

*DOING TIME: TEMPORALITY, HERMENEUTICS,
AND CONTEMPORARY CINEMA*

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Temporality has been a privileged topic in cinema studies ever since Deleuze identified modern cinema with explorations of the time-image. In different ways, Bernard Stiegler, Mary Ann Doane, and Phil Rosen have pushed the philosophical and historical linkage of modernity and cinematic time.¹ Where Stiegler has argued that the modern conception of consciousness is essentially cinematographic, Doane and Rosen have inquired into cinema's role since the nineteenth century in shaping, or containing, the experience of temporal and historical flow. Against these instances of recent scholarship on the topic, Lee Carruthers's book, *Doing Time*, is both less ambitious and also perhaps more courageous in what it takes on. While she would accept the broad claim that cinema has played a privileged role in shaping the modern experience of time, Carruthers is not working out another large claim for the medium either historically or philosophically. Instead, she looks at how particular films formally and narratively attend to cinema's potential for mediating our temporal experience. The four texts that receive a chapter each are *The Limey* (1999), *5x2* (2004), *Ni na bian ji dian* (*What Time Is It There?*, 2001), and *The Tree of Life* (2011). In taking a film analytical approach to investigating the purchase of claims on behalf of time, Carruthers seeks to counter the depreciation of interpretive practice in disciplinary film studies.

Carruthers proceeds from a particular understanding of Heidegger's use of the word *Zeitlichkeit*, for whose translation she prefers "timeliness" over the more commonly used "temporality." Timeliness designates "a dynamic structuring of past, present, and future" (16). It involves human subjectivity, including spectatorial subjectivity, in an active and non-linear engagement with the different dimensions of time. Such a conception of the work of time is in line not only with Heidegger's work but also with other long-standing inquiries into alternatives to linear conceptions of time and history in modernity. Therefore, the case studies in the book, in different ways, all touch upon the theme of

temporal disjunction and realignment. To this thematic concern, Carruthers joins the work of phenomenologically oriented film and critical theory of roughly the past two decades (for example, the work of Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks) that foregrounds the sensorial dimension of film experience. This allows her to develop an interpretive methodology that takes into account the temporal unfolding that constitutes spectatorial relations to the films under consideration. Therefore, each film analysis starts with an examination of the opening scene before moving on to later ones. Nevertheless, this unfolding itself is guided not by an uninterrupted linearity — beginning, *then* middle, and *then* end — but by rhythmic structures that can be detected in a film's formal work, and which, for example, can cause chronologically distinct sequences to exist together in some way, unsettling and reorienting each other.

The films Carruthers chooses all explicitly violate the expectations of a conventional, clock-time framework. *The Limey* is a revenge drama that uses flashbacks, flash-forwards, and ellipses to offset the otherwise goal-driven narrative. *5x2* deploys reverse chronology to trace backwards a couple's journey from courtship to divorce. *Ni na bian ji dian* works with the modalities of the recently baptized "slow cinema" to chart the experience of characters emotionally stuck in time. *The Tree of Life* uses dynamic montage to explore the relationship between cosmic time and personal time. Carruthers looks closely at how each film uncovers the timeliness of experience — of both the characters in the film and of the spectator in front of it. The curious thing is that the dynamism of filmic temporality in each instance serves to reinforce the slipperiness of temporality. The quest for meaning always ends in the realization that, while meaning exists only in time, the experience of timeliness always puts the stability of meaning just out of reach. In *5x2*, for example, the reverse chronology of a marriage's breakdown, traced in five episodes, does not uncover a gradual deterioration that can be re-placed on an inverted trajectory of causal narration; rather, Carruthers highlights details in the film that suggest a repetitive pattern in the relationship from the very beginning and in each episode. And yet she goes on to argue, "[I]t's hard to say that *5x2* really resolves these premises, or indeed that this kind of clarification has ever been the film's project" (83).

