

THE PETRIFIED OBJECT AND THE POETICS OF TIME IN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This audiovisual essay addresses the poetics of time in cinema through depictions of objects that are markers of certain temporal densities. By exploring three films the essay offers a view to the petrified objects as the symptoms of the filmmaker's obsessions with time. In the films cited here, time is a matter of concern as a historical process, as construction within the physical laws, and ultimately, as a psychological perception.

Keywords: Poetics of time; Film; Petrified object; Modern cinema; Postmodern cinema

The wreck of the Titanic in the bottom of the ocean is an iconic petrified object. As Slavoj Žižek argues, the image of the ship, in a return-to-the-repressed submarine journey that was organized by James Cameron in 1997, has to be seen ultimately in its allegorical relations to the reality. This object, abandoned and petrified in an inaccessible space, now rediscovered, is a symptom of ideological sediments of modernity. For Žižek, the ruins of the wreck drowned into the void of the ocean is a space on which—as in Freudian subconscious space of Id— “the sacred and the obscene overlap” (Žižek, 2012). The image of the ship laid down on the bottom of the ocean comes to our consciousness as an epitome of modernity, now presented, in Lacanian terms that Žižek uses, like a “petrified enjoyment” (Žižek, 2012). The whole ideological edifice of modernity, in the duality of the excessive field of pleasuring welfare and its counterpart of repressive social antagonism, comes to the fore into the image of the petrified Titanic. Once the iconic object of desire, it is now an object of horror. Sank in 1912, Titanic symbolically evokes the deadlock of utopian modern illusions, recalling to the audience the horror period of wars that were to come.

But why is this petrified object so cinematic? What makes it, despite its sorrowful aspect, so appealing for the film audience? Andrei Tarkovsky's images of petrified objects might be of interest to elaborate a certain response to this question. The petrified objects in Tarkovsky's universe are the signs of a certain Proustian passed time, but at the same time, they are manifests of the modern ideological failures. *Stalker* (1979), a feature film of the Russian filmmaker, should be mentioned as an example. The film is about—surprisingly in a similar way that of James Cameron's *Titanic* introduction—an exploration of a forbidden territory called The Zone, which after receiving a meteorite impact becomes inaccessible to the human presence, unless they were accompanied by the stalkers, those pseudo mystic guides who know the Zone's rules and its metaphysical—or let us call it the science-fictional—laws. The journeys of stalkers are aimed to take their explorers to the Zone's core, a chamber that has the capacity of fulfilling the human deeper desires. In a moment when the stalker of Tarkovsky's film along with his two clients—a physicist and a popular writer—is resting on the Zone's floor, a Tarkovskian masterfully formal strategy makes the audience flow into the Stalker's daydreams. In this precise moment, Tarkovsky's challenging view of modernity and its questioning perspective to the limits of the science is incarnated in some petrified objects, drowned in the shallow waters of the Zone. A zenith tracking shot explores the traces of an industrial civilization before suffering a great disaster. The oxidized springs, gears, and metallic pieces of modern machinery rest along with some syringes, decorative broken elements, a few coins, a World War II weapon, and a saint icon. Fredric Jameson's reading of these petrified objects is full of interest: they evoke “the late and catastrophic anticipation of the tendential extinction of the human species from a technologically exhausted planet” (Jameson,

1995, p. 99). Both Jameson and Žižek point to Tarkovsky's particular pantheism to save the planet in its agony: thriving on the human sacrifice the Nature can revive (Jameson, 1995, p. 99; Žižek, 2006). Objects here are markers of time, that is so dense that it seems to be about to be paralyzed. But Tarkovsky's petrified objects are not just markers of a melancholic passed time, they are symptoms of a process that ends up destroying/displacing any ideological edifice, allegorically representing the traumatic impact of both communism and fascism as the utopian failures of modernity. In this regard, made in 1979, Tarkovsky's film brings to the audience's memory in a symmetrical way of *Titanic's* introduction, the images and imaginaries of the period of two world wars, the time of the humanism collapse.

