoughts compose a journey, and this journey is no more or less than the steps we have taken, so that, in the end, we might safely say that we have been on a journey, and even if we do not leave our room, it has been a journey, and we might safely say that we have been somewhere, even if we don't know where it is. (Auster 1988, 130)

Indeed, August, even though physically limited by the darkness in the room and his immobility, has complete freedom of action as an extradiegetic narrator – the creator of the imaginary world in his story. It can, therefore, be said that as Owen Brick, he undertakes a journey into the unknown; a journey that draws August away from his reality, from pondering about the past and from his suffering. After a short moment of retrospections which interrupts the embedded story, Brill claims: "I don't want to start thinking about Sonia. It's still too early, and if I let myself go now, I'll wind up brooding about her for hours. Stick to the story. That's the only solution. Stick to the story, and then see what happens. (Auster 2008, 22). For the protagonist, the improbable realm of fiction seems to be an escape from his torment. However, even though set in a non-existent city governed by fantastic temporal relations, the story seems, to some extent, to reflect August's experiences related to traumatic events from his life.

Discussing worlds represented in movies, dreams and desires, Mark Brown refers to the idea of no-places[3], claiming that they constitute "unreal, unlocatable and unmappable" (2007, 129) spaces. As he further explains, "[t]hey are also, to an extent, spaces of imagination themselves, intended by their creators to act as a refuge from the cruel practices of the world beyond their boundaries" (Brown 2007, 129) and, thus, may be regarded as utopian places. However, in the case of Brill, mental journeys to places that cannot be located in space, to painful reminiscences nested deep in his memory, cannot serve as an escape from the real world. Rather, they are involuntary and unwanted. Likewise, the alternative United States in which the action of the embedded story takes place should be classified as a dystopian space overtaken by a damaging conflict rather than a utopian sanctuary for August.

Whereas the primary text is dominated by the chronotope of the room, the embedded world of Owen Brick is defined by the chronotopes of the city. In his sleep, the

[3] It is worth pointing out that the no-places described by Brown have nothing in common with the non-places analyzed by Marc Augé in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. As it has been mentioned, Brown's concept refers to illusory and imaginary places which, to a great extent, function as an escape from quotidian, often distressing, reality. Augé, on the other hand, refers primarily to places of transit (airports, train stations, etc.) which are contrasted with anthropological places.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

protagonist is transported to an alternative reality where a city is governed by entirely different ontological principles: "I go to bed with my wife in New York. We make love, we fall asleep, and when I wake up I'm lying in a hole in the middle of goddamned nowhere, dressed in a fucking army uniform. What the hell is going on?" (Auster 2008, 36) August's protagonist is disoriented since the inexplicable movement in space and time violates the ontological basis of his world. The space-time to which he is transported is so distant from both his quotidian and the historical one that it cannot be considered realistic from his perspective. Hence, "Brick reverts to his earlier speculation that he is trapped in a dream, that in spite of the physical evidence around him, he is lying next to Flora in his bed at home" (Auster 2008, 23). What is more, the chronotope of the alternative city imposes different rules than Brick's city does: the man is stripped of his identity and is assigned a new one – he is a saviour and an assassin at once. Sergeant Tobak, the first person met by Brick after he wakes up in the war zone, informs him that the military conflict is "going to end soon. You're the guy who's going to make it happen" (Auster 2008, 8). At this moment, the reason for Brick's displacement in space-time is evident – he confronts a harsh task of assassinating the person responsible for the conflict.

The chronotope of New York where Owen, the comedian, lives with his wife seems to reflect the economic and political situation in America in 2007. The country is the side partaking in the military conflict with Iraq, the image of Ulysses S. Grant is present on notes, and George Bush is still the president. It can be assumed that the first level of August's imaginary space is created on the basis of his own reality, when the temporal and historical dimensions are considered. Yet, the ontological situation gets complicated when the second level of the imaginary space is incorporated – the chronotope of the alternative city represented by the fictional Wellington and its surroundings. They are representative of the second America, ravaged by the domestic war, where independent states are governed by the prime ministers and the Federals are led by president Bush. Yet, as Brick notices, the country "which hasn't lived through September 11 or the war in Iraq, nevertheless has strong historical links to the America he knows. The question is: at what point did the two stories begin to diverge?" (Auster 2008, 50).

