

# Present(ing) Tense: Temporality and Tense in Comparative Theories of Literature-Film Adaptation

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The novel has three tenses 'past, present, future'; the film has only one 'the present tense'. From this follows almost everything else one can say about time in both media. (Bluestone, 1957: 48)

It was over forty years ago that George Bluestone, in his seminal comparison of literature with film, famously proposed the above thesis. This neat summation of the ways in which literature and film represent tense was eagerly accepted and developed by other writers, and has endured almost unchallenged within literature-film adaptation studies. Robbe-Grillet, in 1962, wrote that "the essential characteristic of the image is its presentness. Whereas literature has a whole gamut of grammatical tenses '...' by its nature what we see on the screen is in the act of happening, we are given the gesture itself, not an account of it" (Robbe-Grillet, 1962: 12). Over thirty years later, McFarlane's important book *Novel to Film* still maintains that: "film cannot present action in the past as novels chiefly do" (McFarlane, 1996: 29). Despite the lapse of almost forty years between the first and last statements the conviction stands: film cannot use any tense other than the present one; literature has the potential to represent events in a range of tenses. Film is thus often described as being restricted to an "eternal present tense". Yet, as Bluestone's statement implies, this notion of film's eternal "presentness" is not restricted to its representation of tense (a feature of narrative which locates events chronologically within the narrative) it is also extended to offer a broader conceptualisation of filmic "temporality". The term "temporality" indicates film's relationship(s) with other kinds of "time". Bluestone delineates "two kinds of time: chronological time measured in more or less discrete units (as in clocks and metronomes); and psychological time, which distends or compresses in consciousness, and presents itself in continuous flux" (Bluestone, 1957: 48-49). Of course, "chronological time" incorporates both specific moments (3.45pm on Thursday, for example) and duration (two years, from 1977 to 1979). Bluestone advances the thesis that film and literature represent tense (narrative time), chronological time (real-life time) and psychological time differently, and with differing degrees of success. Robbe-Grillet conflates filmic tense with time when he describes the "presentness" of the image not simply in terms of tense but in terms of real-life time: "what we see on the screen is in the act of happening". This extension of the notion of film's "presentness" beyond its representation of tense to a conceptualisation of "the filmic" (and its unique temporality) is the ghost of medium specificity that haunts adaptation studies, still.

Medium specificity, which includes claims for the temporal uniqueness of a medium, is a problematic concept for adaptation and film theorists, and has traced a troubled trajectory through adaptation and film studies, for reasons I will discuss shortly. There are ostensibly good reasons for the endurance of some theorists' conviction in film's eternal, inherent present tense and I will explore these below. However, I shall then go on to reveal anomalies,

false analogies and logical elisions within the "presentness" thesis, and argue instead for a more complex understanding of filmic tense and a deeper appreciation of film art. In terms of this last concern, my (ontological) approach can be situated amongst others that regard "film as film" or film as art. In this article I focus primarily on "tense" - only one aspect of temporality, but one particularly relevant to literature-film adaptations - but I also investigate the cognitive links between the "real time" of viewing and the viewer's perception of tense (our perception of filmic tense is best explored within perceptual and cognitive terms, rather than, for example, psychoanalytic or ideological terms). Finally, I shall look at an example of filmic manipulation of tense and of what Bluestone terms chronological and psychological time, taken from *Lolita* (Dir. Adrian Lyne, 1998).

It is important to note at this point that this article focuses only on realist narrative film and literature, for three reasons: historically, narrative realism is the style predominantly used by Western film producers; in particular the majority of literature/film adaptations are realist in style, which is in part due to the use of literary source texts from an Anglo-American literary tradition; and, most importantly, theorists of adaptation, and film and/or literary tense, have tended to work from a similar basis. Film's photographic basis has meant that "realism" (with its perceived relation to the "real world") has often been characterised by proponents of medium specificity as film's most "natural" stylistic mode, following Bazin (*What is Cinema?* Volume I, 1958); thus film's photographic basis, traditional realist style and medium-specific temporality ("presentness") have frequently been conceptually associated. It is true that other conceptualisations of film (as dream, fantasy, cultural event, and so forth) have bypassed questions of realism, but the theories and studies of adaptation with which I am concerned here have generally relied upon ideas of "equivalence" (between literature and film) and therefore "realisms". Filmic equivalence with literature written in a realist mode necessary depends upon fidelity to notions of "realism". As so many theorists of filmic tense base their analyses on films made in dominant narrative realist traditions, it would be rather unfair to evaluate their comments on different terms, and criticise them on the grounds that they do not apply to other modes of filmmaking. Suffice it to say that this article begins from the assumption that other kinds of film and literature are excluded.

