

Representations of Time

Short Film/s

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Project III
Fiction film/s on
Representations of Time
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Guide: Prof. Raja Mohanty

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Since, in the following pages I propose to problematize the ideas of temporality, it would hardly be earnest on my part to subscribe to ideas of gratitude since it involves a precedent and a subsequent, but perhaps simultaneity itself is the strongest acknowledgement of all that there is, eliminating the need to pin-point particulars. With this, as I will again suggest in what follows, the idea of particulars does not necessarily lose meaning but can be made to gain a new dimension altogether - that of self-conscious erasure. It is with this awareness that the author would like to acknowledge the following for various reasons:

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I am like those children who take a clock apart in order
to find out what time is.

– *Roland Barthes*

Representations of Time

Pythagoras, when he was asked what time was, answered that it was the soul of this world. (*Plutarch*)

Time is the moving image of eternity. (*Plato*)

Time is a sort of river of passing events, and strong is its current; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by and another takes its place, and this too will be swept away. (*Meditations, Marcus Aurelius*)

Time travels in divers paces with divers persons. I'll tell you who Time ambles withal, who Time trots withal, who Time gallops withal, and who he stands still withal. (*As You Like It, William Shakespeare*)

Time is an avijjamana-pannatti, which means that it is a conceptual construct with no corresponding objective reality, a concept based on the continuous elemental flow. (*The Dhammasangani, Abhidhamma Pitaka*)

The Beginnings, the Middles and the Ends

The fiction of Time is closely related to the Time of fiction. Narratives that fictionalize time are representations of the fiction of temporality themselves. Perhaps as an extension of this, narratives and temporality are interchangeable and exist as self reflexive concepts, one defining the other which in turn defines it back. In the absence of the fictionalizing faculty, which is difficult to imagine, imagining the concept of time would be doubly difficult, if not impossible altogether .

It is with this contention that an inquiry into the ideas of representations of time, assumes the form of that particularly forceful conventionality of beginning, middle and end. It can be said that all narratives in this mode clearly present a representation of time. What differentiates that representation from the one I propose, is the idea of multiplicity and indeterminacy of these concepts. That is to say that instead of a beginning there are possibilities of several -if not innumerable - beginnings and instead of the finality of an end, endings as potentialities. It remains to be examined what exactly the outcome of such a substitution achieves in terms of representation, but to begin with the beginnings, it is undoubtedly a more diffuse and flexible pool of possibilities (and one that perhaps lends itself to a wider margin of error on that account).

In terms of cinematic representation, I would like to put forward the idea of time as a palimpsest-like entirety, where the idea of re-viewing can be problematized -the consolation of film in having captured an immutable piece of time is falsified- one cannot return to the same set of events, the same moments in time that were once on the screen. The experience is erased and written over with other experiences, without obliterating the previous ones entirely.

It is difficult to say how faithful a representation/s these ideas can provide in the absence of the very basis of determinacy, but then it is equally improbable to talk in terms of precision in a representation or an image of mutability.

In any case, the most faithful of representations can only (if not necessarily) be a fiction.

Beginnings

In the beginning was Brahman. (*Rig Veda*)

In the beginning was the Tao. (*Tao Te Ching, Lao-Tzu*)

In the beginning was the Word. (*John 1:1, The Bible*)

In the beginning was Self alone, in the shape of a person.
(*The Upanishads*)

In the beginning was the deed. (*Faust, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*)

In the beginning was the three-pointed star. (*In the Beginning, Dylan Thomas*)

In the beginning was information. (*Werner Gitt*)

Origins

The project that I have undertaken deals with two ideas: that of Time, and that of representation/s of it. The very enormity of these concepts humbles the enquiry in such a way as to foreground the limits of one's knowledge and the ambit of one's being. Instead of taking this awareness as a pretext to explain the shortcomings of the work, one of the ways to a more meaningful approach, I think, would be to explore the notion of these boundaries themselves : in this case, the concept of time, our understanding and experience of it and the re-evaluation of these ideas and experiences.

