

Holding onto Moments in *The Age of Innocence*

• Steven Peacock

Whilst researching this article, it came as something of a surprise to discover the absence of collected material on the matter of time in film. The small body of work that does exist divides into two overarching approaches: the 'mapping' of theoretical models onto a film's form, to 'decode' its strategies of measuring and expressing time, and a broader approach to time in film as marrying greater ontological and socio-historical considerations. In both approaches, there is a seemingly irresistible desire to lock down time in the trappings of quasi-scientific language. A good and prominent example of the former grouping is the work of Gilles Deleuze, most notably *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time Image*.¹ There is not the space or time here to unpick, to make clear and precise the meaning of this diptych.² It is interesting to note, however, that even writers offering a critique of Deleuze's schema cannot help adopting the same jabberwocky phrasing. Thus, as Lucio Angelo Privitello takes to task Deleuze's 'reading' of *The Leopard* (Luchino Visconti, 1963), he paraphrases the writer to note that, 'storytelling, or the time-as-series, the acts of legends, divided into noosigns as extendable worlds (seeds), and noosigns as integration of self-aware internal representation (mirroring); and stratigraphic readings of visual images, are all unemployed in supporting the decomposition of the crystal (*Cinema 2*, pp. 274, 275, 279).'³

As an example of the second grouping, of broader contextual considerations, Mary Ann Doane conjoins the shifting markers of time in film as reflecting changing times in the world: 'The pressure of time's rationalisation in the public sphere, and the corresponding

atomisation that ruptures the sense of time as exemplary continuum, produce a discursive tension that strikes many observers as being embodied or materialised in film form itself.'⁴ Whilst the writers are 'mapping the field', the use of terms such as 'crystal', 'atomisation' and 'continuum' declares a desire to fix cinematic time in scientific form, to break it down into its basic components, to understand it better. Yet, time can already be measured and understood in clear, everyday terms, such as hours, minutes, seconds and moments. Further, the comparative model (time-as-crystal, seeds and mirrors) detracts the viewer from a clear understanding of a film's expression of time as it is marked visually, in relation to other points of style, in gestures, movements of camera and character, and in the use of sound and edits. That is to say, scientific analogy and neologisms move us away from 'what is there', on the screen, in plain view.

This article offers an alternative approach to discussing time in film. It adheres to ordinary language, and moves away from a 'mapping' of theoretical models or contextual analysis to concentrate on a film's specifics.⁵ It considers the particular handling of time in a particular film: *The Age of Innocence* (Martin Scorsese, 1993).⁶ It concentrates on details of time by sustaining attention on particular moments of the film, and on the relationship between measurements of time and other points of style. Specifically, the article considers the interplay of time and gesture, and the editing techniques of ellipses and dissolves. Further, it is alert to the way this relationship of style, and the film's conception of time shift, moment to moment. Thus, there is a direct connection between the detail *in*



• Ellen's arm aloft

moments, and the detailing of moments. The article and the film hold their attention on the intricacy and intimacy afforded by moments, as they pass. Both explore how the intensity of a lovers' relationship over decades is expressed in fleeting passages of shared time.

Catching at Moments: Time and Gesture

Set in the 1870s, *The Age of Innocence* charts the affairs of New York aristocracy. It tells the story of Newland Archer (Daniel Day Lewis), who is to be married to May Welland (Winona Ryder), of the powerful Mingott clan. On the eve of the engagement being announced, the Wellands reintroduce a disgraced member of their family to grand society: Countess Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer). Beguiled by the new arrival, Archer is increasingly torn between his love for the Countess and the commitments of his pre-ordained life with May.

Although the intense relationship between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska undulates through every frame of *The Age of Innocence*, it is not presented as a continuous thread of action, coursing from scene to consecutive scene. Rather, the film traces the daily histories of the grand families of New York. The meetings between Archer and Ellen are momentary happenings within a greater set of circumstances. Their encounters punctuate the narrative, rather than dictate it. Yet, the significance of each fragmentary meeting is felt. Each moment of shared time is set as a sequin in the fabric of the film. One of the greatest achievements of *The Age of Innocence* is the way it uses the brevity of each meeting to express a

particular sense of momentousness. Initially, the shortness of the encounters suggests how momentous effects may span from momentary experiences. As the lovers' relationship develops, this notion absorbs further meaning. By necessity the later meetings must be brief, and in public they must appear as innocuous, for fear of the couple being discovered. The possibility of discovery impresses itself on each instant, just as the desire to prolong the moment becomes ever more intense.