## **Medium-Specificity and Studies of Adaptation**

As shown at the start of this article, medium-specific beliefs, though now mostly discredited by film theorists, do persist within comparative studies of adaptation (see Appendix One). Noël Carroll argues that the development of a medium-specific thesis relies upon two components: the "internal component 'that' considers what a medium does best of all the things it does" and the "comparative component 'that' considers what a medium does best compared to other media" (Carroll, 1996: 8). As Carroll implies, it is often through comparison between media that the specificities of a medium are seen in relief, and thus it seems reasonable that the development and maintenance of medium-specific notions of temporality are evident within the corpus of comparative work on adaptation. In addition, the issue of medium-specific temporality is particularly salient to the study of cross-media adaptation, and the analysis of the texts resulting from this process. The sheer number of references to the supposed temporal differences between film and literature within comparative studies of adaptation indicates a strong, shared feeling that an understanding of these differences is essential to our conceptualisation of the process of adaptation. In many cases, however, the careful, though rudimentary, analysis that Bluestone offered in 1957 has led only to the appropriation and simplification of his ideas. Stuart McDougal offers the reader hope of deeper exploration with the promising chapter title "Time", in his book on

adaptation, but limits himself to a clear and concise restatement of Bluestone's central points (McDougal, 1985: 326-328). Similarly, Robert Giddings *et al.*, in a nevertheless useful overview of "The Literature/Screen Debate", offer nothing towards the exploration, critique or development of the ideas they present regarding filmic temporality, restricting themselves to quoting others on the subject (Giddings, 1990: 15-16). Thus, there has not yet been a full exploration of medium-specific temporality or its importance to the study of adaptation (or, indeed, vice versa). Often, the subjects of "literature and time" or "film time" are introduced, the concepts glossed over and the whole matter forgotten within the space of a few pages. The primary reason for this lack of rigorous analysis is perhaps the sheer complexity of the intricacies of "film time" (and, to an even greater extent, "television time"; see Appendix Two), but I believe that a secondary reason is the impact of a wider reticence within Film and Television Studies generally to investigate these concepts more closely.

Whilst adaptation theorists like those mentioned above have implicitly accepted Bluestone's proposition without deeper analysis, the wider community of film theorists have tended to avoid questions of filmic temporality and the specificity of the filmic medium in comparison with other media. Again, the complexity of the subject is perhaps partly to blame, but the most obvious explanation for film theorists' avoidance of these matters is that historically dominant paradigms in Film Theory have worked to exclude them from discussion. During the 1970s and afterwards, the predominance of semiotics and the related notion of film as a "language" or representational system comparable with that of verbal language guided scholars away from phenomenological and ontological questions (such as those concerning film's unique "temporality") that are considered "medium specific" or "medium essentialist". The latter has been broadly characterised as being overtly deterministic - as specifying both what could and what ought (therefore) to be done in each medium. Bluestone's assertions were based upon a firm belief in medium-essentialism - a belief that "each art form has its own domain of expression and exploration '...' determined by the nature of the medium" (Carroll, 1996: 26), and those adaptation theorists who have adhered to his ideas imply the same understanding, though generally less prescriptively: Robbe-Grillet's assertion that films present action directly whereas literature describes action is a clear indication of a belief in the importance of film's photographic basis. Many film theorists, in contrast, have tended to draw upon Metz's extended characterisation of film as a "language" (albeit a very different one from that of literature), a system of signification based in (conventionalised) representation (Metz, 1974, 1977). This analogy draws a comparison between film and literature at the cost of evaluating the importance of contemporary film's basis in photography and sound; to understand film as comparable with verbal language is to remove the justification to study the medium specificity of film (ordinarily based on ontological and phenomenological features (see Carroll, 1996), including it instead under the catch-all category of language/system of signification. Whilst even the medium-essentialist Bazin wrote of filmic "language", this was perhaps due more to an unimaginative use of existing vocabulary than to a real belief that film and literature were fundamentally similar. For example, examine Bazin's assertion that

