
Timeliness and Contemporary Cinema

[T]emporality is not some half-hearted existence.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*



IN THIS BOOK, I OFFER A HERMENEUTICS of cinematic time, aiming to clarify some of the ways that we interpret temporality as viewers of contemporary cinema. This is to look closely at the specificities of slow cinema, for example, noticing how we cope with filmic delay and drawn-out duration. Alternately, it is to examine our engagement with filmic “tricks” of time, in our contact with the convoluted temporalities of cinema in recent years.¹ One payoff for these inquiries is to be able to say something precise about our experience of contemporary cinema that recognizes its inclination toward temporal rift and rumination. Given the distinctive time scales of films from Hollywood and the international art cinema in the last two decades, as well as the shift in film’s status as an enduring medium brought about by digital technologies, cinema’s temporal inflection is a live issue.

My focus on the temporal modulations of contemporary cinema does not construe the films as a radical break from older practices, however, but as performing fresh variations on an enduring tendency of the medium. These temporal effects, whether operating as time slowed,

reversed, or profoundly fractured, belong to film's long-standing traditions of temporal play. We need only think of the attractions of accelerated and reversed motion offered by early cinema; the appeal of time lapse effects in science films; the forthright temporal experimentation of cinema's avant-gardes; the moody time zones of film noir; or the decentered temporalities of the postwar European art cinema. These are not exceptional cases, but integral ones: playing with time is what cinema does—and these days, from an altered technological base.² The question to ask of recent film practice concerns how we receive its possibility. What kinds of time does contemporary cinema extend to us?

So this book is neither an elegy for cinema, nor for an experience of time that film technologies regulate or refuse. Instead, it is an effort to be attentive to the kinds of time that recent films actually generate, to name and describe the temporal possibilities that cinema enframes for its viewer. Attentiveness, as practiced here, is a viewing (and listening) stance that demands patience and participation. It involves staying close to filmic detail and nuance, observing not just from the sidelines but from a place of proximity, so as to preserve the unique temporal conditions that a film initiates, and to acknowledge that such conditions are experientially immersive and embracing. The idea of standing *open* to a film in this way—of engaging the encompassing structures of narrative cinema, for example, rather than critically curtailing them—may seem a naive proposition, as though to disregard the formative influence of the apparatus and of filmic representation. But the kind of stance that I am proposing remains alert to such tensions, analyzing both cinematic time and the ways we are implicated by it.

This approach to cinematic time also facilitates a claim about its value for thinking. I will argue throughout this book that filmic temporality is richly insightful—and more pointedly—that what is insightful about it is conveyed in our experience of time, as film viewers. It is sometimes assumed that the significance of filmic temporality is adjacent to the work itself, contained in an idea of time that the film references, for example, or in a temporal principle that it demonstrates. This discussion puts pressure on such assumptions to suggest that the meaning of filmic temporality lies much closer than this, conceiving it as a phenomenon that is conditioned by filmic form, and released through our viewing engagement. Attending closely to the ways we interpret a film's temporal cues, or negotiate its chronological uncertainties, proves strongly suggestive, reflecting means of coping with time that belong to and extend beyond the viewing situation. We learn much about the films themselves as we carefully observe the terms of their temporal unfolding; more provocatively, however, we may discover what it means to exist “in

time,” as we participate in the temporal event that a film sets up. This special receptivity to cinematic time is the center point of this book’s arguments—and discloses what I will call cinema’s *timeliness*.

A related goal of this study is to offer a phenomenological account of our viewing experience, producing a thick description of the contours of filmic time as we endure it. Attentiveness proceeds from the assumption that cinematic time is something we actively interpret, that draws on our familiarity with film language acquired by watching other films, and by this, our situatedness in film history. A corollary of this idea is to emphasize that our interpretive activity is also temporal. Focusing on cinematic time is meant as an occasion to reflect on the ongoing work of interpretation that we pursue as film viewers. As I have remarked already, this kind of discourse has gone quiet in recent academic film study, but I hope to restore it to vigorous consideration. Contemporary cinema particularly invites close assessment for its inherent interest and because its emergence coincides with the diminishment of textual analysis as a scholarly practice. So the work of interpretation is equally the subject of this book, as film’s complex temporal structures enable it.

These are matters that require fuller elaboration. Let me begin to situate this study and its objectives by outlining the arguments to be presented in this chapter. First is the matter of filmic temporality itself, construed generally, and then hermeneutically, to frame an idea of cinematic time as timeliness. Next is a discussion of the kindred idea of ambiguity, relating André Bazin’s filmic concept back to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Along the way, the discussion pauses to observe the extent to which Bazin’s thought has been reconfigured in film-theoretical work. Finally, the chapter concludes with a consideration of the ways that timeliness speaks to issues of film history.

Toward a Hermeneutics of Cinematic Time

Cinematic time begins with the ontological character of film itself. In its origins as mobile filmstrip, usually projected at a rate of twenty-four frames per second, film’s movement necessarily occurs in time. With digital cinema, which encodes its data numerically, allowing it to be transferred and manipulated with greater ease, the medium’s basis in time remains its salient feature. Watching a film is to participate in a delimited temporal event: it is, at its most basic, an experience of temporal duration. The precise terms of this filmic event, however, are somewhat more complex: founded in photography, cinema “makes the past” when it captures a temporal instant, yet is experienced “now,” as a succession of images unfolding before us in the present.