It is hardly surprising that an enquiry into the concepts of time should revolve around the ideas of beginnings, middles and ends. As a framework within which most of our understanding of temporality is structured, these are the most substantial elements of a representation of time. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes talks about the idea of how, to begin with, photography photographed the notable, but that soon it made whatever it photographs, notable for itself. Similarly, if one were to first make the acquaintance of time, the ideas of beginnings, middles and ends are the notable and perhaps indispensable elements, but once this familiarity is developed, whatever is seen in time, can be noticed for its significance independently from the framework of these initial impressions.

In cinema, for instance, the idea of significant and causal action has been the prime fixation of the camera, so much that any sequence that does not immediately make a causal or other notable link with what precedes and follows it, is viewed with a certain impatience. The desire to 'get back' to the events of the main narrative is a case in point : as if to give any meaning to the apparent detours, a main line of notable sequence is a prerequisite.

What this reveals is a kind of ordering, in spatial terms even, of the events or components of a cinematic ensemble to confirm to a preexistent mental format of time: mostly linear, but sometimes a disarranged form that, if sorted out, reassures linearity despite the jumbling. The prospect of misdirecting time, sending it out in amalgamations it has never chanced upon, or perhaps has been avoiding purposefully, is a possibility open to, and almost inherent to, the medium of cinema.

The possibility of disrupting this neat geometry of a temporal structure is something that I would like to consider in conceiving of the ideas of an assemblage. Amalgamations as a possible form of the cinematic narrative have been out of the geometry of time, in fact many of them will require a not so attractive *distortion* of time and perhaps it is the sense of symmetry that has prevented mutilations of that nature. Time has usually preserved an innate sense of presentability, in order to be universally accountable: an idea that is more a matter of a continuing convention than anything else.

As long as a narrative is understood to be a single fixed arrangement of representations, the idea of linearity will be the underlying conception of time and it will only help reassert the representations already familiar to us. For a representation that tries to defy the linearity of a structural formulation of time and presents rather an experiential whole, the idea that suggests itself is not to fix a moment, but flux it in time.

In other words, the beginning dissolves into an amorphous whole, though it still remains a beginning of a kind as it is difficult to imagine a different phenomenon of perception than that of finding edges in temporal events. That, could well be the ambit of perception, in that for instance, a book or a piece of cinematic narrative, no matter where it begins, in the middle or at the end in its temporal structure, still retains a physical beginning, middle and end. The first and last page in a book, the first scene and the end credits in cinema, constitute a physical temporality that is the characteristic of the medium and our perception of it. Even if these were to be somehow dissolved, say by a book that can be shuffled every time it is read or a film that begins at a different point in time of its narrative (what is more popularly called non-linear editing), our perception will entrust a beginning and ending to it still. I would like to contend that this limitation- if at all this is one- does not in any way prevent one from thinking about time in other ways, and for this, the phenomena that can most likely present a model are, obviously, dreams, memory, recollection and projections.

Simultaneities

My way, as has been said, is to begin with the beginning as well, but which one beginning to begin with becomes an increasingly complex question when one considers the idea of beginnings. There seems to be little doubt that there is a beginning, whatever it may be, and the force of the idea is such that one is inclined to believe that if anything exists at all, then it must have had a beginning. Origin myths have not only existed from *primaeval* times, but continue their course resolutely, even giving rise to newer continuities in the ever-growing field of beginnings.

The idea that a beginning must exist, and is simultaneous with the very coming into being of a thing, in no way suggests a linear path of occurrence. The idea of a beginning can equally well be understood as *a beginning*, out of the possibility of many probable *beginnings*. In this context, the idea of a beginning becomes an idea of designation rather than a fixity in terms of time.

This is not the same as a number of different beginnings that are collected over to constitute alternate variations of narratives, but rather the same narrative made devoid of the constancy of its designations. The beginnings begin to acquire a little of the middles and ends and even of other beginnings.

