

The Art of Keeping Time

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ABSTRACT

Like the protagonist, both the short story and the short film are subject to the demand to arrive ‘on time’. Violently freed from the imperatives of conventional storytelling, this film considers the moment when the laws of time and language fall away in favour of an eternal ‘they is’.

KEY WORDS

Henri Bergson

‘duration’

‘mathematical time’

short film

short story

film memory

In an interview, director David Von Ancken remarked that one of the main issues he anticipated when attempting to adapt Tobias Wolff’s short story into a short film was how to show something that seems ‘inherently not visual’ (Raskin 2009: 29). While this observation could be applied to the problem of film adaptation in general, the challenge is heightened here as Wolff’s third-person narration of what an embittered book critic does and does not remember as a bullet enters his brain resists easy illustration. Arguably however, Von Ancken’s creative response to this extends the source material’s literary focus to a self-reflexive focus on film and film genre. Moreover, in recalling our memories of cinema, ultimately the film eschews its clichés and conventions in favour of an exploration of time, memory and the moving image.

The short film, like the short story, is defined by its duration. This film, even more so than Wolff's story, takes the imperative to 'keep time' as its central theme in both a literal and a figurative sense. Literal, in that it's Anders' (Tom Noonan) strict adherence to what Henri Bergson called 'mathematical time', measured by clocks and calendars, that unwittingly brings him to his untimely death; figurative, insofar as the moment of Anders' death is also the gateway to an experience of memory or 'time-keeping' reminiscent of Bergson's concept of 'duration', the subjective experience of which is in some sense immeasurable.

Mathematical time is understood intellectually and represented symbolically as a succession of discrete units 'artificially decomposed for the greater convenience of customary knowledge' (Bergson, 1911: 243). 'Real' or 'pure' duration, on the other hand, constitutes a qualitative rather than quantitative experience of time, which can only be grasped intuitively. In the subjective realm of duration, perception and memory 'melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines' (Bergson, 1910: 104). As Bergson puts it:

Each moment of life is split up as and when it is posited. Or rather, it consists in this very splitting, for the present moment, always going forward, fleeting limit between immediate past which is now no more and the immediate future which is not yet, would be a mere abstraction were it not the moving mirror which continually reflects perception as a memory (Bergson 1920: 165).

As Donato Totaro suggests, 'Bergson's definition of duration as the present pregnant with the past has no better analogy than the cinema' (2001). Film's relationship to time and memory has often been understood as central to its significance. Walter Benjamin recognised in the photograph that 'tiny spark of contingency' (1999: 510) whereby the aura of the lost moment asserts itself in the present. Similarly, Roland Barthes identified the unique quality of the photograph in

its re-presentation of an irretrievable instant, infused with a melancholic awareness of its '*having-been-there*' (1977: 44). In film however, 'the *having-been-there* gives way before a *being-there* of the thing' (45). As such, the extraordinary nature of the moving image resides in its capacity to not only preserve the moment (as André Bazin puts it, like an insect preserved in amber (1984: 14)), but to capture duration, 'change mummified as it were' (Bazin 1984: 15).

In this sense, cinema creates a new space-time category analagous to Bergson's understanding of past and present as coincident. In rising to the challenge of Wolff's short story, Von Ancken offers the opportunity to reflect on two different kinds of film and/as memory or 'time-keeping': one where the past is 'artificially decomposed' and replayed in the present as a series of discrete scenes, and another, more fleeting and intuitive, where we glimpse the possibility of the moving image as 'moving mirror', speaking to the lived experience of time, where perception is inseparable from memory.

