

# Rhizomatic<sup>1</sup> Time and Temporal Poetics in *American Beauty*

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This essay deals with the temporality of film through an examination of narrative, structure and image in Sam Mendes' film *American Beauty* (2000). Beyond film studies, temporality invites an interdisciplinary approach in that the study of time has traditionally been conducted within both the science and humanity faculties, being a focus of attention of both physical scientists and philosophers. Within film studies ideas around time and temporality have tended to emerge from discussions of narrative structure. Exceptions to this often purely narratological focus include Gilles Deleuze's full-length philosophically-based studies of time in cinema – *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989) – and subsequent commentaries that these texts have provoked.<sup>2</sup> What follows takes something from the narratological approach, and at the same time refers to Deleuze's work and also that of Henri Bergson on whom Deleuze draws in his discussion of time.

At the simplest level a film's temporality lies in its very nature; film unfolds in time. More complex temporalities are transmitted through the narrative layer – through presentation of plot order, duration and frequency and the relationship between story, plot and screen time, which can be orchestrated to impart a variety of rhythms – in the editing, framing and relationship between components at every level, from individual photograms, to shots, sequences, scenes and whole films. The presence, absence, and deployment of actors, cameras, settings, props, lighting, sound, dialogue, colour and other aspects of *mise en scène* all contribute to a film's sense of time. And

most obviously time can be a film's subject or theme, either overtly or covertly. Examples of films that feature time as a manifest theme include *Memento* (2000), *Groundhog Day* (1993), *Sliding Doors* (1997), or the many varieties of time-travel narratives (*Frequency* (2000), *Timecop* (1994), *Timescape* (1991), *Twelve Monkeys* (1995)). More frequently the manipulation of plot time provides the structural basis for economical and effective storytelling, through a wide repertoire of narratorial and technical devices, such as flashback, flashforward, elliptical editing, montage sequence, freeze-frame, slow-motion, fast-motion, rewind, dissolves and wipes.

*American Beauty* employs few of these time manipulation techniques, nor does time feature obviously as a manifest theme, but as I seek to show, it does provide an interesting platform for the discussion of certain kinds of embedded filmic temporality. It presents its story sequentially with no transgression of natural temporal order apart from the short pre-title scene that shows Jane being filmed by Ricky. The entire film apparently takes place in the present tense, although chronologically it is the past, being a memory partially narrated, at the point of death, by the principle character, and although screen time is approximately two hours, and story time around a year, plot time occupies apparently no time (or, alternatively, all time), situated in the interstices between life and death. We learn this from the narrator, Lester, who tells us towards the end that he had 'always heard your entire life flashes before your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second is not a second at all, it stretches on forever like an ocean of time'.

Apart from this relatively rare trope of point of death, or post-death narration or action (other films of this type include *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Jacob's Ladder* (1990)), and the interesting moments of slow motion and repetitive motion episodes (which emphasise the fantasy sequences, and the various reactions to the sound of gunfire that signals Lester's death), the film includes several scenes that invite speculation about their temporal layering. These scenes are those cinematically self-reflexive scenes that involve on-screen video recordings. The first scene shows Ricky playing Jane a videotape he has recorded of a paper bag tossing and falling in the wind. He narrates a story about this moment and how significant it was for him and how he recorded the event to remind him. This is a simple image of two people using film, the embodiment of memory, to look into the past. We are in the present of the two characters and we are watching an image of the past (this is all contained within the contextual envelope of the past being remembered and narrated during a 'single' elastic present moment).

We can regard this scene's temporality in two ways: either time is layered, or thickened. In the first model the present moment exists alongside the past moment, represented by the video recording, and any future moments that Ricky will have recourse to the recording to refresh his memory, and past, present and future remain discrete yet stacked together, an atomistic view of time. In the second model the present moment is enriched, or fattened, to contain the past moment and future moments, without any division between the temporal zones. This is a view of time as durational flow that suggests the work of French philosopher Henri Bergson.

Bergson was, ironically, contemptuous of the new medium of film. Nevertheless, Bergson's accounts of memory, motion and time invite filmic comparison and it is hard to read them without seeing the connection between his ideas and the way that they are dealt with in film. This connection is the basis of Deleuze's work in his extended meditation on time and film in his two cinema books, for which he draws on Bergson.

