TIME IN CINEMA AND MODERN ART: REFLECTIONS INSPIRED BY FARSHAD ZAHEDI AND FRANCISCO JIMÉNEZ ALCARRIA'S *THE PETRIFIED OBJECT AND THE POETICS OF TIME IN CINEMA*

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Farshad Zahedi and Francisco Jiménez Alcarria's audiovisual essay *The Petrified Object and the Poetics of Time in Cinema*, this article briefly presents three philosophical approaches to cinema's ways of expressing time — as articulated by Bergson, Tarkovsky, and Deleuze — and questions how absolute time and chronological time are brought to a state of crisis by this modern form of art.

Keywords: Chronos; *Durée*; Aging; Time's moral qualities; Audiovisual essay.

"Time is said to be irreversible".
(Tarkovsky, 1989, p. 58)

READABLE IMAGES, THINKING IMAGES

Farshad Zahedi and Francisco Jiménez Alcarria's audiovisual essay *The Petrified Object and the Poetics of Time in Cinema* addresses the poetics of time, the representation of psychoanalytic "petrified objects", and their filmic connections to the temporal dimensions of past and present. Mastering time in film has been an obsessive and obscure desire of many filmmakers and film-philosophers. Time is what cinema is made of. But time, as a matter of thinking, is problematic and can be approached in different ways. Tarkovsky would say that cinema takes an "impression of time" to then reproduce it, repeat it, and preserve it (1989, p. 62). Deleuze developed a similar thesis, adding that time has always put truth "into crisis" (2008, p. 126).

The fleeting time of film, flowing away from the present to the past, can implicitly be expressed through the mediation of three different perspectives on an absolute notion of time: the film's length, the duration of the depicted events, and the spectator's cinematic experience. Thus, the common concept of duration is usually taken in the sense of *x*'s running time, i.e. its chronological or measurable time. In some cases, the three perspectives give us the feeling of being fully synchronized, as in Linklater's *Before* Trilogy (1995–2013): our perception of the film is similar to the duration of each film (its running time), of its depicted events (Jesse and Celine's encounter, reproduced in real time), and even of the temporal gap between the production of the trilogy and the three depicted segments of the central characters' lives. In this case, time seems to be ordered and tamed by the mechanical sequence of moving images.

But the expression "petrified objects" in Zahedi & Alcarria's audiovisual essay is meant to symbolize an ideology hidden within, or behind, the inorganic things that, despite the passage of time, remain intact, mummified. These objects are meant to be symptoms of something else, caused by an invisible force. Films can be seen as such objects. This is true, for example, of the moving images of the wreckage of the Titanic, forgotten in the depths of the Atlantic, in the depths of the past — behind the present instant, but even so in an accessible "place", as Cameron's 1997 film shows. In a way, interpreting images of a wrecked ship causes us to metaphysically anticipate the inevitable passage of time and its inevitable damage, which, with the arrival of cinema, has become an obsession of the masses. Both grievous and pleasant to look at, these sublime images are modern versions of a *memento mori*.

One preliminary view regarding the way in which different temporal dimensions are depicted in films seems compatible with the scientific perspective, from which time is one more objective element that moving images can copy, manipulate, and reproduce. When the cinematograph was being invented, modern physics was facilitating a revolution in how space and time are correlated (in Poincaré's and Einstein's theories

in particular). Popular culture absorbed all of these technological and scientific changes, and films have made the topic of time travel an even more popular idea. Modern art would not assist this revolution without undergoing its own revolution, with a sense of ephemerality, discontinuity, and fragmentation. But indeed, with moving images we have been given the chance to witness the symptoms of chronological time's own "sickness" (Deleuze, 2008, p. 23), of a disordered, untamed time, pushing us towards an accurate "reading" of these images' signs, for example by mentally reordering their chronology. In this sense, as Deleuze stated regarding the time-image, "chronosigns" are always inseparable from "lectosigns" (readable images) and "noosigns" (thinking images). These images demand to be read, demand meaning, in both their visual and their audible disjunctive respects.

TIME'S "MORAL QUALITIES"

Underneath a deceptively poetic view, there is the more hidden layer of what we would prefer not to face directly but what we inevitably confront through images. This layer concerns life and reality. Complementing the above reading of the *Before* Trilogy and Zahedi & Alcarria audiovisual essay, I would add the example of Linklater's *Boyhood* (2014): shot between 2002 and 2013, the movie follows the expectations and sorrows of a normal family over a 12-year period. The film compresses those 12 years into almost 3 hours, but even more important than the techniques it uses to abbreviate time (through a selection of casual scenes, of certain "facts") is the film's capacity to depict aging. From the first shot to the last, we observe the *same* actors. For Tarkovsky, the film's most important feature is its revelation of the "moral qualities" of time (1989, p. 58). This occurs when a film sees itself as limited by a person's life, unable to respect life's "natural forms" (Tarkovsky, 1989, p. 71). Life's natural forms are factual; they include both visual and audible elements. If it is clear how film can copy, manipulate, and reproduce time, it is less clear how time becomes *indissociable from* reality's materiality, that is, how time is a fact and not an abstract dimension surrounding matter. Once screened, the image preserves time and keeps the past sheltered from the present's ontological ephemerality. In this sense, time's moral qualities become visible through a *retrospective* movement towards the past, which allows us, for example, to evaluate our own actions. Looking back on a past moment gives us a moral sense of our own actions. According to Tarkovsky, it also makes us vulnerable.