I would contend that a representation of this nature will, if nothing else, at least problematize the understanding of time as a simplified sequential phenomenon. In fact, this idea, to an extent, negates the understanding of time as a phenomenon at all and would instead suggest a form of experience as time. The question can be raised that if time is a form of experience, how does it occur similarly to two individuals? The fact that for not just a few but for innumerable individuals time is a shared experience, cannot be looked at in the same way as the fact that people share the experience of following traffic signals. Obviously, in a systematized construction it is futile to talk about experience, as it is based on a conformity and only a certain range of it is understood and validated within it. Thus in a prescribed understanding of time, it is indeed a shared experience amongst the entire body of, what may be called, subscribers to this idea.

On the other hand, the idea that time could be a form of experience and yet be shared in some measure by different individuals, can be explicated if time were to be understood as a palimpsest, an amalgamation of ideas and experiences shared many times over by as many as can have chanced upon them.

Conceptions

In thinking of the representations of time through cinema, I *began* with considering the idea of how the narrative (by which I mean the events and eventualities of the tangible images of the work) could be divested of the ideas of fixities in time and space. Could, for instance, a narrative refuse to begin, or could the ending refuse to cease? If the boundaries of a representation are inevitable, they can definitely be pushed a distance large enough to dissolve themselves. One could always think of , even if only by stretching one's imagination, a narrative that continues for ever : a narrative that begins when one decides to enter and ends when one decides to leave. In that case no one beginning will be fixed and the strongholds of the end will disappear.

Considering the finitude of a narrative too could easily suggest ideas of representations that free themselves of the difficulty of producing an indefinite length of narratives: in the form of cyclic reversions that sustain the same idea as above but make it more practicable.

The drawback with these ideas was mainly that the representation itself required a duration that was equivalent to what it represents. It is like Calvino's idea of making a map of a city as large as the city itself so that every object finds itself

on the map right where it already is. In a representation, perhaps the omittance is what speaks more than what is overtly stated. The idea of a representation could be equated with the idea of a microcosmic entity. This does not mean that it is in any way less complex than the original but that it contains all that there is, in a representation of the whole that is not simply the whole itself.

With this in mind, the non-fixity of the notion of time and the mutability that forms the essential experience of it are the most clearly recognizable elements of any representation of it. If a representation could capture the fluidity of time and its conception, in one way it would have to be a *form* of mutability itself, whether physical or conceptual or both.

Middles

Men, like poets, rush into the midst, in *medias res* when they are born; they also die in *mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and poems.
(*The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode)

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backward as well as forward, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock-finger at Nought really sets off in *medias res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot)

Interludes

The middle is probably the only territory with no defined edge. In a way one could well conceive of a middle as that which neither begins nor ends though is encompassed within the beginning and the end. That indefinite transitive idea of the middle is the most forceful definition of duration, and it is with this that the idea of mutability must engage. Even in a system of inevitable beginnings and endings, the span of the middle is what remains fluid and open to a volatility that is the quintessence of time.

It is difficult to think of temporality without beginnings and endings. Even the idea of eternity has been mostly thought of as an infinite recurrence - demonstrating the dependence on definable beginnings and endings, or a cycle of these points, recurring all over again rather than a limitless time stretching from one ambiguity to another. Ironically, despite the preoccupation with beginnings and endings, it is the duration or span (or the middle) that represents the only concrete idea of time - the beginning being over the moment it begins, and the end never beginning till the moment it ceases.

Thus the image of time is the image of durations.