One definition of Deleuze's time-image, explicated in the second of his two cinema books, is that it is located where 'two images are constantly chasing one another round a point where real and imaginary become indistinguishable. The actual image and its virtual image crystallise'.<sup>3</sup> In this image one can see layers of time, and the 'image [. . .] is able to catch the mechanisms of thought'.<sup>4</sup> This scene, then, and, more particularly, two later scenes where the characters film one another, can be used to explicate Deleuze's ideas about time and film.

The temporal organisation of both later scenes, which feature Ricky filming Jane, and then Jane filming Ricky, is the same, so after a brief description of both scenes, I shall concentrate my discussion on the latter. In the first of these scenes Ricky stands at his bedroom window filming Jane who is at her bedroom window in the house opposite. From each character's point of view we see the other framed by their window, and this image resonates with the framing effect of the cinema screen. Beside Ricky, in his frame, is his television monitor in a separate window frame, on which is shown the image of Jane as he films her.

Jane's image as it appears on Ricky's monitor is caught in frame on the left, whilst Ricky is on the right, looking, not directly at Jane, but at her tiny image on the screen of the digital video camera he holds in his hands. Jane, who is aware that Ricky is filming her, is slowly taking off her clothes. This scene foregrounds film's scopophilic economy in a style resonant of Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* (1954), and includes an active, exhibitionist dynamic that underlines film's purpose and desire to be looked at and an awareness of the viewing spectator. A later scene with an equally voyeuristic and exhibitionist economy is the reciprocal scene in which Jane films the naked Ricky while he relates, without apparent discomfort, a potentially difficult and traumatic passage in his own recent history (Figure 1). Ricky is to the left of frame (backed by the window-like sections of his bookcase on which are housed his collection of books, music and videotapes). Jane is centred in the frame.



• Fig. 1: Jane filming Ricky, *American Beauty*

The film's spectator, represented by the camera position over her left shoulder, sees Ricky's image on the small video camera screen (centre), which Jane also watches. Ricky's image also appears on the large television monitor to the right of frame.

This scene therefore gives us an image of the present time (Ricky talking to Jane); an image of the present growing and becoming the recent past (the act of recording); an aural image of the more remote past (Ricky's history); and in Ricky's television image a complex amalgam of the present moment, which, when accessed at any point in the future will be a piece of the past (watching a movie is like looking into the past), brought into the present of that future time.<sup>5</sup> The previously formed past is represented by Ricky's video and music archive, and his books. So this one scene can be thought of as a thickened 'moment' of the present, which contains memory of the past and anticipation of the future, or as layers of spacetime, past, present and future coexisting, or as the present moment sending out rhizomatic shoots connecting it to other, past and future, moments in time. This last metaphor allows us to imagine that Jane and Ricky are actively constructing time (and their own lives, rather than their lives being something that happens to them). Time – past, present, future, and the relationship between them – is 'growing' outwards from the kernel formed by the dynamic of their interconnection. The temporal cultivation is assisted by their honesty about the past. Recollection has a therapeutic value. Ricky has not buried or repressed his potentially traumatic history, but actively keeps the pathways (roots) into the past alive (during an earlier scene he says that he makes recordings because of his need to remember). His carefully archived recordings of past moments are testament to his active anamnesis.

With its dynamic interplay between temporally embedded elements, this scene illustrates Deleuze's notion of the 'crystal-image' where the actual and the virtual form an internal circuit.<sup>6</sup> In the preface to *Cinema 2*, Deleuze writes of the time-image that 'the image itself is the system of relationships between its elements, that is, a set of relationships of time from which the variable present only flows. [. . .] What is specific to the image [. . .] is to make perceptible, to make visible, relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present'.<sup>7</sup> I suggest that this scene is an example of such 'visible . . . relationships of time', that form part of Deleuze's definition of a cinematic time-image.