"The weird world, the battered world, the weird world rolling on as wars flame all around us […]. and in my own head this other war, an imaginary war on home ground, America cracking apart" (Auster 2008, 49), says Brill as he returns to his imaginary story. His words may be as well the allusion to the source of his inspiration for the construction of the fictional space in his story. The assassination of Titus by the terrorists, which considerably affected both the protagonist and Katya, the war in Vietnam, the conflict with Iraq, or the riots in Newark and the city overtaken by chaos and destruction – all these events have their reflection in the physical space of the alternative United States. The continuation of Brill's narration reveals the disturbing picture of the alternative world: "artillery fire erupts in the distance, and the darkening sky lights up with streaking comets of destruction. Brick hears machine guns, exploding grenades, and under it all, no doubt miles away, a dull chorus of howling human voices" (Aus-

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

ter 2008, 5). Components of the environment also do not fill the man with optimism: "burned-out houses, collapsed food markets, a dead dog, several exploded cars" (Auster 2008, 24) are noticeable everywhere. There is no doubt that the alternative United States created by August is a dystopian country, much worse than the one he lives in. The imaginary spaces in the protagonist's story are to function as detachment from his suffering; nevertheless, they are imbued with profound, mutational meaning. They may offer Brill the escape from both physical and psychological suffering; however, the signs of the man's trauma are imprinted in the cityscape of Owen's alternative United States.

3. Chronotope of the City as a Means of Trauma Storytelling

The chronotope of the city, as mentioned earlier, has been created by August to distance himself from his traumas. Referring to the key concept of trauma, Dominic LaCapra points out that it "is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered" (2001, 46). In other words, it is "the past that lives on in the present, the past we carry with us into the future" (Auster 2008, 78–79). Indeed, reminiscences from the past cannot be removed from August's consciousness, which results in reliving the foregone times during his sleepless nights. To distract himself from recurring suffering, he delves into the world of fiction which serves as "a form of self-medication, a homeopathic drug" (Auster 2008, 15) 'taken' to liberate from the past.

Storytelling, according to some psychological theories (Dominic LaCapra, Cathy Caruth) may function as a technique to get through what is disturbing, to come to terms with experiences and a possible posttraumatic stress disorder. As such, it performs the integral function for reappearing flashbacks imprinted in the traumatised person's mind.

> Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language […]. [T]he story can be told, the person can look back at what happened; he has given it a place in his life history, his autobiography, and thereby in the whole of his personality. (Caruth 1995, 176)

By inventing the story about the alternative United States as the theatre for war, the protagonist, to some extent, transforms the haunting memories into a narrative language. However, August's way of conceptualising his losses or horrors differs from the one mentioned by Caruth. Whereas she puts more emphasis on retelling actual traumatic events and accepting them, the protagonist of *Man in the Dark* relies on the power of his imagination and transfers his traumas into the fictional narration to repress them, to anesthetise himself against the 'ghosts of the past'. Deaths, acts of ter-

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

rorism, or territories ravaged by war – all these have their reflection in the chronotope of the alternative United States. The language thus becomes the device enabling the representation of what seems unrepresentable for August; the crucial difference lies in the function of the story. According to Caruth, the narrative should help the individual to cope with the trauma, while the protagonist ascribes it a repressive role. As Alan Gibbs notices, instead of the burial of August's "traumatic memories, the reader witnesses the return of the repressed, as key themes reflecting August's traumas – infidelity and violence – continually reoccur and overlap" (2014, 211).