The film is sensitive to these changes, expressing the distinct variations present within each fleeting moment of shared time. One of the key ways the film details the particular grades of connection and variation, in each momentary episode, is through the handling of gesture. Two meetings between Archer and Ellen are addressed below. The two moments are seen as distinct fragments, contained within different social occasions. Yet, at the same time, the moments are also seen as bound by a fine line of continuity, expressed through patterns of the characters' gestures and behaviour. In both instances, each gesture is performed in a public arena. The characters shape each socially asserted and assertive move to conceal an offering of intimacy.

A Momentary Suspension

In our first views of Countess Olenska, Michelle Pfeiffer performs two gestures that are at once declamatory and intimate. Before this sequence, we have only seen Olenska in two, fleeting long shots, through the inquisitive lens of Larry Lefferts' lorgnettes. Larry Lefferts (Richard E. Grant) devotes himself to training his eye on the conduct of New York society. With an icy intake of breath, he catches a glimpse of Olenska as she enters the opera box, dipping down into her seat. Alerted to Olenska's presence by Lefferts' biting commentary, Newland Archer ascends the stairs to the box, paying his respects to his fiancé, her mother, and the returned Countess.

Rather than convey the moment of first acquaintance as a gentle prelude to a new relationship, the film suggests how Archer is

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immediately held by Ellen's presence. The introduction takes the form of a momentary enchantment. The camera gradually carries towards the Countess, and a blurred background of the opera audience washes into view. The movement sets her blue dress against a sea of black suits punctuated with white breastplates. At once, the view contrasts Ellen's singular presence with that of the crowds.

Through two brief gestures, the film creates a magical suspension of time, and expresses the momentousness of the instant. Time stretches with the extension of Ellen's arm, first to Archer in greeting, then over the crowds below. When the Countess raises her hand to be kissed, she is unprepared for an awkward reaction, and causes a moment of embarrassment. Through a clipped series of cuts, her hand hangs in the air, waiting to be embraced. As Archer finally decides to shake hands instead, the film moves out to a long shot, showing Ellen's arm remaining aloft, uncertain. The movement through different views elongates the moment, emphasising its awkwardness. At the same time, the treatment of the moment suggests the immediate enrapture of Archer. Ellen's gesture is somewhat forceful. It fixes Archer, holding him in the instant. The flitting movement through the shots conveys the sense of a moment caught up in a quickly shifting mix of embarrassment and fascination.

Ellen's second gesture slows the moment more emphatically. Expressing delight to Archer of her return to New York's high society, she gracefully passes her fan over the spectators below. It appears at once as a gesture of fondness for her environment, and of dominion. With a single wave of the fan, Ellen casts a spell over the galleries. As well as enchanting Archer, the gesture is seen to inflect the entire, grand scene of the opera. As the fan passes over the blurred wash of black and white outfits, it vivifies the sight of the crowd, drawing it to our attention. Equally, the gesture expresses Ellen's wish to subdue the opera audience, to send it to sleep, to bewitch it as she bewitches Archer.

Moving out to long shot, the film gently releases the hold of Ellen's spell over the

galleries. In turn, the movement opens up a view that conveys the gesture's continuing hold over Archer. A single trace of blue light cuts through the background of suited spectators towards the stage. The origin of the blue light is ambiguous. On one level, it appears as the bright beam of a stage spotlight. Equally though, it appears as a vestige of Ellen's spell, tracing the waft of her fan, and the iridescent blue of her dress. The intensity of the moment hangs in the air. The effects of a declamatory gesture are subtly conveyed: showing the lingering impact of a passing instant. After a beat, the camera withdraws, gliding down into the orchestra pit. The film refocuses its attention on the stage. It chooses not to show the separation of Archer and Ellen at the end of the opera. Through these choices, the film encapsulates their first meeting. It embeds the image of Archer and Ellen as a flawless gem in the narrative. Caught in time, the moment is free from the discomposure of the couple taking their leave and bidding farewell.

Slowing Down

The tension of a passing encounter appearing at once inconsequential and profoundly significant, lies at the heart of the couple's relationship. It reaches its apogee in the moment of Ellen's move towards Archer, at the 'Duke of St. Austrey dinner'. Following an informal 'passing through' at Mrs. Mingott's house, the Duke's dinner returns the lovers to the oppressive environs of a grand occasion. The unspoken purpose of the dinner is to reassert Ellen's position within the aristocracy of New York society. Consequently, she becomes the centre of attention. This



- The blue light

palpable sense of concentration heightens the effect of her move across the room. As the film's narrator (Joanne Woodward) observes, 'It was not the custom in New York society for a woman to leave one man and cross the room for another.' Rather, the woman should 'wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side'.⁷ Yet, as Joy L. Davis remarks, 'Ellen [. . .] not comprehending the concept of passive "angel", audaciously solicits an interview with Archer.'⁸

