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INTERVIEW

THE CULTURE OF TIME: AN INTERVIEW WITH BLISS CUA LIM

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 15, 2011 AT 4:15PM

By **Ryan Gurney**, University of California, Irvine, Visual Studies

UCI associate professor **Bliss Cua Lim** has devoted a great deal of research to the ways in which time and temporality impact culture, and more precisely, the cultural manifestation of temporality within Asian cinema. Her most recent publication, *Translating Time: Cinema, The Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, broaches the subject of the supernatural in Asian cinema, but also the idea of time as a culturally localized phenomenon. Professor Lim took a few moments to share her thoughts on the idea of "timeliness".

Our theme this issue is "timeliness". This can be thought of in a number of ways, but as it relates to your work with the study of film, what does this word mean to you?

One of my everyday modes of understanding timeliness is punctuality, and I was happy to see this confirmed by one of two dictionaries I consulted; in that entry, timeliness was also collocated with a wider variety of temporal concepts that included speed. Punctuality, of course, is one of many lived forms of time-discipline, so for me, the term timeliness calls to mind two

vectors of critique regarding time-discipline. One avenue of thought on this issue is represented broadly by the canonical work of E.P. Thompson, as well as the writing on leisure time by Theodor Adorno and Jean Baudrillard. For these thinkers, time is a labor relationship that involves production, consumption, and reification under capitalism. (As Thompson points out it, most people who are employed know that if time is money, then it is largely the employer's money). I would say that this first line of thinking emphasizes the degree to which workers have internalized time-thrift and the commodification of temporality as such, with the result that even our free time no longer feels entirely free, since it is so hard won by all our hours and days at work. A second vector of thought, exemplified by historians Gerard Dohrn-Van Rossum and Michael O'Malley, emphasizes workers' resistance to timed labor and the centuries-long process of standardizing an abstract, homogeneous, quantifiable time exemplified by the clock. O'Malley, for example, tells us that the late nineteenth century promulgation of standard time (pioneered by the US railway industry in 1883 and the adoption of world standard time by the International Meridian Conference in 1884) was vigorously resisted by diverse groups: urban elites, rural working class folk, and people living in places where the shift to standardized time was at distinct variance with the local sun and older chronometric modes (the sundial, the almanac, and other experiential temporal practices).

I also want to add that punctuality as a mode of time-discipline belongs to the same semantic continuum as speed. The culture of speed that emerges out of industrialization has been characterized by thinkers as a defining temporal experience of modern life. Mary Anne Doane tells us that at the end of the twentieth century, modern life was experienced increasingly as a life lived under various temporal pressures, and Michael Neary and Glenn Rikowski suggest that those temporal demands are underpinned by the capitalist drive to increase productivity and surplus value.

More than punctuality and speed, however, the most intuitive understanding of timeliness that comes to me is the notion of something that is opportune or well-timed (and indeed, the second dictionary I consulted affirmed this, mentioning nothing of punctuality). In that sense of opportuneness, of something whose time has come, I am very appreciative of the emergence of really excellent work on temporality in the last decade or so, some of which intersects in really interesting ways with visuality. In all, it suggests to me that critical attention is finally turning to something that has proven very difficult to denaturalize, even though it took centuries to emplace: our modern notion of time as spatialized, homogeneous, measurable, chronological, and apparently neutral with regards to culture and politics. It is finally being understood that time itself has a history.

In your book, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, you grapple with the multiple meanings and usages of time within Asian horror and fantastic cinema. You open the book with the statement: "fantastic cinema incites us to think in disaccustomed terms about time." Why is it important for us to consider time in this context?