The nature of time can be represented according to two different models, as developed by Bergson's metaphysics of time and as applied by Deleuze to moving images: either 1) as synchronic time, simplified in the arrow scheme *past > present > future*, in which linear time runs from the present to the past but is oriented by the future, for successive temporal dimensions, or 2) as diachronic time, simplified in the scheme *past | present | future*, in which the three temporal dimensions coexist. Whereas the first suggests a sequential movement between temporal

dimensions, the second suggests their coexistence, whereby past and present are contemporaneous. In this case, relational positions such as "later than" and "earlier than" are simultaneous with the present moment. Thus, a model based on an objective and measurable time, a succession of homogeneous instants, is opposed to a model of a subjective *and real* time. Why is it real if it is subjective?

Thinking about the paradox of time's linearity and coexistence is particularly interesting in the context of cinema because, as Tarkovsky observed, film is an art that clearly intends to register the passage of time, to master how time passes. More than its mechanical succession, however, Tarkovsky was interested in understanding how time is mastered *aesthetically* — in particular, how the past is understood and how it expresses time's moral qualities, for example in the representation of aging. Sublime images make us think of life's natural forms, its boundless limits and continuous flow, in clear contradiction with our rational drive to simplify, grasp, and master reality.

When a film such as Nolan's *Memento* (2000) inverts the chronological arrow by regrouping a set of actions and ordering them from back to front, this has implications not only for how the audience follows the narrative but also for how we understand the effects of a certain action, or how we analyse the action morally, by returning to its causes. Grounded in Tarkovsky's theory, and revising what I said above about three different perspectives on duration, it is necessary to redefine the spectator's cinematic experience, this time focused on Bergson's concept of *durée*, or duration. Accordingly, the possibility of synchronizing the spectator's psychological intuition of time with the other two perspectives of duration (the film's length and the depicted events' duration) may simply be an illusion.

According to Bazin, with cinema, "for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration (*durée*), change mummified as it were" (1967, p. 15). The sequence shot fulfils this desire. But this ontological certainty, based on a belief in the objectivity of time and of reality, was challenged by modern physics (as pointed out above), which Bergson (2002) tried to think of philosophically, that is, metaphysically. Poincaré, for example, defended the thesis that absolute time does not exist, has no reality, and that simultaneity is just a convenient convention. The clock, and its daily use, was a symbol of modernity's way of understanding time. The wristwatches in Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) are symbols of the illusion that simultaneity is real. But how can we (or film) pretend to represent, reproduce, and manipulate something that does not exist?

Bergson tried to resolve this paradox by introducing a new concept, *durée*, with which he defended the thesis that real-time is not an objective but a subjective type of time: time as we live it, the qualitative continuous movement, not time as we measure it. Along with *durée*, he introduced a new conceptual framework for understanding time, centred on an intuitive notion of time as it is lived, including a virtual (real) and subjective past. Although it usually goes unnoticed, *durée* is recognized when our

experience of time differs from what the clock says. For example, the notion of *durée* explains temporal variations such as the experience of "time flying" or the sense that our childhood days are not that far away from our present situation.

Deleuze would give expression to this paradox with two regimes of signs, the movement-image and the time-image, which correspond to different ways of expressing the relationship between movement and time and which can erroneously be understood in terms of the difference between montages and sequence shots (2008, p. 40). The question, though, is how to give montage a new function with regard to the shot: that of *showing* instead of linking shots, for example by showing the possible reversibility of time by depicting the coexistence of memory/the virtual past and the present, actual moment. Yet montage — or any technique that arranges linear time in the correct order, so often used by the first regime — is not excluded from the second regime; instead, it takes on a new function in the sense that montage does not control time but is controlled by time, in particular by the sequence shot.

In summary, cinema embodies both diachronic and synchronic time (and likely other models that have yet to be conceived). Cinematic time is malleable enough to accommodate a great variety of images, showing how duration interferes as a creative element of the narrative itself. Illusory simultaneity is staged in films such as *Interstellar* but also *Dunkirk* (2017), a film that explores presentism, or the dominant dimension of the present, and that embodies duration *within* simultaneous present moments: the scientific and metaphysical dream of showing reality's "in the meanwhile…"

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