But cinematic time is probably more familiar to us in other ways. Whether we think of an image that flickers onscreen for mere moments, or one that presents an action or event unfolding in its entirety, every shot, as an individual filmic unit, is temporal. Films also generate temporal experience more actively via editing procedures across shots. To this end, narrative film, which this book examines, rarely presents time “for itself,” as sheer duration—although, as we shall see, certain films do foreground this aspect of their operations. Instead, narrative films typically engage in a dynamic shaping of time to accommodate the stories they tell: this process is strongly selective, honing and recombining filmed materials to institute new temporal coordinates. This produces a range of temporal structures that we readily assimilate in film viewing, organizing narrative activity into meaningful units of time.

Consider, for instance, the way a pair of shots, or a shot series, creates distinct relations of “before” and “after,” or by implication, the idea of “cause” and “effect.” Similarly, shots may be structured to convey different perspectives on a single time (temporal simultaneity; the “meanwhile” effect), reflexive relations between one time and another (the logics of temporal flashback or flash-forward), transitions between different times (the bridging devices of fades and dissolves), or suggestive temporal gaps (ellipses). These kinds of temporal structures and their many permutations—deployed to varying degrees of legibility and expressivity, and accompanied by other aesthetic forms that enrich their effects—are the specific temporal terms that each film sets up to condition our experience of time, as viewers. I take these structures seriously as constitutive elements that facilitate a productive exchange between film and viewer. Thus, cinematic time is here conceived as a reciprocal mode of engagement: it is an experience of temporality that arises in our encounter with the work, as we respond to its call to interpret it.

Hermeneutics is something more precise than a loose theory, or method, of interpretation. To approach cinematic time hermeneutically is, in an important sense, to *enter into it*. It is to assume that filmic temporality demands sustained attention and reflection, and a special self-consciousness about the way we respond to it. In other words, it is a way of being thoughtful about our contact with cinema’s temporal forms, and the time we take to interpret them.

One shouldn’t mistake this perspective for a kind of vagueness about filmic structures, or a species of naiveté. If anything, it is a mindful blend of concreteness and abstraction, continually moving between the details of the filmic text and the interpretive fields they open up. Hermeneutics counts on all the knowledge we bring to a text, including our expertise in its aesthetic forms; our familiarity with the stories it

tells; our sense of its historical placement and its political urgency. But it also depends on our willingness to stand open to it, weathering these competing considerations. Paul Ricoeur's well-known distinction between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of faith is one way of positioning these issues, holding the demystification of texts against a counterperspective that welcomes textual irreducibility. The chapters to follow trace a dialogical movement between interpretive modalities that acknowledges the claims of both suspicion and trust, probing instances of filmic time that are assumed to operate conventionally, or transparently, in order to uncover the alternate understandings that such assumptions suppress.

Aspects of Ricoeur's interpretive theory, crystallized in acts of understanding, explanation, and comprehension can be mobilized to permit a freer focus on the ambiguities encountered on the way to appropriation, or more precisely, on those instances where a film's time scales begin to shape a world that may shed light on our own.³ Likewise, Ricoeur's premise that narrative acquires its fullest significance in its articulations of temporal experience is here reconfigured for cinema, advancing the idea that as narrative film generates time for its viewer, it may reflect something of lived temporality, as well.⁴ Thus the project of "doing time" aspires to an active comprehension, bringing together our initial rapport with texts and the work of analysis, to arrive at a fuller understanding of filmic temporality that admits future revision.

This project locates its conceptual support in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics that informs Ricoeur's thought, as developed by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Crucial in this context is Heidegger's insistence on the immersiveness of lived experience and the idea that understanding occurs within this situation, and not in abstraction from it. On this view, interpretation cannot be limited to a theoretical assessment, achieved at a distance. Instead, it arises from conditions of continual contact: more fundamentally, it is the way this contact occurs. These are energizing terms for thinking about the immersiveness of film viewing while seeking to close the gap between experience and theory.

Let me bring these ideas into sharper focus. What Heidegger's thinking specifically contributes to a consideration of cinematic time is twofold: first, by its analysis in *Being and Time*, it forwards an urgent claim for the temporal character of existence. Second, it proposes that lived experience, as the meaningful grounding of temporality, is the appropriate basis for our understanding of it. Whether or not we accept Heidegger's analyses as they intervene in the history of philosophy, his claim is a powerful incentive for thinking: it invites us to consider temporality in terms of proximity and involvement; correspondingly, it proposes

that we might know temporality better by attending to our concrete experiences of it. My point here is simple: Where better to start than with our experiences of time, as film viewers?

Cinematic Time as *Timeliness*

This question reaches to the very heart of this book, motivating its proposal that we think of filmic temporality as a dynamic situation, or as an unfolding exchange worked out in time between films and viewers. Within this situation, we encounter a film's distinctive temporal character, engaging its timeliness. This term draws on Martin Heidegger's thought, but also converges with a more standard usage: it is in this hybrid sense that I offer it as a descriptor for our engagement with cinematic time.