The order of time represented in this scene clearly shares few characteristics with our common-sense view of time that advances at the rate of a second every second in a single direction. Ricky and Jane's version of temporality is both rhizomatic, in that it reaches into other moments of the past and future, and crystalline, in that it is multiply faceted. These models of time may be used to describe the temporality of human subjectivity. The rhizomatic quality expresses the way in which the present moment is infiltrated by the past through memory and accretions of the unconscious, and by the future through anticipation of what is to come, whilst there is always the desire that present action can redeem (change) the past and protect the future. The crystalline quality expresses the multiple nature of time that we confront in everyday life, which is summed up by social theorist Barbara Adam. She says that 'it is not either winter or December, or hibernation time for the tortoise, or one o'clock, or time for Christmas dinner. It is planetary time, biological time, clock and calendar time, natural and social time all at once'.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, time as we experience it passing is also multi-faceted because, for example, the time of individual consciousness runs at varying speeds depending on context. We notice temporal *change* in the world by witnessing the change registered on clocks and calendars, the changing seasons, nature's cycles of growth and decay, and the biological and

physiological rhythms and changes. Yet the speed of change – the speed of time – of our inner experience alters according to the fluctuations of the condition of our subjective experience (i.e. our journey through time may seem rapid during sleep, when we are enjoying ourselves, or as we age, and slow during a period of anticipation, when we are bored, or when we are very young).

Our variable experience of living in time was at the heart of Bergson's philosophy. He said that 'the duration lived by our consciousness is a duration with its own determined rhythm, a duration very different from the time of the physicist' which he dismissed as homogenous clock time.<sup>9</sup> Bergson wrote this, in the late nineteenth century, during a period still dominated by the legacy of Isaac Newton's views of an absolute and atomistic clockwork universe, and Bergson was therefore innocent of the revolution in ideas about space and time that was to be initiated by Einstein's work on relativity in 1905. One of the consequences of relativity physics is that we now know that the speed of time is relative to the position and velocity of the observer. The time of the physicist, in theory at least, now resembles subjective Bergsonian time in that it also possesses 'its own determined rhythm'. Yet how we live within time in our ordinary, everyday lives in modern Western society still feels Newtonian because we must by necessity organise our lives according to the clock. I shall now go on to suggest, again using *American Beauty* as a model, that although film shares characteristics with both Newtonian and Einsteinian/Bergsonian time, film, as an art of time, has more in common with the latter, and this accounts for one of the pleasures that film has to offer.

The film charts the progress of Lester Burnham's life in one direction from his so-called mid-life crisis from a middle-aged man who feels 'sedated' to a youth who feels 'great', and at the same time the film follows his rapid transition through time in the other direction from life to death. This bi-directional journey unfolds within the regular repetitive structure of the daily cycle wherein occur variable day-to-day events. Such patterns (biological cycles implicated in day-to-

day rhythms, lifecycles initiated at birth and arrested at death, oscillations of regret, nostalgia, anticipation, regret, desire and fulfilment) constitute a human rhythmic design. Harvey Gross asserts that 'it is rhythm that gives time a meaningful definition, a "form"'.<sup>10</sup> The rhythm of which Gross speaks is not the invariable periodic rhythm of homogenous machine time, but the aperiodic heterogenic rhythm of poetry and prose where there is repetition with variation.

Change occurs in time, and time can only be registered through the recognition of change. The antithesis of homogenous time therefore is a rhythmic, changing pattern constituted through presence and absence, action and rest. This natural, human timing can be summarised as repetition with variation. A rhythm of repetition with variation lies at the heart of *American Beauty*'s formal structure and sense of time. The following image of Lester crouching on the path (Figure 2) can be used as a starting point for a discussion to clarify this statement.

Lester is framed within the front area of garden. He is slightly off centre and to the right. The diminishing perspective of the path draws us in towards Lester in the foreground and beyond, towards the bright red colour of the front door in the background. The red front door is the central axis of the background around which plants and columns are symmetrically arranged. This symmetrical framing implies that the viewer should be alert to other balanced arrangements within the image. Yet the shot as a whole is strictly asymmetrical because there are three windows to the left of the door, and only one to the right. The added 'weight' of the extra window, however, is compensated for by Lester, whose presence in front of the missing window provides the necessary balance. Reading the image from left to right, and taking the central door as a kind of pause, we find that the elements to the left of the central door are repeated on the right, but with variation. This style of near symmetry is repeated extensively throughout the film, and examples can be seen in the two dinner table scenes, notable for the combination of head-on tableau composition and depth of field. In both shots shown here



• Fig. 2: Lester Burnham, *American Beauty*

(Figures 3 and 4) Jane occupies the central position, and the frame achieves balance from Carolyn on the left and Lester on the right. The shots differ slightly, so I shall deal with them in turn, starting with the one that takes place first (Figure 3).

