

Temporal Functions besides Timelines

Chuk Moran, 10.29.08

Time travel does a few things. It shows us strange places. It permits characters to negotiate their position in times to which they do not belong. It is always a power whose scope and precision is not yet known. It suggests a nature to time that might be understood by a temporal regime, a cosmological organization to all forces, instances, effects, and functions that are temporal. It allows combinations of actions generally abandoned as impossible. It is confusing.

Although our caricature of Modernity suggests that explanation should serve as a tool for elucidation of principles by which objects might become transparent and subject to projects of reason, there are other functions of explanation. If the audience of time travel movies understood the theological or technoscientific context out of which time travel becomes possible, which some do, it might be enough to understand explanations of time as informative. But, more often than not, those watching the movie barely understand the account given of how time travel is possible, though we all get *something* from the explanation.

Well if you had any questions how time travel works, that should have answered them. Explanation makes answers for curiosity to digest, territorializes the discussion of time travel, makes it thinkable in one way that forgets others. Yet wouldn't the story be silly if there was never an excuse at all for all that jumping between times?

I want to suggest that these moments of explanation that answer the metaphysical question "what is time?" with strong chronopolitical claims, are not very central. They are moments alongside many others, and not the deep or essential keys to understanding time travel. Rather, they constructively misunderstand the temporal functions with which the rest of the film occupies us.

What time travel stories have to do, and these expert lectures are one example of, is account for time. And this accounting does not give us a way of knowing time so much as a way of not knowing it. A way to get some kind of vocabulary for all the rich complications by which time can be work, waiting, a feeling, memory, objects, or the state of the world.

Temporal functions, and not just the temporal regime, are the work of the plot device of time travel. Temporal functions are how time functions, always with other things (time that animates, or the animation of time), always particular (though they occur forms that

repeat), always transformative (in the sense of a converting force), and always mixed.

Despite the single cosmology by which experts might manage all of time in a geometry of power across times, there remain capillary temporalities. And while some fans of time travel look for deep explanations, yearning for a unified and neutral time, innocent of social or cultural particularity, we all follow the temporal functions by which time travel is defined. And these particular temporal effects are what is so interesting in these stories. Seeing the main character when younger, alternative history, the setting and costumes of period pieces, architectural contrasts, impossible iteration and opportunities, memories a thousand years old.

These temporalities are not theorized by experts talking about the fourth dimension and vessels approaching the speed of light, or the fabric of the time-space continuum and the event horizon of blackholes. These temporalities subsist in particular actions, relations, or processes and the temporality they make, and which the audience interpretively coauthors. Many of these temporalities have been treated as “merely psychological,” and almost always too mundane for the voice of science to explain, but they are thought through in the heterotopias which time travel opens up. Other spaces, and mobilities between them.

Time travel matters because it is between media. It's not just within movies, anymore than it subsists solely in TV, comic books, video games, philosophy, any one genre, or in our heads. Time travel can appear in an episode of almost any TV series without introducing or explaining the basic concepts to the audience, and we lament that this has happened on more shows than it perhaps should. Even stories that make very clear they are not about time travel, such as the 1994 blockbuster movie *Stargate*, are often interpreted as if they were about time travel. (For Latin American audiences, the gate between two planets across the universe is called la Puerta del tiempo.)

Time travel is a scenario for imagination, it takes up common sense ideas of time, converses with them, and challenges our thinking of time. Insofar as an understanding can be a representation, and I think it can, time travel represents time and prepares ways of not knowing this topic with which we deal constantly but whose omnipresence we almost never discuss openly.

When we understand what is up to date or futuristic, what is lagging behind and what is waiting for things to get started, when we wonder whether it is time to begin or whether we will be able to take back any of our mistakes, we are working with understandings of time, common sense, drawing on all our cunning and wisdom.

Global warming, an effect of decades of buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, has many temporal forms. It is understood as a **threat**, which requires translating it into the timeframe of approaching scenarios for generalized risks. It is a clock to be turned back, as when we discuss returning to 1990 levels of carbon dioxide. It is a glacial time, to be discussed relative to ice ages. Its effects vary seasonally and there is some discussion how temperature might vary differently at night than during the day. Different clocks, different schedules, different mechanisms, different temporal functions. Different ways that temporality functions.

In Bill Morison's *Decasia: The State of Decay*, damaged stock footage, run at varying speeds, performs various temporalities, layered in each scene. Children file past a nun who watches them, two men restrain themselves from wading into the river for something they've lost, camels cross the desert horizon, a whirling dervish spins and spins. At the same time, the luminosity flickers, dirt and specks jump, lines and strange patterns occupy the screen, forms bleed into others, figures melt or blur as if in motion.

Temporal functions are multifarious and layered, are omnipresent and heterogeneous mixtures of temporalities, of the becoming of time. There is a temporality in perceiving them, in their enactment, in their situation, durations in their parts, anticipation and iteration in what

comes and goes from their scene, and temporalities which the function departs from, arrives at, and moves through. These functions can regiment and order, by these functions characters evidence their location in periods, "not where are we, but when". A sarcastic example from Family Guy.