In *Being and Time*, we encounter the German word, *Zeitlichkeit*, usually translated to mean *temporality*—but its more literal rendering is timeliness.⁵ For Heidegger, this is not equivalent to “time” taken as an entity or object: it is not, for instance, the kind of time that we have or lack for a particular task. Rather, *Zeitlichkeit* is less a static concept than it is an activity: it is Dasein's way of being temporal, as a dynamic structuring of past, present, and future.⁶ Clearly this differs from our accustomed sense of this word. When we refer to something as “timely,” we simply mean that it comes at a moment that is suitable: a timely action, for instance, is one that is appropriate or relevant for our present situation. But something new emerges when we combine these divergent significations to describe our experience of cinematic time. Retaining Heidegger's emphasis on the active, “how” of time as it mediates experience, and pairing it with the more everyday sense of responsiveness to the current context, we arrive at a broader term that ably characterizes temporal experience in film viewing.⁷

Timeliness, in this combined sense, emphasizes that time is actively mediated by films and viewers: on the one hand, there is the way that films continually occasion time by their unfolding temporal structures; on the other hand, there is the way these details solicit our engagement, making their acceptance and assessment a meaningful feature of viewing activity. This dynamic framework encompasses our encounters with filmic ambiguity, as we read and respond to shifting temporal cues, and it retains the immersive appeal of cinematic time as we acknowledge our ongoing investment in it, as viewers.

The hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer also shape this intervention, particularly as he conceptualizes art experience. Gadamer speaks of art in terms of a dynamics of play, as in the playing of a game (*Spiel*).

He observes that in play, we join in the game: it is an event that we share in and help to constitute, as players. Play is characterized by proximity and participation, not by distance and detachment; it is not opposed to seriousness, but rather requires it. Most importantly, play is not limited by subjectivity, but in fact attains “primacy . . . over the consciousness of the player.” Thus, the appeal of play—or otherwise, the reason we are compelled to participate—lies in its ascendancy over us: the event of play is one in which the game masters the players.⁸

Gadamer’s dynamics of play highlights our active contribution to art experience, framed as a dynamic exchange between work and perceiver. Moreover, it suggests that we know art only in a diminished sense when we pass over this exchange to reflect ourselves out of it.⁹ These considerations are apposite for the case of film, and film viewing, where the “event” in question is, like music, a sustained performance that stretches out in time. Although film analysis will necessarily involve pausing this event, or repeating it, Gadamer’s commentary underscores the essential task of restoring these findings to the perpetual flux of film viewing, where our relation to filmic images and sounds is not one of mastery, or distance, but more often assumes an attitude of open receptivity.

Finally, timeliness finds additional support in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, especially as his early writings echo and extend Heidegger’s thought. But Merleau-Ponty’s arguments make a separate contribution in this context, as well: the discussion below retrieves his understanding of ambiguity so as to situate it first as a background for the writings of André Bazin, and then as a more independent idea that can be seen as intrinsic to film-temporal experience. This initiative hopes to revitalize ambiguity as working notion, specifying the terms of its phenomenological inflection—and more specifically, its utility as a temporal concept.

Cinematic Time: A Bazinian Background

The topic of cinematic time often circles back to the work of André Bazin, though this correspondence has been understood in different ways. Bazin’s writings offer an important critical model by their balance of priorities. While his commentaries assume an attitude of openness to cinema, rather than a desire to reduce it by the application of limiting categories, the quality of his observations is unwaveringly precise, speaking lucidly to the finest filmic detail and also to broader dialectics of the medium’s history. This receptive stance is also an integral valence of Bazin’s ontology, describing not just the status of images, but implicitly,

the way we stand (or ought to stand) with respect to them. In this context, the ambiguities of cinema are held as meaningful details because they mark a genuine exchange between film and viewer.

But Bazin's thought truly lights up for us when we recognize the extent to which his concern with filmic ambiguity is bound up with experiences of cinematic time. This connection may require a little unpacking. For Bazin, photography is a singular innovation in the history of representation because it operates by a new objectivity; as such, the photograph is something like an imprint, reflecting and confirming the actuality of things, as they exist in space and time. Concerning the ontology of the photograph, Bazin tells us that the automatic nature of photographic processes lends them unprecedented objectivity; unlike painting, where the artist's hand produces a subjective rendering, filmic images are an indifferent inscription facilitated by the camera's lens. When these principles are extended to cinema, as a "moving picture," the phenomenon of photographic credibility is temporalized.¹⁰

An especially salient formulation in this regard is Bazin's description of the cinema as "objectivity in time."¹¹ For Bazin, this is the unique capacity of filmic representation: it conveys not just the instantaneous appearance of things, but also the continuum of space and time that this appearance entails. By this, filmic images reveal the world as we could not perceive it otherwise: they disclose it in its freestanding fullness as a spatiotemporal unity, as a reality that is distinct from our subjective claims on it. It is worth perusing an extended stretch of commentary on this point that brings out the phenomenological cast of Bazin's argumentation most clearly. He writes,

It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love.¹²

Thus, cinema's disclosure of the world breaks up our accustomed ways of seeing it: rather than simply retracing familiar patterns of understanding, filmic images make it possible to encounter the world anew, and perhaps not as we would make it. What accompanies this special capacity of cinema—what makes it truly "realistic," in Bazin's sense, and therefore profound—is its preservation of ambiguity: by picturing events holisti-

cally, in their autonomous unfolding, cinema also reflects the opacities that these conditions sustain.