The first line of my book, which you quote, appears after two epigraphs: the first is from Henri Bergson's 1907 work, *Creative Evolution*, and the other from Gilles Deleuze's book, *Bergsonism*. The two epigraphs together distill Bergson's paradoxical view of temporality: the past is coeval with the present. As opposed to calendars and clocks that presume that there's no going back—not to last year, nor to yesterday, nor to this morning—because we can only ever go forward, Bergson insists on the survival of the past in the durative present, the coevalness of past and present ways of being in the world. I think this notion of a fractured present where both past and present coexist is exactly the kind of temporality you see in so many supernatural accounts, like hauntings (in Tagalog, the word for haunting is *pagbabalik* or return), where the past returns to the present, coexisting alongside it, and the dead are coeval with the living.

I began my book with these epigraphs and that opening line because I felt that Bergson's insistence that we go beyond the customary, habituated understanding of a self-evident present would allow an exploration of the elusive temporality of fantastic cinema and supernatural narratives more generally. In the fantastic, time is paradoxical and non-identical. The past is not dead, but co-exists alongside the present, disrupting the illusion of a pure, self-consistent contemporaneity.

Photographic cinema on celluloid has often been compared to a kind of clock: to produce the illusion of movement, 16 or 24 still frames are projected per second, at a speed capable of tricking the spectator's mind and eye into seeing moving pictures. Exposing and projecting static frames at regular intervals with clock-like accuracy makes the succession of frozen images on celluloid appear to move once projected (hence the illusion of "motion pictures"). So, on the one hand, all cinema (whether photographic or digital, which still relies frames per second), depends on the rule of the clock. On the other hand, fantastic narratives unhinge the logic of clock and calendar. This tension plays out in many ways in ghost films. For instance, parallel editing presumes a single chronological present in which simultaneous events are set. But when you cross-cut between a mortal and a specter, the times evoked exceed a rational, chronological time.

I was drawn to the supernatural in part because it is so often either rationalized as a figure for history, or disparaged as primitive, superstitious, anachronistic thought. For postcolonials, the critique of both anachronism and its converse, progress, is always necessary. Progress is always presumed to be owned by the city, by the First World, by the West; while the province, the Third World, the poor are always considered to be backward, obsolescent, or left behind. The work of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Johannes Fabian reveal that the accusation of anachronism – that something is untimely because it is outmoded or superseded – is a form of temporal elitism and exclusion. The temporal critique I tried to pursue in my book was an attempt to take seriously the fact that supernaturalism and anachronism pose problems to what Walter Benjamin called “empty, homogeneous time.”

At one point, you reference Roland Barthes and his assessment of the camera as a “clock for seeing.” This is a very interesting idea. Would you explain to us what he meant by that?

*Both Roland Barthes and Henri Bergson, among others, have compared the cinema and its photographic base to the clock, since both clocks and cameras are, in a way, translation-machines that convert heterogeneous duration into measurable, divisible, uniform intervals. Anyone who has worked with photographic film knows that temporal aspects—exposure time (how long the shutter remains open), film speed (how quickly the photosensitive emulsion responds to light), and rate of projection—are absolutely crucial to analog photography and cinema, and remain relevant to digital remediations of both. Barthes mentions that beautiful phrase, “clocks for seeing,” in passing in *Camera Lucida*. He lovingly recalls that early cameras were housed in boxes made not of plastic or metal but of wood. So, in the sound of the camera shutter, Barthes seems to hear again the creaking cabinetry of the first cameras. I also see his phrase, “clock for seeing”, as positing an analogy between the sound of the camera shutter (which determines exposure time) with other auditory time-signals (Barthes lists bells, clocks, and watches as sources of the “noise of time”). Though I don’t work on film sound or film music, I have learned immensely from excellent scholarship in that field. Claudia Gorbman, for example, has described how composer Max Steiner employed the click-track technique in his 1930s films. That technique involved punching holes into the soundtrack at the edge of the film to achieve precise “to-the-second synchronization” of dubbed sound to projected film image, enabling the conductor and musicians hear the metronomic beat of the click-track during post-production recording sessions for film music. So I was always struck by the suggestiveness of Barthes’ linking of the visuality of the camera with the auditory time signal and clockwork more generally. Bergson does the same in his trenchant critique of the cinema as an apparatus that, in recording and projecting reality at 16 or 24 frames per second, translates to the visual realm the clockwork logic of a chopped-up, measurable, time. In contrast to Bergson, Barthes is suggesting a very similar idea— that the camera is linked to the clock – but he does so fondly, not in a spirit of denunciation. And that helped to open a path for me that acknowledged the founding debts of the cinema to modern homogeneous time, without foreclosing the possibility that it might, on occasion, also enable routes to temporal critique.*

