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TIME TRAVEL
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Did cinema invent time travel? Moments we believed lost are recovered in their entirety through recording. Phenomena we believed determined by a duration and a destiny are accelerated or slowed down, fragmented, inverted, or repeated by the twin magic of frame rate and montage. At the beginning of *The Time Machine*, the 1960 adaptation of H. G. Wells's novel, an impatient experimenter sits down on the red velour theater seat in the heart of his machine, and by pushing a simple lever is as awed as if he were watching a movie: flowers wilt and blossom again all around him, clouds fly by so quickly that they soon form a single indistinct mass, and the alternation of day and night is transformed into an inebriating flicker. He looks at his watch: for him, only a few seconds have passed, while the rest of the world slipped by at another speed, crossing hours, years, and centuries.

Time travel is that difference. While cinema is, as the art historian Jean-Louis Schefer writes, “the only experience in which time is given to us as a perception,” it is always a diffracted perception, hovering between the viewer's own time and the time suggested on the screen, between the unyielding watch deep in your pocket and the flower become untimely before your eyes. Every film is a singular temporal crossing: we enter a movie theater to *kill some time*—to experience in a manner either discreet or violent “time [...] out of joint,” according to the famous line in *Hamlet*—and provisionally find another time.

Yet time lost and regained in cinema is not only a question of sensation. Any narrative structures its time, no matter how poor or unproductive, and time travel is in and of itself an age-old theme of fables, a reverie as solidly anchored in man's mind as cinema—which André Bazin said had always existed, “fully armed in [our] brain as in the Platonic heavens.” When time travel does not generate a narrative, it can at least sketch in its traces, or serve as the imaginary articulation between images. Aside from being a motif in varyingly wild and spectacular fantastical fictions, time travel materializes operations in thought: to find oneself physically in the past rather than remembering, or jumping into the future rather than projecting it like an abstraction, and thereby living every variation of time in the present, in the presence. Wouldn't this explain why Robert Frank gave the name *The Present* (1996) to a documentary self-portrait in which nothing lasts, in which everything offers itself up immediately, while simultaneously signaling past times? “I'm looking out the window, and then... a memory,” Frank whispers from behind his camera. There is no fiction in *The Present* other than that entirely left to the imagination: the fiction of a life transformed into a perpetual leap between scattered splinters of time. A constant play with “time in” and “time out,” according to the expression used by a character in the final shot: as if the filmmaker-filmer were crossing a landscape studded with peaks of the present from which different temporal horizons are constantly discovered. In his own self-portrait, Jonas Mekas names these peaks “outtakes.” Beneath the syncopated succession of images, the fractured continuity of a consciousness slips in : this paradoxical time is *lived*. There is a time traveler. While he once was happy, as Mekas's title *Outtakes from the Life of a Happy Man* indicates, is he still happy in this tormented landscape?

This is a general rule. With time travel, the viewer is no longer alone with his perception as he faces leaps into the past or future, the accelerations and repetitions specific to cinema. His perception comes second, while that of another person—the condemned man dreaming in his cell in *Histoire d'un crime* (1901); the fictional test subject in *The Pier* (*La Jetée*, 1962) hurled forward and back through the eras; or the real Louise Bourgeois in *Grabigouji* (2011) hurled between her memory lapses—faces the storm. Who is this traveler? What effects does time travel have on him, what does he return with? The traveler gathers the difference of times inside himself. He is the future inserted into the past, the past precipitated into the future—he is not born yet, he is already dead. To what extent does he accept to be a *living contradiction*?

TIME AFTER TIME

Time After Time (1979) has a beautifully clear title. The cautious traveler holds on to it as if to a logical buoy. The heroine of *Der Müde Tod* (1921) lets Death send her to three different eras to save a life in each, but this historical montage has no consequences for her and for the eras, which remain locked off from one another. *The Seasons* (1975) proceeds from a similar fundamental stability, an immutable succession inside of which bodies and things are tossed about by waves, and where everything runs off along the same dizzying slope. For the simplicity of the time after time to test the time traveler, it has to be provided the kind of disorder and “temporal perspective” that the end of *The Planet of the Apes* (1968) layers over its entire narrative by suddenly revealing that it takes place in a catastrophic future. One is equally struck by the sight of the Statue of Liberty rising from a deserted beach as by the absurd rage of Charlton Heston lashing out at the sand and surf as he realizes that he has been abandoned on the shores of time. The statue’s damaged face has the same effect as the youthful appearance of the parents discovered by their children when they are propelled into the past in *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). “*I had forgotten how young you could be,*” Peggy Sue says to her mother; I did not realize the extent to which the world could change, Charlton Heston’s character screams in silence.

Both nostalgia for the past and the future have a dark side which travelers learn to contend with. While all these films seem to share the elementary lesson that time is irreversible, they depict something else: the feeling of an unbridgeable distance within the greatest proximity and the abrupt consciousness of a level of solitude that could lead to madness—even in the hilarious *Back to the Future*. In *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), three time periods alternate in flashback to follow a few characters’ trajectory through the perspective of one member of the group, Noodles. But Noodles is not really a narrator, and the film only pretends to follow the to and fro of his memory in order to project his melancholy everywhere. Whether a child, an adult, or an old man, Noodles is always stirred by the same mix of fascination and bitterness. Like the opium he smokes in one of the film’s initial scenes, the film is the narcotic thanks to which he constantly re-explores his own history and this single feeling, time after time. His time travel is a drug.