Caesura

It is perhaps futile to talk or even to think about time as a simultaneity as long as one is talking and thinking about it in language, for it presupposes the idea of temporality. Words must follow other words in order to make meaning and sentences follow others in a sequence to compose a text. As long as we remain in the domain of a temporal system, it is possible to work with the elements of that system only. Therefore, to deny the fact that a book, for instance, exists in a temporal linearity is not significant. It is difficult to assert a simultaneity of time in this case, after all it will be argued that only one page is read at a time. But the simultaneity of the idea of time is not to deny the fact that a book, or anything else for that matter, exists as a sequence of linear elements, but to examine the idea that once that linearity is transgressed, in other words, converted into a form of experience, what remains is not the individual succession but a simultaneous amalgamation, the essence of the thing itself. In concrete terms, it is what remains after one has read a book or seen a film or listened to a piece of music. Even though all of these entail a sequence and succession of words, images, notes, it is not the succession that is derived from this experience but an amorphous whole. The familiar habit of quoting is a thing made possible by the fixity and assertion of temporally rigid and frozen experiences and the belief that what is committed to text (written, heard or seen) or to memory remains immutable

and the exclusive conception. The assortment of quotations in this text, I think, should at least highlight the plurality of even committed texts, if not point towards the impossibility of reducing a conception to a fixity.

This is nothing more than the idea of absolutes and relatives, of ultimate truths and interpretations. All forms of expression, to whatever extent, as it is tend to assert the plurality of meaning even in the present form. No texts are read in the exact same way to derive the same experiences even if they are fixed. So, in a way the representations of these are more or less unrepresentative of the inherent mutability both of the text and the understanding of it. In an extreme case texts and their interpretations merge to constitute a hybrid which can only be understood in terms of dislocations and flux. The moment it is fixed on to a surface, it loses its mutable dimensions and implies quotability.

Meanwhiles

The capacity of a medium to remain fluid is nothing new; it is the basic character of all oral traditions. Folklores and folktales exhibit a mutable form that changes the representation every time they are narrated, while retaining the essence to a great degree. These mutations are obviously not arbitrary or for their own sake, but occur as a response to that particular act of narration.

In a Telegu folktale called What happens when you really listen, a man who is forced to listen to a story all night keeps falling asleep and waking up in the morning with a taste of whatever is dropped in his mouth by night. So the story turns sweet one day, salty on another, becomes heavy in time. One night when he listens to the story carefully, an ontological boundary crossing occurs as he enters the world of the story to retrieve something that a character in the story has lost. It is a strong instance of what I think is an alternative to narratives based on empathy. It does not require the viewer or listener to empathise with the character by forgetting his own state but presents an alternative representation that alters the very way one perceives it. This I think foregrounds the experiential and perceptual nature of a representation, that does not remain fixed in time but alters when one engages with it again. If every moment is unique then there is no reason why a representation should remain constant in the meanwhile.

Endings

The end crowns all,
And that old common arbitrator, Time,
Will one day end it.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, William Shakespeare)

The physician Alkmeon observed, with Aristotle's approval,
that men die because they cannot join the beginning and the
end. (*The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode)

Eternity's a terrible thought. I mean, where's it all going to
end? (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard)

The end is not an apocalyptic explosion. There may be nothing
so quiet as the end. (*The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera)

Asymmetries

All enquiries end at the idiosyncrasies of a language, which ever language it may be -paradoxes, tautologies, contradictions, metaphors- beyond which it cannot continue to be the same language. Most of the reasonable and meaningful concepts reside in a symmetry of duality : beginnings and endings, origins and extinctions, order and disorder; giving a distinct boundary to each of them. The eccentricities and asymmetries, I think, are more inclusive areas of any system rather than the restricted ideas of a closed space of definitions that ascribe stability to it.

Just like representations of time tend to be spatially defined, as cyclic, linear arrows or forking paths, the idea of time in cinema, on the whole, with the techniques of montage, flash-backs, slow or fast motion and even dream sequences, implies the same temporality of stability, clearly conceiving of time as a revisitable phenomenon. The exact same moments can be reviewed and reexamined within a film. In a way, the idea of having captured time is intrinsic to cinema.

I would like to think of cinema not only as a selective capturing of time, but as time itself; and in that capacity it is no more stable and fixed but like memory and projection, is mutable. The idea of the narrative is that of events in time that

cannot be accurately revisited, reviewed or realized, without becoming unrecognizable. A mutable narrative is that which does not remain the same as before nor even of the same duration every time it is viewed.