We shall begin, necessarily, with the photographic image, the primitive element of the ultimate synthesis, and go on from there to outline, if not a theory of film language based on the hypothesis of its inherent realism, at least an analysis which in no way contradicts it. (Bazin, 1958: 9)

This is clearly a statement of belief in the importance of the fundamental features of the filmic medium (the primary feature here assumed to be its basis in photography) to an

understanding of the medium as a whole. The term "language" does not seem to imply a connection with verbal language over and above film's unique specificity. Whilst there were considerable problems with the early medium-essentialist theories of film offered by theorists like Bazin (see Carroll on Bazin, 1996: 1-49), the dependence upon literary models by later film scholars has perhaps allowed the pendulum to swing too far away from the question of whether there are fundamental differences between literary and filmic media. A distrust of deterministic medium essentialism within recent film studies as a whole has led theorists away from questions of medium specificity based on ontology, so it is not surprising that the issues Bluestone raised have been swept under the carpet.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as Film Theory diversified to address institutional, cultural and ethnographic questions (and moved away from the paradigms of psychoanalysis and semiotics), issues regarding the ontology of the film image, the nature of film as an art and/or medium, and the relations of one medium's "essence" to that of another were further subordinated. The pluralist Film Studies of the 1980s and 1990s relied far more heavily upon "intricate interpretations of individual films" (Bordwell and Carroll, 1996: xvi), and exhibited an overt "culturalist" approach (Bordwell and Carroll, 1996: 6-18) that placed film within the broader context of culture, playing down its specificities as a medium. Alongside these changes in the field, continuities with the older traditions of semiotic analysis remained. As with the semiotic "project", newer pluralist, "culturalist" approaches to film aimed to isolate the filmic text as an object of study, challenge simplistic evaluative aesthetic criticism, and recognise film's locus within a wider cultural context. In addition, "most variants of culturalism continue to subscribe to semiotic premises" (Bordwell and Carroll, 1996: 18). Therefore the project of defining film as film has been all but discarded within Film Theory. Though in the most recent advances in the field the influence of analytical philosophy and cognitive science have provided fresh impetus for a return to fundamental questions about film's specificity - its ontology, its specific cognitive affectiveness, its aesthetic particularities - scholars have been slow to build upon the work of scholars represented in (for example) *Post Theory* (1996), *Film Theory and Philosophy* (1997), and *Passionate Views* (1999) (See Appendix Three). In general, questions of ontology, specificity and essentialism lie dormant in the wider field of Film Theory.

## **Tense and Temporality in Comparative Theories of Adaptation**

It is therefore in the realm of adaptation and comparative studies that the question of medium specificity has survived up to now. What is interesting is the tacit acceptance and perpetuation of Bluestone's ideas by comparative theorists, who may be best placed to evaluate medium specific claims. Perhaps these theorists have recognised that it is not only the case that the study of adaptation can provide the useful "comparative component" of a proposed medium-specific thesis; the opposite is also true. Any theory of filmic temporality which contrasts it with literary temporality impacts upon the study of adaptation. There is obviously a fascinating theoretical dilemma here. If one accepts the belief in film's inherent "presentness", one is left with difficult questions concerning cross-media adaptation. Surely film's "eternal present tense" inhibits the possibilities for equivalence with literature? Literary tense can achieve an extraordinarily complex multiplicity and fluidity which the screen, if trapped in an eternal present, cannot hope to approximate. Taken to its extreme conclusion, such medium-specificity denies even the *possibility* of adaptation as we commonly understand it - a problem which Dudley Andrew notes: the strong medium-specific approach that Bluestone advocates towards adaptation takes "pleasure in scrutinizing this practice even while ultimately condemning it to the realm of the impossible" (Andrew, 1984: 101).

Compare this with Metz's assertion, based on the notion of film as a "language", that "film '...' says' things that could be conveyed also in the language of words; yet it says them differently. There is a reason for the possibility '...' of adaptations" (Metz, 1974: 44).

