

Title	Stop the Clocks! Time and Narrative in Cinema, by Helen Powell
Authors	Mellamphy, Deborah
Publication date	2013
Original Citation	Mellamphy, D. (2013) Stop the Clocks! Time and Narrative in Cinema, by Helen Powell. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 5. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.5.09
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	https://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue5/HTML/ReviewMellamphy.html - 10.33178/alpha.5.09
Rights	© 2013, The Author(s) - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2025-08-16 18:54:17
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5782

***Stop the Clocks! Time and Narrative in Cinema.* Helen Powell. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012 (183 pages). ISBN: 9781848851757.**

A Review by Deborah Mellamphy, University College Cork

Time and narrative have always been inextricably bound in cinema, but the advent of the digital age has both affected this relationship and prompted investigation into this association. Books including Sean Cubitt's *The Cinema Effect* (2004), Garrett Stewart's *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (2007), *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* by Todd McGowan (2011) and *Violating Time: History, Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* edited by Christina Lee (2012) all explore the representation of time in cinema, concentrating on the disruption of linear time within contemporary postmodern filmmaking. In *Stop the Clocks! Time and Narrative in Cinema*, Helen Powell traces the ways in which filmmakers have treated and articulated time from Marey's chronophotography to contemporary digital filmmaking, locating the films' treatment of time within their own social and technological contexts. She investigates "the dynamics of time in the Western world" (8), discussing the many ways that filmmakers in Europe and the United States have both represented and experimented with the concept of time since cinema's inception. The book discusses how temporality can be understood on both the individual as well as the social levels in order to explore how the audience's understanding of time has changed, and is still changing, due to social and technological developments. Although her main focus is cinema, Powell takes an interdisciplinary approach, using examples from visual and conceptual art, including Joseph Kosuth's *Clock (One and Five)* (1965), Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) and Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010), as well as examples from advertising, television, sport and other forms of popular culture, in order to "explore the usefulness of cinema in understanding the concept of temporality, in relation to both the individual subject and the social milieu in which they are situated" (8).

Powell begins her study by attributing the shortage of time in our contemporary culture of immediacy and simultaneity to digital factors; this "intensification of activity" (116) is due to the increased accessibility of information, instant communication facilitated by social networking and our contemporary penchant for multitasking through the use of multiple screens, all of which make the concept of time an increasingly significant social concern. Powell locates her study of time and narrative in popular culture within this social context and asks, "How can you visually communicate the passing of time?" (28). Her study discusses both films that take time as their central subject matter as well as films that experiment with linear time and causality, establishing the classical Hollywood narrative model as the standard against which all other forms of temporality are measured.

In order to discuss the disruption and subversion of linear time in later chapters, Powell grounds her study by examining films that strive for temporal verisimilitude in Chapter One, "Real Time". The films examined, which include *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948), *High Noon*

(Fred Zinnemann, 1952), *Nick of Time* (John Badham, 1995) and *Phone Booth* (Joel Schumacher, 2002), are characterised by their temporal flow and linearity as all feature a marked absence of temporal interruptions and obvious cuts. In this chapter, she refers to the “real time” of early cinema, linking the early attempts by Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge to capture and document reality with our ongoing preoccupation and fascination with time (or lack of it). Within this first chapter, Powell establishes her theoretical framework as Bergsonian, an approach that she maintains throughout, arguing that time is a highly subjective experience that is a constantly changing continuum of past, present and future. This approach enables Powell to argue that “real time”, as experienced by onscreen characters and as expressed through narrative, is fundamentally flawed, as subjective time cannot be represented empirically onscreen. Powell demonstrates that even when “real” uncut time is represented onscreen in contemporary cinema, it remains highly edited and mediated, demonstrating the manipulation that is inherent in the medium and which necessitated the establishment and adoption of the classical Hollywood system.