The incorporation of the protagonist telling the story is one of the most common manifestations of metafictionality of the work. However, in *Man in the Dark,* there can be observed a more complex realisation of metafictional techniques, namely the intrusion of the author of the narrative. In this case, the appearance of August Brill in his narrative is dictated by the traumatised man's mental state. For Brick, the ontological borders get more complicated as the man becomes fully cognizant of his status as the author's creation: "[y]ou're saying it's a story, that a man is writing a story, and we're all part of it" (Auster 2008, 10). As Tobak informs, the United States ravaged by war is the invention of Brill – the creator of the embedded narrative and, simultaneously, the narrator in the novel. "[H]e owns the war. He invented it, and everything that happens or is about to happen is in his head. Eliminate that head, and the war stops. It's that simple" (Auster 2008, 10), explains the sergeant. The characters of the story are literally trapped inside their creator's head and are subject to whatever his imagination conjures up. Thus, getting rid of the author is perceived as freeing from their control, even though it also means characters' possible end.

The introduction of himself into the world of fiction may have different, yet interlinked, dimensions for August. On the most fundamental level, it may stand for the man's subconscious desire to create a sort of intimacy between the author and his creation. By being a part of the world where violence and armed conflicts are rife, the man may stress that he has also been victimised by such circumstances. However, on a deeper level, Tobak's remark about eliminating the 'head' of the author of the conflict as well as the further one provided by Lou Frisk may be suggestive of August's hidden desire of death as a means of liberating from suffering. "This is your story, not ours. The old man invented you in order to kill him" (Auster 2008, 70), explains Frisk. Tired of endless physical and mental suffering, by means of the fictional story, August may express what he cannot say aloud – the desire to die. "Why did you have to die, Sonia? Why couldn't I have gone first?" (Auster 2008, 44), Brill questions himself while recalling memories of his beloved Sonia. Hence, the fictional character of Owen Brick may function as the device which is supposed to help the protagonist to visualize his wish and, at the same time, to get accustomed to it.

August's presence in the product of his imagination may also signify his intention "to assign blame, and assume responsibility, something which is markedly absent in the 'real world' which August Brill must endure in the aftermath of Titus' murder" (Deacon 2015, 167). Death from the hands of one of his invented characters is aimed

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

at terminating the armed conflict and, consequently, at saving thousands of innocent civilians. In such a way, August accepts total responsibility for the circumstances, something that he was not able to do in real life. As Tobak informs Brick, "[t]he intelligence reports say he's racked with guilt, but he can't stop himself. If the bastard had the guts to blow his brains out, we wouldn't be having this conversation" (Auster 2008, 10). August's guilt may signify his remorse that he could not do anything in order to save Sonia or Titus, or to prevent other negligence. Referring to the last conversation before Titus' departure to Iraq, the protagonist mentions: "I pulled myself together and did the best I could – which was nothing, nothing at all" (Auster 2008, 171). Thus, Brill's death, although a fictional one, gives him control over the situation, which was non-existent in his real life.

While referring to Brill's narrative, Jesús Ángel González claims that "the function of the narrative is explicative, rather than thematic, since it offers an explanation of the diegetic level" (2011, 31) as the story contains "a psychological clue into the author's obsessions" (2011, 1). Indeed, on a psychological level, producing the narration about the suicidal mission may be the embodiment of August's desire to free from the painful memories, to express his remorse, or to take control over the situation. However, the thematic function should not be overlooked as its realisation is also significant. The picture of the United States, military conflicts, violence, deaths of innocent people, or omnipresent suffering are the thematic concerns that recur in both – the primary and the embedded fabula, offering insight into haunting images from the past that the August Brill desires to free from.

4. Conclusions

The represented reality created by Auster in *Man in the Dark* testifies to the complexity of spatio-temporal dimensions in the novel, proving its metafictional character.

> There's no single reality, Corporal. There are many realities. There's no single world. There are many worlds, and they all run parallel to one another, worlds and anti-worlds, worlds and shadow-worlds, and each world is dreamed or imagined or written by someone in another world. Each world is the creation of a mind. (Auster 2008, 69)

The claim made by one of the characters of the embedded story depicts the complexity of the spatio-temporal dimensions in the novel. The story about the suffering man 'trapped' inside his room is nothing else than the product of Auster's imagination. From the reader's perspective, the embedded text is created by the American author; however, on the diegetic level – by the protagonist of *Man in the Dark*, August Brill.