In exemplary cases, such as Italian Neo-Realism, and in the films of Renoir, Welles, and Wyler, ambiguity occurs as a deepening of cinema's possibilities that is facilitated by the techniques of deep space and the long take. One thinks, for example, of Bazin's admiration for *La règle du jeu* (Renoir, France, 1939), which stems from the way the film's formal arrangements reveal "the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them."¹³ Further, ambiguity relates to the filmic phenomenon of ellipses, as evidenced in Bazin's appreciative descriptions of Rossellini's cinema as it includes "the empty gaps, the white spaces, the parts of the event that we are not given."¹⁴ Looking elsewhere, ambiguity arises even in the cinema of John Huston, a filmmaker sometimes disdained at *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Bazin finds in *The Red Badge of Courage* (USA, 1951) a lack of formal embellishment whose implications are metaphysical, manifest as a "respect for people, objects, and events, in and of themselves." By the deliberate understatement of its editing and mise-en-scène—essentially, a refusal to articulate the scene dramatically by cutting in to closer views of significant details—the film places special demands on its viewer. For Bazin, Huston's film "doesn't make sense if we don't contribute some insight of our own, the discerning fruit of an intellectual complicity."¹⁵ Thus, filmic ambiguity does not derive from the application of limited techniques, but from the attitude of restraint that accompanies them, and an acceptance of uncertainty underlying their use. This is what binds the cinema of De Sica to that of Wyler and Huston: by differing formal means, their films permit a flowering of ambiguity that launches a productive interplay between film and viewer. To see this exchange most clearly, we can look to the film's temporal syntax: long take and ellipses, for example, mark these occasions strongly, as though encapsulating an interpretive process within their own structures.

This last point is critical for my purposes. Ambiguity is central to Bazin's reflections on the cinema, but is rarely treated as a self-standing term that might reward theoretical extrapolation. This relates, I presume, to its quality of approximation, or the way that "ambiguity" necessarily designates a space between concepts rather than a concept itself. Yet its utility for questions of filmic temporality is quite precise. I want to propose that we consider ambiguity a valuable ally for theoretical inquiry, and specifically, as an essential modulator of cinematic time. Ambiguity already inclines in this direction when we notice how often it is aligned in Bazin's thought with cinema's temporal movement, or in

Dudley Andrew's phrase, with cinema's "ongoingness, its registration of time flowing."¹⁶ Likewise, it may emerge in instances of elliptical cutting, reminding us of our epistemological and temporal finitude. These are reasons to spend time with the temporal forms of cinema, observing the ambiguities that potentially spring from their operation. For Bazin, filmic temporality is a meaningful opportunity: it shows us time, not as something we know in advance, or master retrospectively, but as an ambiguous event that is opened up in experience and solicits our continued questioning.

Bazin Reconfigured: Indexical Time

Given Bazin's interest in the ambiguities of temporal experience, one might expect a convergence of scholarly interest around this facet of his thought, particularly within contemporary analyses of cinematic time. But this has not been the case. While seeking to renew Bazin's thought for the contemporary context, the significant theorizations that have emerged in recent years have little to say about ambiguity, in Bazin's sense, or its implications for conceptualizing filmic temporality. Instead, scholars have tended to stress a concept that Bazin himself did not deploy: namely, the index.¹⁷

Derived from the semiotic categories of C. S. Peirce, and directly applied to Bazin's writings by film theorist Peter Wollen, the indexicality of filmic images refers to the way they point to, and are an effect of, the objects they represent.¹⁸ However, the index is conceptually at odds with Bazin's notion of ambiguity: it emphasizes the extent to which filmic images are structured in certainty, functioning as signs within a determining sign system. As we shall see, its prioritization in relation to Bazin's arguments is actually a substantive transposition that limits the ways that filmic temporality can be conceived.¹⁹

Philip Rosen's study, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*, revisits Bazin's work so as to recuperate aspects of his ontology for contemporary critical culture. In this context, Bazin's phrase, "change mummified," signals a special concern with temporality, and specifically, with dichotomies of temporal flux and preservation. Situating the indexical character of filmic images as the center of Bazin's thought, Rosen shifts the terms of Bazin's ontology to distill from it a certain understanding of subjectivity. On this reading, what is most salient about the filmic image is the way it serves the subject: by its reassuring indication of "the real," the image works to allay subjective insecurity.²⁰ Notably, this formulation does not just say that cinema "has" a subject, or that its indexical gesture toward the real is an appeal to subjectivity. Rather, it expresses

what cinema *is* as a matter of epistemological utility, and thus sets aside such issues as the specificity of filmic images and the range of viewing experiences that this specificity might engender. Yet this emphasis sits uneasily alongside Bazin's repeated claim for cinema's revelatory capacities: recalling, in particular, his suggestion that cinema can convey the world stripped of "piled-up preconceptions," as released from the "spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it," we do not find an abstracting subject but one eager for experience, who receives cinema's reflection of the world in a spirit of joyful discovery.²¹ As I will argue, Bazin's writings are persuasively read in other ways.