Chapter Two is titled “Future Time”; in this chapter Powell begins her examination of temporal disruption, referencing Georges Méliès’s experimentations with early editing techniques, as he recognised the vast possibilities that temporal manipulation possessed for the moving image. With the development of narrative in Méliès’s films came the manipulation of time and Powell links these early films with Gilles Deleuze’s concepts. She argues that the “time-image” destabilises our traditional understanding of how time is represented onscreen and she discusses the uncertainty that became associated with the crystal image of time in the post–First World War period. In this chapter Powell examines the concept of time travel in cinema, which she argues is the most popular method of temporal manipulation, discussing *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962) and its remake *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995). She argues that the biggest difference between the two films is the physical time travel that is achieved in Gilliam’s film and is not present in Marker’s film, thus demonstrating that cinema can visually represent the manipulation of time through both physical time travel or as a subjective experience through flashbacks, flash forwards or “parallel worlds” scenarios. Powell also discusses the time-image of *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), ascertaining that time in this film is a subjective concept linked with post-9/11 fragmentation and anxiety. The metanarrative of time as something constant is played with in *Donnie Darko* as the film features various images of calendrical time, which are then subverted and made malleable during the film’s ending through the use of the time loop, which causes events to happen more than once, with different outcomes.

Chapter Three, “Dreaming Time”, discusses how the work of the Surrealists, in particular that of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, sets out to disturb our conceptual framework through their appropriation and interpretation of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), as dream time and logic determine the temporality, editing and mise en scène of the films. Powell discusses the manipulation of time, particularly the destabilisation of temporal indicators in intertitles in *Un Chien Andalou* (Buñuel, 1929) and *L’Age d’Or* (Buñuel, 1930), linking these films with David Lynch’s oeuvre. Lynch’s defamiliarisation draws on surrealism as he incorporates the dream into his work and Powell refers to *Eraserhead* (1977), *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Lost Highway* (1997) as they are all governed by dream logic, therefore enabling Lynch to destabilise space and time in order to frustrate contemporary audience expectations.

Chapter Four, “Consuming Time”, deals with “significant temporal markers” (87) in the form of endings, both apocalyptic and individual, and how these are represented onscreen,

as well as images of immortality, specifically angels and vampires. Powell links the recurring motifs of the angel and vampire with periods of temporal disjunction, arguing that the angel has a strong presence onscreen and appears as a reassuring icon “at moments of historical uncertainty and anxiety” (103). Such a moment was experienced in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s due to the approach of the millennium, and was recognisable in films including *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, Wim Wenders, 1987), *A Life Less Ordinary* (Danny Boyle, 1997) and *City of Angels* (Brad Silberling, 1998). Powell argues that “[i]f angels represent a controlling influence at times of temporal discord then the vampire functions as master of time itself” (103). Since the millennium and in the post-9/11 era, a further period of temporal disjunction, the vampire has grown in popularity as an image of perpetual youth and an image frozen in time due to contemporary culture’s increasing awareness, and fear, of aging and our own mortality. The author argues that time also becomes a central part of the vampire narrative in films including Neil Jordan’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), as the figures become subject to ennui, seeking new ways to spend their immortal time, again transforming time into a highly subjective experience.

Powell also discusses the “film blanc”, specifically in relation to *A Matter of Life and Death* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1946), in which the narrative extends across two worlds, the mortal and the spiritual, both of which are depicted as being equally authentic. Powell argues that “the fundamental difference between mortal and immortal worlds centres upon a specific relationship with time” (100), as the mortal world is bound by linear time in a way that the immortal is not. In this film, the linear narrative and mortal world is persistently fractured by a figure from heaven, who pauses time and meets with the main protagonist in the fourth dimension, essentially “out of time”. Time in the afterlife is also portrayed as stretching on in a manner very different to clock time in Peter Jackson’s *The Lovely Bones* (2009), as the protagonist again suffers from ennui and speculates how she is going to occupy her time in the immortal afterlife.