The space of the primary fabula, dominated by the chronotope of the room, becomes the place of the clash of two temporal orders – the linear time of the present with the fragmented time of the past. It is where August relives the confrontation with distressing

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

reminiscences, which forces him to 're-visit' real places from his memories as well as to indulge in those termed by Brown as no-places. The dominant embedded text, on the other hand, takes the form of the fictional story about Owen Brick. Although its action takes place in the unreal space, it remains in a close dialogue with the primary fabula.

Even though the chronotope of the alternative United States is the product of August's imagination, the fictional description may be, in fact, modelled, for instance, on the protagonist's recollections of riots in Newark he witnessed: "Driving into Newark that night was like entering one of the lower circles of hell. Buildings in flames, hordes of men running wildly through the streets, the noise of shattering glass as one store window after another was broken, the noise of sirens, the noise of gunshots" (Auster 2008, 81).

The imaginary spaces of the protagonist's story, thus, are ambivalent in their nature. On the one hand, they are intended to offer some sort of escape from unwanted thoughts and flashbacks; however, they are not the spaces deprived of any emotional charge. They may offer Brill a moment of respite as neither does he focus on physical suffering from pain nor on the psychological one after the death of Sonia or Titus. However, the signs of the man's trauma are imprinted in the cityscape of Owen's alternative United States. Referring to the unforgettable images of the situation in Newark, the protagonist confesses:

> That was my war. Not a real war, perhaps, but once you witness violence on that scale, it isn't difficult to imagine something worse, and once your mind is capable of doing that, you understand that the worst possibilities of the imagination are the country you live in. Just think it, and chances are it will happen. (Auster 2008, 82)

Indeed, neither the conflict in Newark nor the war in Iraq are the battles Brills wages. However, they are his conflicts in the sense that they concern him both personally and socially, as their aftermath can be traced in the man's consciousness. Violent images are transferred into the medium of fiction and embedded in the imaginary chronotopes.

References

Augé, Marc. 1995. *Non-Places Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, translated by John Howe. New York and London: Verso

Auster, Paul. 1993. *Leviathan*. London: Faber and Faber.

Auster, Paul. 2008. *Man in the Dark*. London: Faber and Faber.

Auster, Paul. 1992. *Mr Vertigo*. London: Faber and Faber.

Auster, Paul. 1988. *The Invention of Solitude*. London: Faber and Faber.

Bachelard, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. 84–258.

Bal, Mieke. 2009. *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 29/11/2026 17:06:14

Brown, Mark. 2007. *Paul Auster*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Caruth, Cathy. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Deacon, David. 2015. "Ethical Imagination, Complicity and Trauma in Auster's Man in the Dark." *Time, Narrative, and Imagination: Essays on Paul Auster*, edited by Arkadiusz Misztal. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Universytetu Gdańskiego. 159–176.

Edel, Leon. 1955. *The Psychological Novel: 1900–1950*. New York: Lippincott.

Genette, Gerald 1983. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Gibbs, Alan. 2014. *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

González, Jesús Ángel. 2011. "Another History': Alternative Americas in Paul Auster's Fiction." *Comparative American Studies*, vol. 9 no. 1, 2011. 21–34.

Hugonnier, François. 2015. "Auster's Narratives of Traumatic Temporality." In *Time, Narrative, and Imagination: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Arkadiusz Misztal. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego. 135–157.

Jacobson, Roman. 1971. "The Dominant." *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, edited by Ladislav Matějka, Krystyna Pomorska. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 82–87.

LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

McHale, Brian. 2004. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge.

Nelles, William. 2010. "Embedding." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, edited by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan. London: Routledge. 134–135.

Nicol, Bran. 2009. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Panzani, Ugo. 2011. "The insistent realism of Don DeLillo's 'Falling Man' and Paul Auster's 'Man in the Dark'." *Altre Modernità* special issue 9/11/2011. 76–90.

Prince, Gerald. 2003. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Salmela, Markku. 2008. "The Bliss of Being Lost: Revisiting Paul Auster's Nowhere." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 42, no. 2. 131–148.

Shiloh, Ilana. 2015. "Travels in a Locked Room: Space and Time in Man in the Dark." In *Time, Narrative, and Imagination: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Arkadiusz Misztal. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego. 177–193.

Waugh, Patricia. 2001. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Routledge.