A certain temporal momentum as well as a sense of *déjà vu* is established from the outset. The film begins with a rapid montage set in an unspecified but immediately familiar American city street. This is accompanied by sounds of sirens, traffic, and urgent breathing, which echo countless similar soundtracks (Shots 1-14). Here we are introduced to Anders, hurrying towards some as yet unknown destination. The sound of ticking segues into the second scene, where Anders winds his wristwatch and raises it to his ear to ensure that its relentless tick-tock continues to mark time's passing (Shots 15-17). As has been noted (Lefebvre 2009: 37), the wristwatch, absent from the short story, provides a visual motif for Anders' investment in the idea of a linear time whose logic is irrefutable. We see Anders wind it before he launches into a scathing assessment of his creative writing students' waste

of his time with their ‘contemptibly bad’ work (Shot 18); we see him show it to the security guard at the bank to prove that he’s ‘on time’ (Shots 50 and 52); and, in the final scene, we see Anders wind the same watch as a young boy (Shot 202), just before the revelatory moment that subsequently stands out of time, before it finally runs out.

At a structural level, the conventions of film editing make the fragmentation of time in the film’s first act legible. We understand the shots of Anders in the classroom as flashbacks (Shots 15-32, 34, 36-46, 51-55, 57-61), and shots of Anders’ watch (Shots 16 and 50) provide a timeline in which to situate the various spaces in which the action takes place. Having established the ‘correct’ time and entered the bank, Anders enters another kind of film-time where what happens in the future is determined by movies from the past. In this context, Anders finds himself in the kind of fiction that he loathes. He brings his unsparing critical skills to bear on the scene that unfolds before him like a B-movie, complete with reference to a line from Robert Siodmak’s *The Killers* (1946) and/or Ernest Hemingway’s short story of the same name (1927). ‘Great script, eh?’ he remarks sarcastically (Shot 86), in response to the robbers’ regurgitation of hackneyed dialogue such as ‘you’re all dead meat. Got it?’ (Shot 83) and most unbearable of all for Anders, ‘capiche?’ (Shot 134). The deadpan delivery of this single word, synonymous with numerous gangster movies and parodies thereof, precipitates the helpless laughter that leads directly to his death. Anders dies as he had lived, deriding the derivative and unoriginal use of language.

Released from this replay of movie clichés by what appears to be the end of his own story, it is perhaps unsurprising that what Anders does not remember as the bullet makes its way through his brain is ‘when everything began to remind him of something else’ (Shot 188). The memories that Anders does not revisit unfold like a

showreel of separate scenes, intercut with shots of Anders striking through written passages with a red pen as if rejecting the trite re-presentation of his own past (Shots 154-191). These scenes belong to a temporal register where time can be fragmented and memories play out like reruns of old movies refracted through our conscious mind, to be recollected or rejected at will. Instead, another scene ‘passed before his eyes’ (Shot 162), one that speaks more closely to an experience of Bergsonian ‘*durée réelle*’.

Up until his death, Anders apprehends time primarily through its symbolic representation. As he loses consciousness and enters ‘brain-time’, this gives way to a qualitative experience of time where past and present coexist, inexpressible either by clocks and calendars or the conventional laws of language. According to Bergson, the subjective experience of time is inexpressible because language cannot capture it without arresting its movement or contain it within its common forms without losing its fundamentally individual aspect. Nonetheless, as the self thus refracted and fragmented is more amenable to articulation, consciousness favours it over the fluidity of pure duration (Bergson 1910: 129). In this instant however, mathematical time and grammatical sense fall away and the moment of Anders’ death permits him a glimpse of the form which our conscious state can assume ‘when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former state’ (Bergson 1910: 100).

As noted above, in both the short story and the short film brevity is an imperative. In this sense, ‘they is’ constitutes the perfect short story, distilling the protagonist’s fascination with language into two simple words that together capture the essence of a moment that defies a grammatically correct temporal logic. Furthermore, neither fully past nor fully present, this short phrase summarises

cinema's potential to present time in its 'two aspects: [...] actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other' (Bergson 1920: 165). In short, Von Ancken's adaptation does not simply illustrate its source material's concern with questions of time, perception and memory, but elaborates on this in ways that reflect cinema's capacity to 'keep time', not simply in terms of its ability to restage fragments of history but in terms of its evocative suggestion of a present that is always in some sense already the past.

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