Perhaps it is their recognition of the problem with Bluestone's thesis that encouraged later adaptation and film theorists to water it down, even reject it altogether in favour of Metz's interpretation. Studies of individual adaptations in the late 1990s began to exhibit signs of the wider, pluralistic, culturalist approach of contemporary Film Studies, but adaptation "theory" still relies heavily upon comparative, semiotic approaches, even though the predominance of semiotics in the wider field of Film Theory has waned somewhat since its heyday. As in the study of Comparative Literature in the USA, the comparative study of adaptation is primarily about the similarities and differences between one text and another, or one medium and another, regarding the latter as systems of meaning. The continuing importance of semiotics to the study of adaptation then, is greater even than its historical importance to Film Studies, and has similarly diverted attention from a fuller investigation of medium specificity. Certainly adaptation theorists have retained only a vague and generalised conception of film's eternal presentness and literature's flexibility of tense. Yet in fact Bluestone's claims deserve greater exploration than that, as I shall reveal.

The unfortunate result of the marginalisation of medium specific theorising is that the writing that is offered on the subject tends to be flawed and uncertain. Writers asserting the presentness of film tend to conflate tense (a property of language) with real-life time (a property of human experience), to blur different "time scales" (such as the time taken to read a book or view a film and the narrative time scale *within* a book or film), and to ignore temporal similarities between the experience of reading and that of viewing. It is the failure to make distinctions between temporal concepts such as these that creates the seemingly endemic feeling that these issues are too large, too unwieldy and too complex to take on. Take as an example Bruce Kawin's fourth chapter "The Continuous Present" in his intriguing book *Telling It Again and Again*, which tackles (among other things) the issue of filmic and literary time (Kawin, 1972). The central thesis of the chapter is (somewhat unusually) that a text's "manifest tense is present, whatever the medium" (whether the text exists in literature or film), and Kawin's argument runs thus:

No matter how long a film is, every frame at the instant of its projection portrays the present - a flashback may be supposed to be occurring in the "then" of the story but it is on the "now" of the screen, just as it was in the "now" of Proust's mind - and any written word rests on the page, or is read, in its present tense. (Kawin, 1972: 113-114)

The attempt to tease out and explore similarities between film and literature, and to reveal the "presentness" inherent within them, is unfortunately undermined by the obfuscation of important issues here. Kawin moves from talking about the essence of the film image ("every frame '...' portrays the present") to the temporal experience of reading or viewing, and then elides the distinction between narrative time ("the "then" of the story") and the distinctive temporal features of the film image ("the "now" of the screen"). Kawin also neglects to differentiate grammatical tense from real-life or narrative time. But his insights still raise fascinating questions, and inspire further investigation; adaptation theorists' instincts that Bluestone had pinpointed something crucial were correct. Kawin's reference to the film flashback is salient, thought-provoking and useful, and below I explore the same ideas as he

does. There *are* medium-specific temporal relations, and these relations are important to our understanding of both the adaptation process and the media involved in this process.

What do theorists mean when they claim that film presents action only in the present? Obviously, this claim is not meant to imply that a film cannot communicate the "time scale" of a narrative. When one watches a film, one can usually comprehend the linear progression of this time scale, even if there are flashbacks or flashforwards included. In this sense, films can represent a narrative "past": if, for example, the central character in the film is twenty-five years old, we understand a flashback showing the same character at the age of six as being "past" in relation to the main body of the narrative. Voice-overs, dialogue, *et cetera*, help us to place each scene within the linear progression of the time-scale of the narrative. This can be compared with the use of literary sentence construction to indicate that some parts of a novel are "past" in relation to other parts (for example, the use of the words "nineteen years previously"). Similarly, if a film is clearly set in a past era, as indicated through the use of costumes, props, sets and so on, or through the use of sepia-coloured film, we have no problem inferring that the film is set in "real-time past" some years ago; this compares with the use of language to describe events and characters in a novel which are set in real-time past in a similar way.

However, the claim for literature's flexibility of tense, in contrast with film's limited possibilities appears solid, at first sight. A cornucopia of tenses is available to the novelist - not just past, present and future tenses, but also subtly different "versions" of these tenses; for example, there are the pluperfect, perfect and imperfect past tenses. In addition to these variations, there are the possibilities open to the writer through the choice between subjunctive or indicative mood. It does appear that film lacks this same degree of particularity of tense that literature has, and for reasons that are essentially medium specific. Indeed, there is a way in which film's representation of tense is fundamentally different from literature's representation of tense, and this difference is implied in the argument that the "essential characteristic of the image is its presentness". Balázs argued that images "show only the present - they cannot express either a past or future tense" (Balázs, 1972: 120). This argument refers to the case of the isolated image, extracted from its narrative, and divorced from any explanatory voice-over, in comparison with the word the verb which has been isolated from its text in the same way.