Laura Mulvey's recent work on cinematic time draws nearer to the premises of this book, drawing on Bazin while thinking through the ways we respond to filmic temporality as contemporary viewers. But by emphasizing issues of indexicality, rather than the potentialities of ambiguity, she ultimately charts a very different course. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* addresses the paradoxical nature of the film medium, as a moving picture comprised of still images. Mulvey understands this paradox as a process of profound mystification, emphasizing the ways that film's basis in the inanimate—the film still—is blurred, and thus covered over, by the regulated movement of the filmstrip. That this dynamic produces "conceptual uncertainty" initially sustains the possibility that ambiguity might serve as a generative mechanism for the analysis. But Mulvey's study is a hermeneutics of suspicion that regards the elusiveness of cinema as an obstacle to be overcome: its aim is to show how new technologies offer unprecedented control over moving images, allowing us to pause or delay them, so as to disclose the "hidden stillness" that such images conceal.²² The way to cope with filmic time, then, is to disengage from it, refusing its powers of narrative absorption.²³ Having disclosed the "secret stillness" of filmic images, then, we are in a position to control them, exempt from their implicating force.

This systematic shattering of narrative time calls to mind Christian Marclay's celebrated art installation, *The Clock* (2010), the twenty-four-hour compendium of filmed images designed to be screened in, and as, "real time." Marclay's work is a meticulous collage of diverse materials, culled from both film and television, which directly or obliquely reference time; by their careful assembly, the piece functions as a working clock, with time told in images.²⁴ The broad appeal of Marclay's project for galleries and the viewing public is obvious: its democratic blend of footage, comprising thousands of images from television, Hollywood, and the art cinema, often affords the pleasure of recognition. In the time one spends with *The Clock*, it is fun to spot these cultural references, sharing with other viewers, and with the personae onscreen, a common concern

with clock-watching. At 1:15, for example, the discoursing of Orson Welles overlaps with a characteristic composition from Wes Anderson; though nearly fifty years separates these titles, this distance is dissolved by *The Clock*'s governing structure, registered only in the contrasts of monochrome and color.²⁵

By its continual referencing of time, *The Clock* causes us to notice the temporal markers of narrative cinema as oddly detached from the energies of their diegetic contexts. Within these workings, time rises to the surface, and narrative motivation withdraws. Beyond its intricate orchestration, however, it is hard to say what Marclay's installation finally means. Certainly it shows us that the stories told by cinema, and other media, are "made of time"; it also raises the temporalized nature of film viewing to perfect visibility. But in bending these materials to its own aesthetic structure, *The Clock* does not propose a particular significance for the new continuities that it traces: its work is accessible, not analytical. For the aims of this discussion, neither is it ambiguous: curtailing narrative development with cutaways to new situations, *The Clock*'s temporal movement is perpetually preemptive.²⁶

But here we should return to the literature. Rosen and Mulvey's studies are valuable theorizations of cinematic time, which invite us, in different ways, to consider how Bazin's commentaries might speak to the medium's transformation by new technologies. But we should also notice that these formulations are particular, rather than general, so as to recover the significant terrain that they displace. This requires drawing on Bazin's critical sensibility, with its affection for open-ended experience; more precisely, it involves restoring these ambiguities of experience to his understanding of cinematic time. What would it be to envision a receptive viewing subject who engages both the rewards and resistances of filmic temporality, deriving pleasure and insight? More to the point, what would it mean to *be* that viewing subject? Before taking up these queries, there is more to say about the concept of ambiguity, placing it in its phenomenological context.

Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Ambiguity

Highlighting the period through the late-1940s when Bazin contributed to the literary magazine *Esprit*, Dudley Andrew has detailed the shared intellectual terrain of Bazin and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In a recent piece, Andrew identifies direct linkages across their writings.²⁷ These are exciting connections, and for the topic of cinematic time, they are conceptually clarifying as they highlight the temporal inflection of Bazin's ontology. But these correspondences are most revealing when focused on

the idea of ambiguity—developed as a filmic concept by Bazin, and as an informing principle of Merleau-Ponty’s analyses. Fleshing out what ambiguity might mean for Bazin, in an intriguing interface with Merleau-Ponty’s early writings, recalibrates ambiguity as a surprisingly sturdy term with which to address film-temporal experience.

Merleau-Ponty’s work has sometimes been called a “philosophy of ambiguity”; while this designation is in certain ways imperfect, it reflects an essential preoccupation of his thought, particularly across the early writings.²⁸ As developed in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, ambiguity infuses lived experience: once the polarization of subject and object is rejected, and the detached stance that this framework supposes, ambiguity is disclosed as a basic condition of our situated being. It registers in perceptual indeterminacy, as when the length of a line appears to shift, depending on its context, and across the robust synergies of sense experience.²⁹ More emphatically, it springs from the deep reciprocity of subject and world, of perceiver and perceived, that the body mediates; indeed, it may be useful to think of ambiguity as an ongoing movement between these terms, assuring that our existence is never centered completely.³⁰ Merleau-Ponty tells us that humankind possesses “a genius for ambiguity” as its defining feature, pervading perception, sense experience, the body—and as we shall see, lived temporality.³¹

Thus, ambiguity is not to be “gotten around,” or dissolved, but is something more integral: it is a binding condition of experience that might lead us to an improved understanding of it. Extrapolated for Bazin, it is remarkable that he should locate ambiguity in the context of film technologies: we should mark the scale of Bazin’s claim when he proposes that under certain conditions, cinema reveals the objective world and also our ambiguous relation to it. But a descriptor that is sometimes joined to ambiguity—the idea that it signals the presence of a mystery—is unhelpful in this context while it imports an idea of mystification.