Time travel combines temporal functions whose prohibition by ordinary temporal regimes incites the desire for their transgression: what if a US aircraft carrier were in position to prevent the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

That time of preparation against attack that seems never to have existed to American recollection must be simulated compellingly with a ship from the future to prevent a tragedy of the past, though this may alter that future in ways those on the ship can't imagine.

Discipline, resolution of contradictions, enforcement of programs, government. A temporal regime, which is itself a way of dealing with a wily time that remains unknowable, does not enforce itself. Though its relation to temporal functions recalls governmentality, it shares little history with the European state-system.

Temporal regimes may require their own temporal functions. What happens to the carrier if it delays or prevents US entrance into World War 2? What concretely happens if it would not longer have been built? Maybe you remember how this works in *Back to the Future*,

where Marty fades away as the man who should become his father fails to dance with the woman he needs to have become his mother. Here is the funnier function used in the 1994 movie *Timecop*. The older senator gets a scar when Jean Claude van Damme kicks the senator's younger self.

Time draws a scar. There are other problematics like this in most stories. Is it possible to really **return** to the time from which you left, how could you meet your former self if you don't remember it already, are other futures available to a given past, what happens when you violate the precious time-space continuum?

The timeline is not a plan from outer space, but a broker between contradictory functions which have all been put together in one story. They need each other to be meaningful. This sort of crisis came to a head a few times in the DC Comics whose storylines had come to require and mutually exclude one another. Soon the timelines needed to be set straight, and all this was done in the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series, which reduced all contradicting stories to a single timeline, through a confrontation between super powerful rivals made of matter and anti-matter. Of course the crisis was reached again, only 10 years later, and the *Infinite Crisis* series handled that with characters leftover from the earlier *Crisis* series. This re-creation of diegetic reality to correct plot inconsistencies by the formation of a new

temporal regime is itself a kind of temporal function: making a new line of time. Not just rewriting the history books, but altering the enactment of the past.

Comic books have to be especially careful with time because they are not just, like a movie, novel or television serial, trying to make **one** complicated but consistent story to underlie the plot and saturate each moment with meaning. There are **many** long-running series for DC Comics, whose properties include Batman, Superman, and Green Lantern, and all these stories and worlds, with attendant sensitive fans, must be considered.

At the opposite extreme, single player video games can run amok with time. It's quite normal to let the player save the state of their game and return to it, either later that week or the moment the shit hits the fan. In the single player experience, it doesn't cause problems to accelerate time, pause, or load old games.

For *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, the undo buffer so common in applications other than games, becomes a feature of play. The player can hit a button to rewind time, effectively undoing as many seconds of action as they hold the button down for, in order to choose their moves over again.

In the film *Run Lola Run*, people act differently each time Lola runs, but in the more experimental *Primer* and very mainstream *Groundhog Day*, it's possible to know exactly what people will do and at what time, though this knowledge can be hard to translate into power. This difference between prescribed and contingent action plays with various temporal functions: actions take the time of opportunity to express psychological depth; a continuous causal timeline determines the universe; provisions for audience interaction variedly control the passing of time; lines of flight extend from the moment of playback.

In a computer game the **player** has seen what results from their original choice of actions, in film the characters must choose. And while technology does not strictly determine use, media have tendencies, resources, and constraints. Alexander Galloway understands the specificity of video games through the term active media, "whose very materiality moves and restructures itself" (3). Although other media may also be understood in the activity of their storage state, the material movement of games is a defining feeling in the medium, sometimes so familiar that it's often boring.

Prince of Persia: Sands of Time has been criticized for its repetitive and simplistic gameplay, beyond the nifty rewind button, it's nothing out of the ordinary. This is why I like this example. It's a very typical game and its extremely loose temporal regime could describe

countless games. The main character, who is the Prince, explains at the beginning of the game, which is also the end of the storyline, that most say time is like a river that flows swift and sure in one direction, but he has seen the face of time and can tell you that they are wrong. Time is like an ocean in a storm.

To summarize, temporal regimes are molar representations of the order of time. These representations do matter, but provide limited strategies of reading temporality. They do not function to elucidate time, but to manage what is unknowable or unthinkable about time, they respect and deal with alien temporalities. To understand time as a force and take seriously its very different forms I have used the term temporal functions, which are the particular ways that time functions. Temporal functions can, at times, occasion a regimentation of temporality to mediate between contradictions. Yet often they do not. Usually they go about their business without any explicit subsumption to a temporal regime.

The pleasures and interests of time travel are not exclusive or specific to time machines, science fiction, or travelers who visit the future or past. *Millennium Actress*, a movie of many times without any mechanical technology to displace characters through the ages, shows the stories of an aging actress who cannot tell her movies apart from

her memories. She travels between these times which are memories which are cinematic moments. She chases after basically the same man. The interviewer who solicits her recollections appears as her companion in the different eras of Japanese history recreated in Japanese films shot since the 1940s. The cameraman, confused and incredulous as much about the old movies as the memories, chases the pair, trying to get it all on tape. I've edited together two chase sequences to better illustrate the film's montage of history remediated by cinema.

Clichés of history do not here function as a historical past for the present and its future, they are different engagements with temporalities, producing effects that are interesting, fun, philosophical, complicated, and temporally rich. And all this activity happens not beneath or within, but beside the supposed orderliness of a socially particular and universalizing timeline.

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