Take the word "sat": it does not require the support of a sentence in order to convey not just its basic meaning but also its tense. We know what this action is, and we know that it happened in the past, though we know nothing more about who sat, where they sat, or why they sat. A change in tense is indicated through changes in spelling as we move from "sat" to "sits" to "will sit". Verbal tense, therefore, is (potentially) inherent within the visual appearance of the words themselves, for "'a' given linguistic item will normally have a single meaning, which is independent of the context in which it occurs (invariant)" (Comrie, 1986: 13). In comparison, we can see that a shot of someone "sitting" can be said to be "present" in the sense that we cannot tell whether this action is happening in the narrative past or the narrative future. If one looks at a freeze-framed image, one is unable to tell whether each shot is a flashback (representative of narrative past or past tense) or a flash-forward (narrative future or future tense). The visual appearance of the shot does not reveal this to us. Even the way we describe the image - the use of the words "someone sitting" - implies the impossibility of defining the shot in any tense other than the present tense. We do not see, nor do we say that we see, "someone sat" or "someone will sit". We cannot know enough to describe the image thus; we can only know that there is someone "sitting". (Of course, in

terms of the formation "someone will sit", it is important to clarify that I am not arguing that film cannot show us someone who is *preparing* to sit and therefore indicate someone who will, eventually, sit. Rather, I am saying that if we see a shot of someone sitting, we cannot distinguish, through looking at the shot alone, whether this action is occurring in the narrative past, present or future.)

All this would seem to support the theory that the film image (and therefore the filmic medium) is restricted to the present tense. It seems a convincing argument, based upon the realities of film images. However, there are two problems with this conceptualisation. The first is this: if it is true that, when looking at a shot, we cannot distinguish whether it is in the narrative past or the narrative future, how can we know that it is in the narrative *present*? Surely it is more the case that, as George Linden has suggested, "the essence of film is its immediacy, and this immediacy is grounded in its tenselessness" (Linden, 1977: 157). (It is unfortunate that Linden offered this analysis within the context of his argument that "film directly displays the present", but if we ignore this contradiction in terms (for the present, being a tense, can not be tenseless) we can still build upon his useful notion of the tenselessness of the film image.) "Sitting", after all, can be a verb or participle in the present tense; however, it can also be a gerund: a word that describes the action itself. Think of that word - "sitting" - and think of the action it refers to... you will find that, although your thought took place in the present, the "content" of the thought did not have its own tense - tense was irrelevant to your imagined image. Thus, if a film image shows someone "sitting", we cannot determine the tense at all our perception of the shot is in the present, but then so is - our perception of the words we read in a novel. It is my contention, then, that the image is not "present" but tenseless. Balázs concluded that the image is present because it can express neither past nor future - an analysis limited by a conceptual framework that attempts to understand film in terms of a system of verbal/linguistic tense. It is more accurate to say, as Brian Henderson does, that "cinema has no *built-in* tense system as language does" (my emphasis) (Henderson, 1983: 6).

Yet Balázs and others were not just limited by their conceptual framework of understanding. It is not just that the film image is conceptualised as present, but also that it is so often *perceived* as being "present", instead of "tenseless". Why is this? I can offer two possible explanations. First, we impose upon our perception of film images our own desire to comprehend and become involved in the narrative presented to us. The experience of watching actions on film is perceptually temporally similar to the experience of seeing them happen in real life. In real life we see events happening within the present, and we understand this real-life present to be most closely represented by the verbal present tense. Thus when we watch a film, we perceive the actions happening therein to be not "tenseless" but "present". When Bluestone argued for the presentness of images, he wrote: "Unfolding in a perpetual present, like visual perception itself, they cannot express either a past or a future" (Bluestone, 1957: 57). He thus implied the similarity that I have noted between watching real and filmed events, but did not note the subtle differences between images and real life. Similarly, when Kawin asserted the presentness of both film and literature, he referred only to the moment in time of perception (the present), failing to note that the images and words perceived differed inherently in tense - the former being tenseless, and the latter having the potential to be visibly "tensed". Second, the film image does not (cannot) display the same type of tenselessness as a gerund does. The visual depiction of "sitting" cannot quite be equated with the word, for it is necessarily different in its *abstraction*: the image is tenseless, but it depends upon someone doing the sitting. This lack of abstraction, resulting from the necessity of *agency* of someone specific doing the action, results in our tendency to read the film image