The analysis offered of *The Limey* most clearly illustrates the author's desire to approach meaning only to go past it. The film's defamiliarizing techniques do little to distract the viewer too long from the goal-oriented narrative or from the progressive clarification of character motivation. Though these techniques are seemingly more disorienting than

those identified by Bordwell as constituting “intensified continuity,” they ultimately bear out his point that the seeming violation of continuity (and linearity in this instance) only serves to recuperate it better. While conceding this point, Carruthers identifies some fuzzy logic in the narrative and in shot details to push home the point that the film’s meaning cannot be completely recuperated. Following this analysis of *The Limey*, it is not surprising that she makes more persuasive cases for temporal elusiveness in Tsai’s and Malick’s films.

We can now look briefly at the challenge the book sets itself of reviving a hermeneutic practice in the academic study of film. While scholars such as Dudley Andrew, D. N. Rodowick, and Daniel Morgan have argued for the centrality of hermeneutics to disciplinary practice, the dilemmas involved in countering its current marginality are illustrated by Rodowick’s own recent work. His persuasive two-volume argument for a hermeneutics-driven humanistic practice in film studies has precious little space for engagement with particular films.² One of the things this suggests is that too much concern with the “why” of doing something may serve to deflect the difficulty of the “how.” Therefore, *Doing Time*, by looking closely at films themselves, goes further than many advocates of a hermeneutic practice in bringing out one or two challenges specific to our times in taking up film interpretation. The choice of “time,” especially conceived along the lines described above, as a topic with which to make a case for interpretation is a sign of this challenge.

Deleuze’s theorization of the time-image as loosening the sensory-motor schema may be seen as one factor among others in the depreciation of narrative and of hermeneutic practice in general (even if his own work cared enough about films to run a lifetime’s programming at the Parisian ciné-clubs through his conceptual machine). The valorization of temporalities that make room for the ambiguous, the indeterminate, and the inarticulable has played its part in undercutting claims to meaning. Though Carruthers consciously brackets Deleuze’s work in setting up her theoretical concerns, it cannot be denied that at a fundamental level her theorization of temporality is not incompatible with his. Thus, by seeking to rehabilitate our engagement with meaning and narrative through one of the channels of their erosion, this book displays the courage mentioned at the outset. However, while one can see the need to acknowledge the importance of the conceptual push against complacent interpretive practices, *Doing Time* finally ends up conceding too much to the discourse of the indeterminate. Thus, for example, *5x2* teaches us that “interpretati-

on is a kind of presumption" (64). More generally, "[t]he thought occurs that filmic time is most instructive as it gets away from us, exposing the limits of academic language and approved discourse" (9). The book is very aware of the paradox of always arriving at the meaning that meaning is slippery. The lesson it offers is that such slipperiness be understood as a kind of ambiguity that is not just a choice among multiple possibilities, but an accumulation of simultaneous meanings (23). This requires a careful mapping of a film's possibilities, rather than an *a priori*, abstract assertion of ambiguity, even if some of these possibilities may be logically incompatible. This is an ingenious but ultimately a tepid resolution to the problem of interpretation: one may interpret only on condition that meaning constantly undermine itself. And a certain understanding of time is indeed a well-suited theme for the task.

It is legitimate to wonder that at a time when the lessons of ambiguity are too easily learned in academic discourse, but also when it has once again become possible to assert dogmatic and populist certainties in the larger public sphere, might it not now be necessary to commit oneself to rigorous argumentation that identifies and works through doubt to arrive at something more philosophically and historically determinate. Such determinateness would invite contestation from the outside as opposed to a too consciously open discourse that anticipates, internalizes, and ultimately defuses the force of contestation. *Doing Time* indeed has several moments of determinate insight as, for example, the reading of the closing image of *5x2* as modeled on the most hackneyed conceptions of romance without being glibly ironic; or the claim that *Tree of Life* "advances[s] the ontological claim that the possibility of loss precedes all having" (131). But, given the overarching argument, such insights accumulate without being synthesized.

Despite the reservations expressed here, as suggested earlier, *Doing Time* genuinely advances the debate on the status of hermeneutics in film studies. By pushing the demands of interpretation against the theoretical insights of recent film theory that have taken some edge off those demands, and by doing so not only theoretically but through example, the book brings to a head some of the most intractable issues involved in reviving a hermeneutic practice.

1. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001).

2. D. N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).