In the centre of the table in this shot is a bowl of red roses. The red roses, and the pool of light from the lit candles, direct our attention to the central axis of the frame, in which Jane is positioned, after which the eye scans to either side to collect information about the other characters and their surroundings. The image is only nearly symmetrical because the windows are not equally balanced either side of Jane's central position, and there is a lamp behind Carolyn, but no corresponding item of equal 'weight' behind Lester. The tableau composition, and the symmetrically arranged people, invites us to expect symmetry in all planes, but this is not offered: the background to the left of centre is repeated in the background to the right, but with variation.

The second dinner table scene (Figure 4) has obvious elements in common with the first. The characters are similarly deployed. There are also obvious differences. The table is laid this time not with red roses but with a white bowl on white linen. There is also a marked difference in the characters' body language. In the first scene Lester crouches, diminishing his height, and this reveals his low self-esteem at this point in the film. Carolyn and Jane appear relaxed. In the second scene Lester asserts himself (he has just thrown a plate of asparagus at the wall), and his new attitude is displayed in his upright posture, whilst Carolyn's shock is evidenced by her drawing her body away from the table, placing distance between him and her. Jane looks at her father from beneath her brows, avoiding confrontational eye contact. The lack of red roses, the introduction of the white cloth, and the unlit windows, add an austere note to the second scene which is lacking in the first.



• Fig. 3: First dinner table scene, *American Beauty*



• Fig. 4: Second dinner table scene, *American Beauty*

This, again, is repetition with variance. Apart from the visible differences already mentioned, there is greater weight, rhythmically speaking, in the second scene. This, I suggest, is because the scene is given extra emphasis through repetition, just as a word or phrase gains significance when repeated (or referred back to, in poetry, for example, by a close rhyme). It is recognised as significant because it is a repetition and this significance is supported by the heightened emotion surrounding Lester's character's development. The repeated scene thus reinforces the film's theme of change by forcing comparison between the two. It also involves a moment of 'thickened' time, where the present refers back to an earlier event, and sets up expectations of future repetitions.

This scene takes place near to the beginning of the first act, and the second scene near to the end of the second act. Between these two lies the shot of Ricky and his mother and father watching television (Figure 5). Colonel Fitz is centrally placed with his wife and son either side of him. The lamps, tables, windows, chairs, wife and son are all deployed symmetrically around his reference point, a visual pointer to the dynamics of their relationship. As a triadic family grouping it forms a set with the other two already discussed, which are placed either side of it in the film's chronological order, and once joined by the second dinner table scene, it serves to suggest the near symmetrical pattern that the film apparently endeavours to sustain. Other clues are in the deployment of the three households linked together. On one side of the Lester household is the homosexual couple, the two Jims, and providing balance on the other side is the homophobic colonel.

The near symmetry (where something on one side of a plane is repeated or balanced on the other side, but with variation) has an affinity with rhyme, in that it is the significant arrangement of similar, but not identical, elements in the same way as a poem will use two or more words whose initial consonants differ, but whose main vowel and succeeding consonants agree (might/fight). A number of different 'rhyming' elements can be found in



• Fig. 5: Ricky and his parents, *American Beauty*

*American Beauty*, many of which come to form patterns of expectation and fulfilment. For example, the scene before the opening titles is a section of a later scene of Jane being filmed by Ricky, and is the first of nine occasions on which we see Ricky filming her. A number of car journeys punctuate the film. Lester's voice-over accompanied by an aerial shot appears in the opening scene and is repeated at the beginning and at the end of the third act. And perhaps the most visually striking rhyming elements are the eponymous red roses that are seen throughout as Lester's companion in his home and fantasy lives. The red of the rose, echoed elsewhere in red lipstick, door, clothes, lamp and notably blood, is the most eye-catching colour in an otherwise restrained, generally monochromatic palette. In the shooting scene we see the rose shape in the splatter of Lester's blood on the kitchen wall. This final variation in the rose's image sends a shock-wave back through the preceding film, rewriting what was originally a colourful accessory and accompaniment of sexual reverie into a *memento mori*.