Ambiguity, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, does not intervene between subject and object, as though willfully obscuring one from the other; in fact, this kind of thinking can only displace it. Instead, we should think of ambiguity as opening out in situations where two or more options are simultaneously possible—not as either/or, but taken together, with *and*—in this way testifying to the complexity of experience. A phantom limb is both absent and meaningfully present because the body remains open to all its past possibility; likewise, my body is an ambiguous form that both distinguishes me from others and facilitates my contact with them. Ambiguity permeates all these events, insisting on a multiplicity of copresent meanings. We might think of this multiplicity as an event in time: it happens spontaneously, and “at once.”

Merleau-Ponty's formulation is temporal in other ways. The fundamental ambiguity of existence, as conveyed by the body, is discerned through the ambiguity of time.³² That is to say, the ambiguity of our being in the world stems from its temporal character: time characterizes our being while also eluding our grasp—and this continual, ambiguous movement is existentially constitutive. He writes,

My hold on the past and my hold on the future are precarious, and my possession of my own time is always deferred until the moment when I fully understand myself, but that moment can never arrive, since it would again be a moment, bordered by the horizon of its future, and would in turn require further developments in order to be understood.³³

So to acknowledge the ambiguity of being—that is, the way it is never fully accessible to understanding, yet is always at issue for us—is to accept its temporal movement, and to see this movement not as an obstacle to thinking but as a source of its profundity. Likewise, we learn something about time, as it matters to us, when we recognize the ways in which it conditions our lived situation. Merleau-Ponty writes,

Time only exists for me because I am situated in it, that is, because I discover myself already engaged in it, because all of being is not given to me in person, and finally because a sector of being is so close to me that it does not even sketch out a scene in front of me and because I cannot *see* it, just as I cannot see my face.³⁴

As these lines indicate, our experience of time, as an ongoing temporal investment, is fundamentally ambiguous: like the event of being, time must be reckoned with as an immersive movement, not as an object represented to ourselves, or as a scene “sketched out” before us. These lines may help us to be better readers of Bazin, supplying a compelling context for the privileging of ambiguity we find in his writings. With this background in view, Bazin's ontology may be read as a set of arguments about the medium *and* the engagement of viewers. In particular, this perspective clarifies Bazin's sense that filmic ambiguity traces an existential arc, and potentially yields profound experience. In other words, cinema is uniquely equipped to show us our ambiguity, picturing an entanglement in space and time that speaks to our lived situation.³⁵

Thus, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty lights the way for a new approach to filmic temporality that focuses on the ways we experience

it, and the value of this experience for thinking. The time that matters here is necessarily ambiguous: there is no pulling apart these terms to shatter their deep imbrication, leaving our engagement with time out of the equation. This is why when we talk about ambiguity in a film, we are so often brought up against the temporal terms that condition it, referring to filmic episodes that are too fleeting to assess, or perhaps dwell so long as to grow opaque. For the purposes of this study, ambiguity is an essential feature of temporality because it signals our investment: put simply, it shows us how we are situated in time, as viewers.

So far our examination of Merleau-Ponty has emphasized an overlap with Bazin's thought, sketching some key affinities. But his writings extend to cinematic time in more direct ways as well, as evidenced by the arguments presented in an early lecture, "The Film and the New Psychology." While this text has received detailed elucidation by other scholars, most notably Vivian Sobchack, its potential for thinking about the temporal character of film experience remains untapped. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty's discussion serves as an essential complement to this study because it encourages us to look beyond the most familiar framework for Bazinian ambiguity: the unfolding time of the long take. Indeed, it foregrounds the timeliness of other temporal forms, allowing us to contemplate what we might call a *phenomenology of montage*.

"The Film and the New Psychology" was delivered as a talk at France's state-sponsored film academy, L'Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC), the same year that *The Phenomenology of Perception* was published, and as such, it shares that investigation's concern with describing an embodied subject's relation to the world. But here film is taken up as a medium that is exemplary because it tutors us in perception. Merleau-Ponty indicates that perception allows us to understand the meaning of the cinema—but characteristically, the reverse is also true: cinema discloses the world, not as a mental construct, but as given in perceptual experience. Thus, the medium possesses a unique capacity to animate the insights of Gestalt psychology: it shows us that we are in continual contact with the world, joined to it by a natural bond.³⁶ This convergence of subject and world is consequential for the way we perceive others, as well: it suggests that emotional states, like love or anger, are not veiled, "inner realities," but observable behaviors contouring the body's sentient surface.³⁷ Crucially, these features of experience are raised to special legibility by filmic processes.