In Chapter Five, “Fractured Time”, Powell discusses the treatment of time and narrative in the puzzle film. Much has been written about this subgenre in the past number of years as this category involves “new forms of spectator engagement” (117), enacting narrative turns and playing with temporality and audience expectations, as chance and coincidence play a much bigger part and weaker causal chains lead to less resolution. Powell argues that the “influence of television on cinema is significant as we have been conditioned to a viewing experience punctuated by advertising and the mobilisation of the remote control” (118). She refers to the work of Allan Cameron, who argues that such narratives are linked with the new digital age as they reflect a “database approach to storytelling” (118), involving a subversion of classical Hollywood narration. Powell also employs the work of Paul Ricœur, who argues that “emplotment” (122), the gap between our experiential time and “movie” time, is being eroded and that alternative, nonlinear strategies of time are becoming more dominant within mainstream cinema, due to the popularity of postmodernist techniques within cinema during the 1990s. Powell comments on Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and the collapse of the grand narrative, linking this argument with the fragmentation and “petit narratives” of *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), thus acknowledging and reflecting that events occur simultaneously in the everyday and that not everything is neatly resolved. In addition, she discusses cinema as a “waste of time” (129) as seen in *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), which foregrounds narrative construction though the use of the narrator, thus challenging the authority of the Hollywood classical system and the suspension of disbelief through its highly self-conscious narrative and narration. Powell also discusses the ambiguous narrative and temporality of *Last Year in Marienbad* (*L’année dernière à*

Marienbad, Alain Resnais, 1961), which she observes is reminiscent of the game narrative, and she questions the classification of the modern versus the postmodern in cinema, arguing that this distinction cannot be easily determined (127). The author also questions modern versus postmodern temporality and investigates open narratives and the interweaving of multiple diegeses in films including *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004), as such films are an attempt to capture the complexity of everyday contemporary life; this is also achieved through the use of vignettes in cinema, as seen in *Night on Earth* (Jim Jarmusch, 1991) and *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, 1993), again capturing the complexity of the everyday.

In the Conclusion, “Time in the Digital Age”, the most significant section of the book, Powell returns to her discussion of digital culture initiated in her Introduction, discussing it here from three perspectives: as a technical phenomenon, in relation to how culture is consumed in the digital age, and in relation to how the content of films is affected by these technological changes. She argues that we have more control over time in the digital age but that the clock has become less relevant, referring to Robert Hasson’s argument that “cyber” or “network time” differs from “real time” as online communication is not limited by temporal barriers. She argues that analogue time is linear and is “underpinned with a sense of rationality, of cause and effect” (151), whereas digital time “is characterised by rupture and fragmentation; by nonlinear models of temporal flow; of multiple renderings and genuflections of temporal experience” (151). Powell also discusses the role of Web 2.0 in the acceleration of daily life, as it “encourages collaboration and reciprocal communication” (150). In her examination of the representation of digital culture in cinema, Powell refers to Mike Figgis’ much-discussed *Timecode* (2000), observing that “As a viewer, it takes a few minutes to ‘learn’ to read this film appropriately” (161) as it is often the choice of the audience which quadrant they pay most attention to. Powell argues that this multiplicity of screens reflects our contemporary need to multitask and the ubiquity of multiple screens in work, leisure, communication and everything in between.

Due to the book’s accessibility, it serves well as an introduction to the various ways that temporal considerations affect narrative and subjectivity within cinema and other mainstream media. The sheer abundance of films referenced throughout means that the analysis generally remains brief, providing an overview of the films discussed rather than an in-depth examination, which adds to its interdisciplinary appeal. This results in a lack of novel approaches if the book is read in an exclusively scholarly manner, yet Powell successfully draws our attention to the need for ongoing academic consideration of how new media is affecting the treatment of time in cinema.

Works Cited

Altman, Robert, dir. *Short Cuts*. Fine Line Features, 1993. Film.

Badham, John, dir. *Nick of Time*. Paramount, 1995. Film.