THE LABORATORIES

The difference between time travel and memories, foreshadowing, flashbacks, and flash-forwards is found in the way an entire character is taken over, at risk to his body and sanity. It is not simply a question of remembering, imagining, or telling the past or the future, but delving into them to experience the distance between time periods and embody that interval. The traveler provokes the most unlikely clash of eras: any trip is therefore a potential montage, liable to remind cinema of its fundamental functions. Certain timeless love stories (*Brigadoon*, *La Jetée*, *Je t’aime je t’aime*) hold the exhilarating splendor of the most beautiful splicing of images, including in their sadness: two distant time periods are joined in a single shot like two heterogeneous shots are combined to produce a piece of narrative, an idea, or an emotion. But we often don’t know how to define these new narratives, these indistinct ideas and emotions. For instance, what is a prehistoric man doing in 1970s New York (*Altered States*, 1980)? A former concentration camp prisoner on a remote planet (*Slaughterhouse Five*, 1972)? A Buster Keaton-like stranger in a dictatorial future à la *Soylent Green* (*Sleeper*, 1973)? These extravagant situations all serve as laboratories in which assemblies of situations and their moral consequences are tested, as well as their effect on characters and those characters’ ability to remain in the interval.

The lab can be very simple. The montage of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2011) is executed in space itself, through the introduction of a 3D camera in a landmark of Paleolithic art, the film being the result of this extended confrontation, the upholding of the extreme time gap (30,000 years) between the two systems of representation. In *Wavelength* (1967), the cave is replaced by a deserted apartment, the floating of the 3D camera by an inexorable zoom-in, and the confrontation of time periods takes place through abrupt inserts and double exposures. But the feeling is identical: that of a temporal montage woven through the continuous presence of a machine, of a kind of mechanical consciousness that runs the time travel to deliver it to our perception: in the same way that the robot *Curiosity* sends images of Mars, *Wavelength* and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* send images of a crossing of time.

We often see labs in fiction, from the basement of *The Time Machine* to the underground tunnels of *La Jetée*. But do not be mistaken: the real place of experimentation remains the time traveler's body and mind. How, for example, can one bear to relive the terrible pain of a lost love, of anguish and suicide? The protagonist of *Je t'aime je t'aime* lends himself to an experiment in returning to the past that goes wrong, leaving him irrevocably coming and going between different periods of his life, repeatedly stringing together moments of happiness and depression, the blossoming of a love and the evidence of its impossibility—he becomes a tragic traveler. The scientist in *Altered States* regresses in time until he becomes a Homo Erectus, who is merely another stage toward an even earlier form, one that is monstrous and outside of any known history.

LIVING IN THE ANOMALY OF TIME

In its montage lab, time travel puts forward a hypothesis, however grotesque and unintelligible. It is a kind of utopia, yet of another type than those explored by the characters in *The Time Machine* (a future society) and *Brigadoon* (a village in an idealized past). Not some other place situated at one extremity of time, but the unlikely result of a combination of times. For instance, we have two ways of watching Hollis Frampton's *Nostalgia* (1971): one by exclusively focusing on the strangeness of the gap between sound and image, which superimposes the description of a photo to appear later over the one we see now, on screen, placing us in constant expectation of the right image while we use our memory of what was said about it. Or by accepting, in the present, that the heterogeneous combination of the description and the photograph is a temporal junction which has its own validity and produces its own monster. That is the alternative offered to *Groundhog Day*'s protagonist (1993): to desperately wait for a day ahead to return to the arrangement of time or accept the anomaly that perpetually makes him live through the same day, and through this acceptance to live in an interval as if in the only world possible.

Now utopia is no longer an exoticism of history, but a kind of montage. On the path of *The Milky Way* (1969) as in the crowning achievement of *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1988-1998), in the comparison of great historical blocks in *Leïla and the Wolves* (1984) and in *Kommunisten* (2014), the accuracy of facts and historical references, Godard's lyrical didacticism and Buñuel's playful didacticism are inseparable from the invention born of their assemblage of time periods. These films do not offer a world of fantasy, similar to a theater in which historical eras appear side by side through the arbitrary nature of dreams or artistic creation (as seen in *The Testament Of Orpheus*, 1959, and *Céline and Julie go boating*, 1974). It is in their crossing that a utopia comes together. Godard expresses the idea: by focusing on the (hi)stories "that took place," he awakens all those "that could be or that will be." History is spelled "with an-ies"; this plural form is both that of truth and hypotheses.

Heterochrony could be a name for the temporal enclaves where periods mix in a whirlpool, away from the unequivocal current of history. Yet one can remain there: the Abkhazia in *Letters to Max* (2014)*, the Iberian peninsula in *O Velho do Restelo* (2014), and the space station in *Out of the Present* (1996) are real places. But every time period seems available there, as if at an intersection. A 17th century Spanish hero sits on a bench next to an 18th century Portuguese writer (*O Velho do Restelo*); two men exchange letters to evoke a new country with an ancient history, both young and in ruins (*Letters to Max*); a Russian cosmonaut floats around the earth while his country is rocked by tremendous political upheaval (*Out of the Present*). A kind of contemplative torpor takes hold of each of these characters, consisting of a blend of fatigue and elation, combining the weight of history and the lightness of utopia. Time is no longer "out of joint," it is purely and simply "out": Ujica's "out of the present" allows one to understand the deep meaning of Mekas's "outtakes." One must know how to go against the course of history, to sidestep it. Heterochrony is the time traveler's ethic.

Cyril Béghin

Translated by Nicholas Elliott

* *Letters to Max*, by Eric Baudelaire (2014) is selected in the International Competition of Entrevues.

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