not in terms of an abstract "tenselessness", but in terms of "present action". The problem here is in attempting to offer a syntactic analysis of the image in trying to match verbal language to visual representation, thus echoing the problem (referred to at the beginning of this article) with regarding film as a "language system". (The problem of discussing images in syntactic terms is clear from other examples: how can we separate the adjectives from the nouns they describe, or the adverbs from their verbs or adjectives, within an image?) The exploration of the film image within the terms of syntax is informative, but it is limited by the distinctiveness of both film and literature.

## **The Film Image and the Filmic Medium**

I stated that there was a second problem with the idea of film being restricted to an eternal present tense. Even if we accept the contention that the film image is "tenseless", we cannot go on to argue that the filmic *medium* is thereby also tenseless. Whether we believe the image to be present or tenseless, we have only been discussing the *dislocated image*. Once this image is returned to its rightful place in the film, and sound is replaced which, through dialogue and voice-over, can bring the subtleties of literary tense directly into the visual text, there are few tenses left that the filmic medium cannot convey. So the film image does indeed manifest a tenselessness which many writers have conveniently (though inaccurately) conceptualised as a form of "presentness", but makers of film and television texts can employ words and sounds, as well as images, and thus present actions within a variety of "tenses". Obviously to attempt to replicate in a visual medium the complex interplay of different tenses that can occur within a very short paragraph in literature is to take on a task of immense proportions, but to achieve this goal is not necessarily a theoretical impossibility.

To sum up, then: 1) the film image is not inherently present, it is inherently tenseless, and 2) the filmic image - films or movies - are capable of representing a range of tenses through the manipulation of images, words and sounds within a narrative. Neither image nor medium is restricted to an eternal present tense, and to maintain that belief is to wrongly deny the possibility of cross-media equivalence through adaptation. Equally, though, the attempt to argue for equivalence through characterising film as a language-system analogous with verbal language is to underestimate the validity of cautious medium-specific claims about film, and to limit comparisons to those instances of filmic depiction which can be assimilated syntactically. Gregory Currie, in his recent book *Image and Mind*, which offers the clearest and most comprehensive approach yet to filmic temporality, even argues that in conceptualising filmic temporality "we should not make explicit or implicit use of the notion of tense" (Currie, 1995: 207). Such a firm and complete rejection of a linguistic framework is certainly appealing and is perhaps the best way forward, but his contribution, though wide-ranging and revolutionary, does not explore the efforts already made to conceptualise film's representation of "tense" and their roots in our everyday perception of film. His role as a theorist of film allows him to make such a radical move; it will be up to adaptation theorists to develop the "comparative" component of a medium-specific theory of filmic temporality that his book lacks.

Some theorists, then, have made the mistake of assuming that film and literature's similarity in their abilities to present (realist) narratives justifies their classification under the same heading of "language". A different mistake was made by medium-specific theorists, who wrongly assumed that what is true of the film *image* is true of the medium as a whole; films cannot be equated with still images. Both photographic realists and medium essentialists assumed that film's use of photographic techniques validated the conceptual equation of film



with photography. As Carroll says, "given the fact that photography is a constituent element of cinema, essentialist arguments concerning photography often mirror those concerning film" (Carroll, 1996: 5). This false conceptual elision of the image with film is one of which Bluestone falls foul, though, unlike many of his successors, he does note the potential of dialogue and sound, whilst downplaying it:

One may argue that the use of dialogue and music provides a door through which a sense of past and future may enter ... In this way, apparently, a succession of present images may be suffused with a quality of past or future '...' At best, however, sound is a secondary advantage which does not seriously threaten the primacy of the spatial 'visual' image '...' our seeing (and therefore our sense of the present) remains primary. (Bluestone, 1957: 57-58)