Boyle, Danny, dir. *A Life Less Ordinary*. Channel Four Films, 1997. Film.

Buñuel, Luis, dir. *L’Age d’Or*. 1930. BFI, 2004. DVD.

---, dir. *Un Chien Andalou*. 1929. BFI, 2004. DVD.

- Cameron, Allan. *Modular Narratives in Contemporary Cinema*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- Cubitt, Sean. *The Cinema Effect*. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2004. Print.
- Figgis, Mike, dir. *Timecode*. Screen Gems, 2000. Film.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams: The Penguin Freud Library*. Eds. James Strachey, Alan Tyson and Angela Richards. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.
- Gilliam, Terry, dir. *Twelve Monkeys*. Universal, 1995. Film.
- Gordon, Douglas. *24 Hour Psycho*. 1993. Installation.
- Haggis, Paul, dir. *Crash*. Lions Gate Films, 2004. Film.
- Hassan, Robert. "Network Time". *24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society*. Eds. Robert Hassan and Ronald E. Purser. Stanford: Stanford Business Books, 2007. 37–61. Print.
- Hitchcock, Alfred, dir. *Rope*. Warner Brothers, 1948. Film.
- Jackson, Peter, dir. *The Lovely Bones*. DreamWorks SKG, 2009. Film.
- Jarmusch, Jim, dir. *Night on Earth*. JVC Entertainment Networks, 1991. Film.
- Jordan, Neil, dir. *Interview with the Vampire (Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles)*. Geffen Pictures, 1994. DVD.
- Kelly, Richard, dir. *Donnie Darko*. Pandora, 2001. Film.
- Kosuth, Joseph. *Clock (One and Five)*. 1965. Installation.
- Lee, Christina, ed. *Violating Time: History, Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*. New York: Continuum, 2012. Print.
- Lynch, David, dir. *Blue Velvet*. DEG, 1986. Film.
- , dir. *Eraserhead*. AFI, 1977. Film.
- , dir. *Lost Highway*. October Films, 1997. Film.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994. Print.
- Marclay, Christian. *The Clock*. 2010. Installation.
- Marker, Chris, dir. *La Jetée*. Argos, 1962. Film.

- McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2011. Print.
- Powell, Michael and Emeric Pressburger, dir. *A Matter of Life and Death*. The Archers, 1946. Film.
- Resnais, Alain, dir. *Last Year in Marienbad* [*L'année dernière à Marienbad*]. Cocinor, 1961. Film.
- Ricœur, Paul. *Time and Narrative: Volume I*. Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Print.
- Schumacher, Joel, dir. *Phone Booth*. Fox, 2002. Film.
- Silberling, Brad, dir. *City of Angels*. Warner Brothers, 1998. Film.
- Singer, Bryan, dir. *The Usual Suspects*. Polygram, 1995. Film.
- Stewart, Garrett. *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Print.
- Tarantino, Quentin, dir. *Pulp Fiction*. Miramax, 1994. Film.
- Wenders, Wim, dir. *Wings of Desire* [*Der Himmel über Berlin*]. Road Movies Filmproduktion, 1987. Film.
- Zinnemann, Fred, dir. *High Noon*. Stanley Kramer Productions, 1952. Film.

Suggested Citation

Mellamphy, Deborah. "Stop the Clocks! Time and Narrative in Cinema by Helen Powell". Book review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 5 (Summer 2013). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

Deborah Mellamphy completed her PhD at University College Cork in 2010, with a thesis titled *Hollyweird: Gender Transgression in the Collaborations of Tim Burton and Johnny Depp*. She teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Film Studies at UCC and has published articles in *Widescreen* and *Film and Film Culture* as well as a book chapter in *Dexter and Philosophy*, with forthcoming publications on the links between video games and cinema, the cultural study of video games around the world, *Mamma Mia!*, *Boardwalk Empire* and Tim Burton. Her research interests include stardom and performance, television studies, new media and video game studies.