You point out that “the cinema belongs to the shared genealogy of mechanical clock, wireless telegraph, and railroad, that is, to the tendency toward the technical denaturalization, homogenization, and standardization of time.” You are essentially saying that the acts of colonization and industrialization, and the technical advances that resulted, have modified the ways in which we conceive of and engage with time. How do you feel this has changed in our current digital age, if at all?

The connection between film and railway travel has been commented on by many historians. The invention of the locomotive engine is embedded in the historical emergence of industrial capitalism in the last third of the 18th century, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch has famously described the early nineteenth-century perception of the speed of railroad travel, what he dubbed the “annihilation of space and time”. The speed of the locomotive made travel time so much shorter that it felt as if space itself had been diminished or overcome. Of course, what actually eroded was not so much actual spatial distance, but prior experiential and perceptual paradigms relating time and space to human potentiality. Drawing on his work, Lynne Kirby argues that cinema, which emerged during the golden age of rail, inherits the spectatorial modes of train travel.

I’m not entirely persuaded by critics who posit that the even more compressed, accelerated temporality inaugurated by digital networks has ushered in an epochal change in time consciousness comparable to the steam engine’s “annihilation of time and space”. Robert Hassan, for example, argues that network time obviates clock time because, while online, users feel that local times cease to matter. Interestingly, when I’ve taught his work to undergraduates, they have by and large been wary of this kind of euphoric celebration of digital networks as freeing us from the regime of the clock: they point out that video chatting with someone halfway around the world affords a feeling of real time instantaneity but also requires more synchronization of each person’s local time rather than less (the videoconference can only happen when both people in two continents are both awake). More compelling, I find,

are the writings of feminist new media scholars. Anne Friedberg, one of the co-founders of UCI's Visual Studies program, was one of the first scholars to recognize the temporal dimensions of media convergence—the pervasive erosion of differences between film, television, and computers, and the ensuing loss of medium-based specificity—as having roots in older analog technologies that precede home computing, the fiber optic cable, and the digitalization of images. The VCR, pre-eminent among a host of analog time-shifting devices, allows the spectator an unprecedented, interactive control over the temporality of viewing: the ability to defer watching a live broadcast of a TV show to a more convenient time, or to fast forward, pause, rewind, or repeat snatches of screen texts. Mary Ann Doane notes that the diminishing sense of technologically-mediated delay that we call “real time” was already a property of earlier technologies like instantaneous photography in the nineteenth century and television in the twentieth. Digital connectivity adds to television’s capacity for near-simultaneous recording, transmission, and reception the user’s interactivity.

Next Spring you will be teaching a seminar titled Temporality. What sorts of issues and ideas can students expect to engage with?

Students can expect to explore many of the ideas I've mentioned here in greater depth: the emergence of modern forms of time consciousness based on synchronization and simultaneity; the linked temporal experiences of technologies of travel, communication, and vision (telegraph, railroad, cinema); critiques of homogeneous time by thinkers like Bergson, Benjamin, Chakrabarty, Reinhart Koselleck, and Fabian; critiques of time discipline. There's also much that I'd like to incorporate that I haven't mentioned yet: the rich vein of work on photography, instantaneity, and the moving image by Phillip Prodger and Marta Braun; the Bazinian debates on the long take in film; and contemporary modes of film narration that play with nonlinear, or at least chronologically disjunctive time. What I hope to offer students taking the seminar is a field of possibilities for temporal approaches that they might find productive for their own work.

Professor Lim is an associate professor in the department of Film and Media Studies, and is also the Director of the Visual Studies graduate program.

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