This is a more complex and careful elucidation of film's ability to convey tense than that offered by other theorists, though still asserting the "presentness" of the image. But I would dispute Bluestone's sense that the tense of the visual image always asserts primacy over the tense evoked through sound. Dialogue and sound, including music, are absolutely integral to most films. It is Bluestone's adherence to a medium-essentialism rooted in the ontology of the film image that determines his lack of attention to these other, non-visual elements of the filmic medium. As Joan Dagle writes: the "role of sound as an element of film narrative, as part of the film image, is crucial, for it is the failure to look closely at sound that helps sustain the notion of film narration as present-tense narration" (Dagle, 1980: 51-52). I cannot digress here to discuss specifically the importance of filmic sound, but two superb accounts are offered by Edward Branigan and Peter Kivy in *Film Theory and Philosophy* (Allen and Smith, 1997).

In lieu of an extended discussion, I would like to offer, finally, an example of the manipulation of tense within adaptation which contradicts Bluestone's assertion, and which shows how the conceptualisation I propose in this article deepens our understanding and appreciation of film artistry. Let us turn to the opening words of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1959), and the equivalent opening section from Adrian Lyne's film *Lolita* (1998).

### **Tense and *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne, 1998)**

The opening of the book reveals the thoughts of Humbert Humbert, as he remembers Lolita and reflects upon his past:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.

Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a pryncedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style. (Nabokov, 1959: 9)

I am not assuming that Lyne necessarily aimed to "replicate" Nabokov's book on screen, but he did attempt to convey a similar sense of shifting, indefinite tense to that which this section of the book uses.

The film's opening sequence approximates memory, and the connections that memory and material things can forge between past and present. The first few shots of Humbert weaving all over the road in his car, if viewed with the sound turned down, could be seen as exhibiting that tenselessness that has for so long been called film's "presentness". Yet the soundtrack complicates the tense of this sequence. The haunting, melodious music predominates over the location soundtrack, most noticeably when a truck driver swerves to avoid a head-on collision with Humbert's car, and we hear only a very faint hooting of his horn, and see the hay bales fall from his truck onto the road behind Humbert's car. As a stylistic device, the lack of "live" sound serves to extract us from the present events on the screen, emphasising their relative unimportance; in addition, the shots of a gun sliding across Humbert's passenger seat, and his bloodied fingers grasping a small hairclip, act as material echoes of a recent past which is the true focus of this scene and the film. The first few sentences of Humbert's voice-over establish the centrality of "Lolita", whom we have not yet seen. He speaks in various past tenses, his words being taken fairly closely from Nabokov's opening section. Thus his voice-over continues the contrast between the insignificance of the present that is directly pictured and the importance of the past which is the content of Humbert's voiced thoughts, and which is thus also represented to us. This results in a sense of indefinite tense, a sense that we are waiting for the past to be revealed, to be played out in the present.

The past that we desire is retrieved for us through memory - Humbert's memory, and is thus not a reliable "past" but a blurred, coloured and partial view of the past. As Humbert recalls Annabel, the object of his childhood passion, a subtitle, "Cannes, France 1921", appears, which clearly marks a change in period, and the scenes with Annabel and a young Humbert are played out in front of us. Beja argued that "what we see on the screen is in the act of happening, we are given the gesture itself, not an account of it"; that film is therefore forever playing out scenes in the present. Yet these scenes are unmistakably marked as "past", and not only because Humbert's voice-over gives us a past-tense account of the events being shown and the colours used resemble sepia tones. The film is erratic, fragmented; it offers an unreliable account of the events. Some shots are slowed down, some run at "normal" speed, and the location of the shots alters rapidly, denying spatial continuity. The scenes are intercut with fleeting images of what can only be described as fog. This is not how events "happen", this is how events are remembered: we dwell upon some moments, skip over others, remember fragments of events in different or even uncertain locations, have moments where memory fails us and the mind is apparently blank. The director uses Hi-8 film for a couple of the shots of Annabel, not just implying that the past is blurred through memory, but *representing* the past in a uniquely filmic fashion. The equivalent of this in literature could only be achieved by inserting scraps of old parchment, with words inscribed in dipping ink, into a book printed with modern materials (see Appendix 4). Attempting to draw comparisons with literary devices is therefore unhelpful.