Moreover, what makes film an exemplary perceptual object is its temporal character: it is, as Merleau-Ponty insists, not a "a sum total of images but a temporal *gestalt*." As this formulation suggests, our engagement with cinema is always an experience of time, occurring in "a total

way” that speaks to all our senses at once.³⁸ Whether in terms of individual shots, or longer temporal units like sequences, film editing shapes a new reality that always exceeds the sum of its parts. Phrased another way, film is not equivalent to the discrete, static elements from which it is composed: to be grasped in its significance, film must be held as a constellation of effects experienced bodily and unfolded in time.³⁹

But Merleau-Ponty’s claim for filmic temporality is also more precise. In a subsequent passage, he writes,

The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture: the film does not mean anything but itself. The idea is presented in a nascent state and emerges from the temporal structure of the film as it does from the coexistence of the parts of a painting.⁴⁰

We should pause over these lines to notice just how purposeful they are. First, there is an idea that this book takes as its governing premise: the meaning of cinema is built into its rhythms; it “happens” through these temporal structures and not otherwise. But what about the latter statement that Merleau-Ponty makes—here, and at other moments in the lecture, repeatedly—that “film does not mean anything but itself”? In one way, this claim is necessary rhetorically. If cinema is to serve as a kind of perceptual analogue, as the author intends, we must appreciate that, like perception, the medium is not merely derivative: it does not follow on, or operate in service of, something else. While film possesses an essential realism, it is not bound to reproduce it; rather, like poetry, cinematic syntax can operate as a “machine of language” that induces “a certain poetic state.”⁴¹

There is more here that is clarifying for matters of cinematic time. By their temporal orchestration, films create something *new*; they formulate fresh events of perception. This means that films aren’t reducible to representations of a particular content: they do not simply stand in for something else. Likewise, filmic temporality does not just reference time, but activates it; it does not look to external phenomena for its significance, but *is that significance at every moment*. Merleau-Ponty puts this point strongly, stating that the medium’s complex of effects “tells us something very precise which is neither a thought nor a reminder of sentiments we have felt in our own lives.”⁴² We should read him here as making a firm distinction: of course, a film may inspire such recollections, encouraging us to ponder a past event, or a comparable moment, but this is a secondary effect of film experience, not a primary function. Cinema’s

meaning arises out of our active engagement with its temporal forms, to touch us “at every point of our being”; in this event, it may disclose *our* meanings, as well.⁴³ This idea forms the crux of cinema’s timeliness.

On this view, the ambiguities of cinema, which arise spontaneously from its temporal character, may be rendered as palpably by the rhythms of montage as by extended shot duration. This qualification is relevant for the case studies detailed here, which are not limited to slow cinema, but also focus on temporal fragmentation. Broadening the scope of filmic ambiguity in this way is uncontroversial: if anything, this return to Merleau-Ponty’s writings foregrounds proclivities already present in Bazin’s thought, such as his genuine regard for montage technique. As I have noted already, Bazin’s call for a restrained approach to editing has always admitted other options: the long take, while exemplary, is situated within a comprehensive history of film style as one creative choice among others.⁴⁴ We should think particularly of Bazin’s interest in Welles—assuredly an artist of the long take, but also one associated with a self-conscious cinematic optics. In a similar vein, to his claim that “analytical cutting tends to destroy . . . the ambiguity inherent in reality” by unduly subjectivizing it, Bazin appends this corresponding note:

[I]t is nevertheless possible to use this technique in such a way that it compensates for the psychological mutilation implied in its principle. Hitchcock, for instance, excels in suggesting the ambiguity of an event while decomposing it into a series of close-ups.⁴⁵

As these lines suggest, Bazin’s arguments are consistently conditioned by their alternatives, receptive to variation and innovation. But there is another set of texts that convey Bazin’s acute interest in editing technique more plainly. I’m thinking here of a series of lively reviews, written late in Bazin’s life, on the cinema of Chris Marker.

In his assessment of Marker’s documentary short, *Dimanche à Pékin* (1956), Bazin likens the work to a precisely cut diamond that leaves viewers dazzled, detecting within the film an approach to montage that gives the term a radically new meaning.⁴⁶ Subsequently, in Marker’s *Letter from Siberia* (1957), Bazin sees montage reinvented, generating within this longer work newly dynamized relations of sound and image. He writes,

Chris Marker brings to his films an absolutely new notion of montage that I will call “horizontal,” as opposed to traditional montage that plays with the sense of duration through the relationship of shot to shot. Here, a given image doesn’t refer

to the one that preceded it or the one that will follow, but rather it refers laterally, in some way, to what is said. Better, it might be said that the basic element is the beauty of what is said and heard, that intelligence flows from the audio element to the visual. The montage has been forged from ear to eye.⁴⁷

While these remarks speak to the operations of documentary rather than fiction, they evidence Bazin's characteristic receptivity to new creative and technical developments, especially as these potentially renew perception. But one wonders what this kind of reinvigorated montage might look like in the context of narrative cinema—not as something directly applied, but in its conceptual possibility.

To approach this question, we need to get clear about what this idea of editing involves. Horizontal montage, as Bazin explains it, poses two basic innovations: first, it deprioritizes the visual basis of cinema, that is, the primacy of the single image, to emphasize its mobile contact with other elements, like spoken text and competing images. It is a cutting procedure that moves “laterally,” forging additions and fresh associations. Second, it is a method that disrupts the usual sequencing of shots, or at least the way we conventionally think of them; image relations do not work to secure a temporal progression, advancing from one shot to the next, but perhaps propose a mode of time that seems to “widen” it, increasing an image's available surfaces and points of contact in a kind of visceral interpolation.