These mentioned experiences of the metaphysics of time, in postmodern cinema, come to the terrain of physicality. Following Einstein and Stephen Hawkings' theory of relativity and the revolutionary observations of Quantum Physics, some filmmakers of postmodern cinema push the depiction of time on-screen toward a space in which "chronological linearity is being challenged" (Gomel, 2012). That implies the construction of narratives based on temporal simultaneity, journeys in time, or even on the process of construction/perception of space-time itself. The human body here is a matter of concern when it is exposed to this process of construction of time. In this regard, some of Christopher Nolan's works should be mentioned as the manifestations of the author's obsession with the relativity of time and the multiplicity of the timeline. The reencounter of father-daughter in *Interstellar* (2014) after the spatial travel of the former and his experience of crossing a black hole is worthy to be mentioned as an iconic example. In the black hole, according to the physical laws of relativity, time is slowed down. The father, by his return, finds her young daughter much older than him. Similar to that of the Stalker's face, the daughter's face is itself a petrified object, in which the audience conceives a strong poetic of temporal relativity. *Interstellar* somehow follows Tarkovsky's concerns with, paraphrasing Jameson a "planet technologically exhausted" (1995, p. 99) to imagine the post-apocalyptic effects on the earth, now uninhabitable by the radical climate changes. The solution of Nolan's film, however, distances from the metaphysics of Tarkovsky and comes to the terrain of science: to save the human life, displacing it to other space that is made and engineered by a posthuman intelligence.

But apart from this physical depiction of body-time relation, treatments of the passage of time sometimes are the pretext to show the volatility of human desire. Richard Linklater's trilogy builds a depiction of body-time relation but in the background of some philosophical reflections that are incarnated by a perception of petrified illusions. A young couple's reencounters in time show the futility of their revolutionary illusions. Made in 1994, the first part of the trilogy, *Before Sunrise*, follows the couple in their endeavour, when they found each other first on a train when both were students in their twenties. They just have one night, that they take advantage of, and by the sunrise, each one has to take their transport

vehicle to come back home. But they promise each other to come back to their point of departure at a train station in Vienna a year later. The second part, *Before Sunset* (2004) gives the audience the information that this second encounter never occurred, but almost ten years later, in 2003 they accidentally found again each other in Paris, now in their thirties. The re-encounter triggers the ten-year illusion of the Viennese summer night. The third part, *Before Midnight* (2013) almost a decade later, in 2013 encompasses their psychological crisis, now married, in their forties, parents of two young girls. The trilogy is an experiment of the passage of time corporeally for both audience and film actors/characters. The narrative, in a similar way that of examples mentioned above, makes the audience grasp the density of time, not so thick as Tarkovsky's one, but as a fluid one, in which the poetics of time becomes an issue of day-to-day life. Linklater's depiction of time is corporeal, in terms of the perception of time as well as maintaining the illusory dimension of time itself: a *Haiku* way of portraying instances of life, in which time stands still. As if it never existed, or even coexisted with eternity.

CONCLUSIONS

Petrified objects on film materialize the human obsession with time. The reason for their appeal to the audience should be found in their capacity to incarnate the density of time that appears in the object's aspect. Our three films addressed here and in the audiovisual essay approach each one from certain historical discourses to the issue of time. Since modern cinema is concerned with the metaphysics of time, in Deleuzian terms of time-image (1986), postmodern cinema shifts attention from temporal concerns to the spatialities and the geographical anxieties (Gregory, 1994; Smethurst, 2000). That means the spatial construction of time is now of concern, in the background the quantum physics laws and the theory of relativity. The body as the petrified object of postmodern cinema comes to the fore, but now its portrait is situated outside of the modern historical process and inside the process of the construction of time itself. A third example of the essay addresses films that in the threshold between modernity and postmodernity, depict this process of temporal perception in the human body, but at the same time, they bring to the fore its deeper psychological effects. In this cinema of threshold, the passage of time in itself turns human illusions into philosophical reflections.

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