What Lyne achieves is an extraordinary representation of remembered past, through Humbert. Humbert is established as a rather unreliable narrator - not just because his memories, like anyone's, are incomplete and fragmented, but also because the shots of Annabel which he remembers with most clarity reveal a young girl so beautiful, so perfect, and so entrancingly filmed that we doubt this clarity, which contrasts so strongly with his other memories. Instead of accepting the depiction of Annabel as truthful, we cannot fail to

realise Humbert's tendency to deliberately misremember, romanticise and self-delude, in order to justify his desires for Lolita. In the context of a realist representation, the present could never look or sound like this; this sequence is too unstable, too contradictory, too incoherent. Within the terms of the narrative, "real" past - as represented through dates and some images - is interwoven with memory, and memory overrides, but does not eliminate, the present, in ways that only an audio-visual medium could achieve. The shot of sand falling through Annabel's fingers, as the couple lie on a beach, is emblematic of the shifting sands of time that this opening sequence captures on film - one of the few instances where Lyne resorts to a linguistic metaphor rendered visually.

Bluestone would probably not have conceded the possibility of the above representation of remembered past: he argued that film "cannot render the attributes of '...' memory" (Bluestone, 1957: 60). Though his contribution to our understanding of literature-film temporalities has been significant, his assertion of film's inherent presentness has been perpetuated too long. It is in fact the tenselessness of the film image that, in combination with sound, guarantees the possibility of film's fluidity and flexibility of tense.

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## Appendices

1. The term "comparative" is my own, though some writers have used it in a similar sense in the past (McDougal, 1985: 7; Aycock and Schoenecke, 1988). It refers to the large body of work done on screen adaptations that employs a methodology of comparison between a written source text and its screen adaptation. Relying for the most part on narrative theory to illuminate the ways in which a narrative is "adapted" from a literary source for the screen, it is focused on the process of adaptation, rather than "adaptations as films/television programmes". The best example of this approach to date is Brian McFarlane's *Novel to Film* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). It should also be noted that my use of the term "adaptation theorists" is shorthand here for "writers who attempt to conceptualise the process of adaptation or explore issues concerning the adaptation of narratives from literature to screen".

2. As most work on adaptation is based on film (not TV) adaptations, this article is concerned only with predominant conceptualisations of "film time" here. Some of the claims made about filmic temporality are based entirely upon the visual nature of the film image, and these claims can thus be analysed in the light of television also, especially as many television programmes are shot on film and therefore use film images anyway. Clearly, though, television has different extra-textual time-relations constituted through its broadcast form, etc.; I will not discuss these here, but I am addressing them in other work, at present.

3. There have recently been more sustained attempts to return to ontological and phenomenological questions relating to film, within the context of the development of an approach to film studies based in analytical philosophy and cognitive psychology. This

approach (an alternative to traditional, contemporary Film Theory) has been considerably more successful in addressing many of the central concerns of film studies, including the issue of filmic temporality. For an extended and careful discussion, for example, see Chapter 7: "Travels in Narrative Time" in Gregory Currie's book *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (1995). There are some examples of a more rigorous approach to this subject written during the heyday of contemporary Film Theory - see, for example, Joan Dagle's chapter "The Question of the Present Tense" for an imperfect but thoughtful consideration of claims for film's "eternal present tense" (Dagle, 1980).

4. The use of Hi-8 in *Lolita* raises questions regarding the salience of medium-specific notions to contemporary films that often utilise a mixture of different formats, like this. For example, the importance of digital technologies to current and future filmmaking practice challenges the "tenselessness" I have ascribed to traditional film made up of individual "photographic" images. This article is limited to the tense and temporality of "traditional" film because it is concerned with theories of literature-film adaptation, which are similarly focused. However, a coherent, "from scratch" conceptualisation of contemporary filmic temporality would need to reconsider, among other things, the fundamental question of whether film is an art or a medium (or both). Perhaps, like "painting", which utilises different media (watercolour, oil, etc.), "film" is an art that can also employ a variety of media (photographic, digital, etc.). It is possible that the medium specificity of the monolithic category "film" may not stand up to technological advancement and diversification within the medium; alternatively, "film's" particular combination of various formats might increase the possibility of clearly delineating film from other media and elucidating its unique specificities. Such a discussion falls outside the scope of this article, but is undoubtedly important.

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