By problematizing the idea of reviewing, the notion of a captured piece of time disappears, as one cannot ascertain beginnings, middles and ends as fixed positions or events. The resulting asymmetries in structure as well as durations of repeated viewings would suggest a representation that engages not only on a narrative level, but as in the folklore, on a meta-narrative level, where the viewing itself is foregrounded as an unstable event in time.

This does not imply infinite structural variations or permutations, distinct from each other, but an immense interpretative experience, in that two different people can talk about the same narrative without referring to a rigid geometry of cinematic time. Like the stories of the oral tradition, the narrative is not limited, as it is existent in time itself.

Anti-clockwise

With these ideas in mind the short film/s take as the point of departure, three subjects preoccupied with time : a man, a woman, and a child, who do not remain distinct but overlap in their characters as an embodiment of a simultaneous universe. This simultaneity, expressed through the individual but overlapping narratives of the characters, is constituted of the fragments of the whole. It is these fragments that occur and reoccur in a state of constant flux, to form the narrative of the film.

The narrative deals with the various forms that time acquires in the life of the characters. It is not only about time in the form of a regulating mechanism of their daily lives, but in the larger realization that the characters are time themselves. The small incidents and shifts that serve to mark time, as it were, encompass the span of the individual involvement with various ideas of time; for instance, the notion of a representation or evidence of time as more real than the present, the fixation with the notion of the right time for everything, or the idea of controllability and manipulation of time, the prospect of being misdirected in time or being confined to a small period of time repeated regularly. These ideas only help indicate the nature of the relationship of the characters with preexisting notions of time and the boundaries of these notions that are touched and altered voluntarily or involuntarily.

This mutability is not conceived of as an attention-seeking device, or merely as a tool to inspire interest, but as a confrontational concept to reevaluate and reinterpret the event of the viewing itself. Each time the object of contemplation of the narrative remains the same, the change being in the telling rather than in a variation on themes. The apparently random nature of this representation may resolve itself into an intricate pattern of meaningful eventualities on a variable number of viewings which could reduce the expectation of the conventionalities of plot, while at the same time the familiarity and recurrence of some parts may lead to an experience that is both novel and still the same.

The representation of the temporality of the film engages not merely a linear coherence seeking, but the space of memory which would become stronger with increasing familiarity, though each part would still form a representation on its own. It is perhaps absurd to describe a representation, that is, to present a representation of a representation by confronting one with the other, but it evokes ideas that would otherwise be overlooked. The representations of time in everyday activities, for instance, represented through a cinematic narrative, bring out the peculiarities of that engagement which would generally go unnoticed. Such a confrontation, if it were to occur between memory (which could be a representation of time) and the viewing in time (which again is a representation) would in a way, attempt, if not assure, a foregrounding of the peculiarities of that relation.

Punctuations

The hours wait patiently to be consumed. Like prisoners, patient and guilty. Everything consumes the hours, the minutes, and the seconds. Every small movement, every blink, every sentence – word by word. When there is nothing to consume them, they consume themselves. Each moment consuming the next.

Everything consumes the hours. They, in turn, devour everything else.

In a simultaneity of origins and extinctions like this, it is hardly difficult to imagine why duration is such a consolation to the span of a life. It reminds me of the old Buddhist saying that a being's life lasts only as long as an idea. The man of the past moment has lived, but he does not live nor will he live; the man of the present moment lives, but he has not lived nor will he live; the man of the future moment will live, but he has not lived nor does he now live.

Representations are acknowledgements. In a way, representations entrust both the idea of meaning and duration to what they represent. It may well be, I am inclined to think after a study of this meagre dimensions, that our ideas of everything are actually our ideas of their representations.

He resolved to anticipate the vanity that awaits all the labours of mankind; he undertook a task of infinite complexity, a task futile from the outset.

- Jorge Luis Borges