As Bazin repeatedly emphasizes, this method proceeds dialectically, for instance, “placing the same image in three different contexts and following the results.”⁴⁸ We might imagine here an effect of Kuleshov that does not tamp down meaning, but instead loosens it, to produce an open-ended and unsteady synthesis. In the context of Marker's cinema, these dialectics are palpable, producing sparks, shocks, and conflagrations.⁴⁹ As a thought experiment for narrative cinema, then, horizontal montage specifies a kind of cutting that preserves ambiguity rather than reducing it by setting the image in time with a plenitude of possibilities. Here Bazin's thought draws even nearer to Merleau-Ponty's than before.

So the concept of horizontal montage confirms the diversity of Bazin's thought, and its phenomenological inflection, providing an excellent justification for seeking ambiguity across different temporal modes. The benefit of Bazin's term is not as something newly affixed to narrative cinema, but as a way of acknowledging its temporal range. If the long take is understood to preserve ambiguity as it presents a situation holistically, certain applications of the cut, while structuring time very

differently, may effect a comparable gestalt. This possibility registers, for instance, when a sudden spray of images conveys the fullness of experience by concentrating its shimmering energies; or alternately, when moments that are widely spaced in time are made to answer to each other, speaking quiet alignments of past and present. Thinking about *the cut* as a unit of filmic time that is susceptible to phenomenological inquiry is a fascinating proposition: in chapter 5, Terrence Malick's cinema gives us a way of situating this idea more concretely.

But here I should say something more about my approach before it is taken up in subsequent chapters. Most obviously, this book is concerned with ambiguity as facilitated by the temporal forms of cinema, where a film's way of doing time, and a viewer's way of engaging it, mediates an interpretive situation that constitutes cinema's timeliness. In this event, filmic temporality is not foreclosed by arbitrary creative choices, per Bazin's interdictions; along with Merleau-Ponty, we are concerned with a kind of time that carries the complex rhythms of lived experience.

For the titles analyzed in this study, the experience of time that a film offers leads us to its meaning, but does not still it: instead, our contact with a film's temporal forms conditions us to its ideas, preparing the ground for their potential recognition. As I have emphasized through Bazin, the temporal form in question—be it the long take or the transient image—does not guarantee a certain result, a priori. Rather, we can say that the form goes to work, in concert with other aesthetic elements, to create an encompassing temporal situation; as we shall see, the significance of this situation is held open to viewers, and mobilized by our engagement.

Ambiguity, Analysis, Attentiveness

If the interpretive activity of viewers has received scant attention in recent film-theoretical work outside of cognitivist frameworks, this silence extends from an earlier moment in the discipline, and in particular, from received theorizations of the film spectator. The insights of apparatus theory, and the significant critiques that followed from it, have had lingering consequences for contemporary film scholarship. One important, and intended, effect is the self-conscious questioning brought to any idealized notion of the film viewer and of viewing activity. In itself, this is a beneficial corrective. But in some contexts, it has fostered the idea that film viewing is conceivable only in terms of a binary opposition, committed either to a fixed formulation of the viewing subject, who always receives the film the same way, or to a kind of relativism by which all experiences are possible, and therefore unconceptualizable. A version of

this claim surfaces in Matilda Mroz's recent study of film analysis and temporality, as follows:

Although I suggest various possibilities for watching the films, and cite other critics' experiences of viewing and analyzing them, it is clear that to speak of a homogenous process of film viewing is impossible. Whether a shot is held for 'too long' or 'not enough' is dependent upon each viewer and each screening, the conditions of which will vary greatly.⁵⁰

We should linger over these lines to recognize their operative assumptions. This passage conflates the task of analyzing a film with offering evaluative judgments of it, as though the assessment involved deciding whether the film's stylistic construction were more or less appealing. Conceived in this way, there is nowhere for the analysis to go, because it construes its task as a reading of the viewer rather than the details of the film itself. This is a curious picture of what film analysis and interpretation entails that needs to be dismantled in order to move forward with the work.

Film analysis and interpretation need not assume a "one size fits all" picture of the viewer, nor does it concede to an imagined conceptual impasse. It does not insist on a single, monolithic meaning once and for all; neither does it seek an underlying code that is indifferent to the situated play of interpretive activity. While giving priority to some interpretations over others—usually, the ones most responsive to complexes of textual detail, and to the overlapped contexts that shape them—this practice also stands open to future revision. In this respect, the work of interpretation is not so different from that of film-historical and cultural analyses, or those concerned with technological transformation, so far as each line of inquiry seeks to delimit, and explain, the conditions that make our understanding of cinema possible at a given moment. Of course, when we read a film, the terrain in question relates to its particular aesthetic configurations, but the movement toward understanding is compatible. This may be the best way to situate film analysis and interpretation within the shifting topographies of the discipline.

A further counterpoint may be helpful here, this time with reference to Garrett Stewart's *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*. Stewart's account has certain features in common with the present discussion, but does not actually share its commitment to an open hermeneutic practice. Pairing theoretical discussion with a close analysis of contemporary examples, Stewart designates films produced since 1995 as a "postfilmic" cinema,