Although apparently existing, as individual images, primarily in the three dimensions of space (and projected in the two-dimensional space of the cinema screen), these images and gestures take on a firm temporal existence once their rhythmic patterns become evident to, and involve, the viewer. This temporality is established precisely through the repeated motifs. The viewer looks for repetition, and at each occurrence makes a link to the previous one and anticipates the next. The rhythmic pattern creates for them, therefore, in their turn, not only moments of 'thickened' time, but also establishes a rhizomatic temporal scheme. This echoes the one created by Jane and Ricky that I

described earlier in which the present moment is actively linked by shoots growing out into the past and into the future. I also offer this patterning as an illustration of Deleuze's 'time-image', a 'system of relationships between [. . .] elements.'<sup>11</sup> Whilst interesting in themselves, as points in space, and as significant narrative moments, the framing, the images and the motifs acquire extra meaning, as rhymes, with the addition of the dimension of time required to form the connective links.

These rhymes also provide the film with a temporal structure that echoes the rhythm of the daily life portrayed, while the changes that occur with each repetition speak of the variable nature of each day and the linear progression that constitutes both story and life. Harvey Gross writes that 'in the arts of time [. . .] rhythmic forms transmit certain kinds of information about the nature of our inner life. This is the life of feeling which includes physiological response as well as what psychologists term affect.'<sup>12</sup> The simplest example of a rhythmic pattern found in film is probably the action and rest inherent in the ignition of curiosity about story events that is (usually) satisfied after an intervening delay.

Film production is a mechanical process reliant on clockwork technology. This process suggests one particular kind of regulated, machine-like, Newtonian time. Time of a different order is also inherent in the story-telling process, and in the rhythms, durations and tempos of visual, audio and kinetic representation of images and sounds. Time is also, as already mentioned, embedded in film's subject matter: in the stories told, and in the iconography of the objects and forms used to tell these stories. To the narrative, film adds the audio and kinetic dimensions of other time-based arts such as music, dance and theatre, and the rhythms of colour and form from static visual arts such as painting and sculpture. These audio and kinetic dimensions contribute to the spectator's sense of immersion in a temporal environment that is sympathetic to human time and addresses the needs of the desiring subject.

The repetition of formal elements (for example, images, settings, colours, shapes, and

textures) create a kind of internal rhyme that appeals to human aesthetic rhythmic sensibilities and further invites the spectator's imaginative interplay. Too much repetition can dull the senses, however, and suggests machinic, context-free regularity, so the filmic metre is relieved by a continuous variety of modulation. When elements are repeated with variations that grow out of meaning and context, I suggest that this temporal pattern speaks of a particularly human rhythmic design, and provides an escape from the 'standardised, context free, homogeneous' clock time 'that structures and times our daily lives'.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The OED definition of 'rhizome' is that it is 'a continuously growing [. . .] underground stem, which puts out lateral roots at intervals'. I have therefore borrowed the word to suggest a kind of temporality that actively reaches out in any direction.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1983); *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1989), hereafter referred to as *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 52.
- 4 Deleuze, *Negotiations*, p. 52.
- 5 The present referred to here is that of the spectator rather than the film. The question of whether film inherently possesses a tense, or is, in fact, tenseless, is a complex one and is outside the scope of this current work. For a further discussion of filmic tense see Sarah Cardwell, 'About Time: Theorizing Adaptation, Temporality, and Tense', *Literature Film Quarterly*, 31:2 (2003), 82–92.
- 6 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, pp. 68–97.
- 7 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. xii.
- 8 Barbara Adam, *Time and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 16.
- 9 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, (1988 [1896]), p. 205.
- 10 Harvey Gross, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry: A Study of Prosody from Thomas Hardy to Robert Lowell* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1965), p. 11.
- 11 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. xii.
- 12 Gross, *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, p. 11.
- 13 Barbara Adam, *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 11.