This transitory movement and moment form the nucleus of the entire film. It holds within it the instant of New York society awakening to the attraction between the two lovers. Equally, Ellen's move advances the relationship, intensifying the possibilities of shared time. Echoing the effect of the opera-box meeting, the act forms a momentary enchantment. Here, a brief passage of slowed movement contains the beguiling hold of the moment. The decision to use the declarative, protracting technique of slow motion, at this point, is well judged. It registers the momentous impact that Ellen's daring gesture has on the amassed elite, like a collectively drawn breath. The film achieves this sensation without having to recourse to close-up shots of shocked faces or muttering cliques. The collective effect is felt through the suggestive use of a single stylistic device. First, Ellen rises from her seat into the flow of slow motion, as if stepping serenely into a gale. The effect is of graceful calm, whilst expressing the overwhelming significance of her gesture. As Ellen draws near to Archer, the film alters the speed of the moment to convey the quickening of emotion. The camera arcs around to Archer. The fluid movement speeds up the moment without breaking its continuity. It is a final rush, conveying at once the guests' quietly scandalized realisation that Ellen means to speak to Archer, and a quickening of pulses for the two characters on the cusp of a greeting.

Having brought us to the point of this crucial, public meeting with meticulous measure, the film composes the brief exchange with equal acuity. Responding to the change in pace, the

camera now holds still on the couple as they sit together. Through its composition, the moment appears suspended in private time. In focusing closely on just these two characters, the position of the camera pockets them away from the greater activity of the dinner. As Leslie Stern remarks, 'The Countess Ellen Olenska moves across the room in a trajectory that erases the vastness of space and simultaneously opens up an aporia.'⁹ Shaping the moment with senses of suspension and enclosure, the film creates a bubble, affording the characters short-lived sanctuary.

At the same time, the fact of the greater community's presence is implicitly apparent. Although the camera fixes the couple tight into their private corner, the angle of this view shows the characters looking out intermittently onto the room. Again, the film expresses the full impact of the couple's rendezvous without adopting a forceful stance. All the piercing glances and twittering of the crowds are distilled and conveyed in the exact positioning of the camera: shooting its own sideways peek at the couple. Echoing the form of the opera-box encounter, the meeting is held in a tension of public scrutiny and private sanctuary. For the characters, the delicate balancing of the situation is impossible to sustain. The bubble has to burst.

The exclusivity of the moment is pierced with devastating fineness, just as the conversation reaches a quiet climax:

Archer: You know, you're amongst friends here.

Ellen: Yes, I know, that's why I came home.

As the camera absorbs Ellen's purposeful response, fixing on her smile, a soft trip of footsteps bleeds into the soundtrack. May's entrance into the room is introduced as whisperingly, devastatingly intrusive. The sounds of her footsteps and the rustle of her gown scuffle into the muted chamber, across the rhythm of the piano interlude. The patter is heard before May is seen, whilst the camera's gaze lingers on Ellen. In an instant, the film delicately binds the two women together, whilst puncturing the suspended moment on the couch. Ellen hurriedly arranges a further

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rendezvous with Archer, proposing a firm date ('tomorrow afternoon'). Despite his prior ignorance of any such arrangement, Archer quickly accedes, in step with Ellen's game. Standing to bid Ellen farewell, Archer rises to the occasion. The substance of each meeting tapers into the hope of securing another. The couple use each shared moment as a springboard into the next. Caught in these 'trajectories of desire' Archer and Ellen are unable to appreciate each instant as it presents itself, as it passes. From moment to moment, they create for themselves a virtual relationship of prognostication. Although each fragmentary meeting connects in a course of subtle continuity, of meaningful moves and gestures, each is hollowed out in anticipation of future occasions.

Motions of Fixity

After Archer's wedding to May, the sense of the hollowness of his time with Ellen increases. Before the marriage, the lovers are bound on a path of forward planning, wistfully disregarding each moment in anticipation of the next. Now the film shows Archer endeavouring to create a sense of intransigence. He tries to immerse himself in each stolen moment with Ellen. Yet, the attempt comes too late. Instead of sharing a current of continuity, the brief meetings are linked by a common sense of futility, of Archer's efforts to gather the disparate moments as they ebb away. Two instants convey the paradox of the lovers' situation most distinctly. Again, the film's attention to gesture carries the paradox and complexity of the couple's relationship. First, Archer's desire to gather moments with Ellen is



- Ellen crosses the room

explicitly expressed in his decision to 'save' an afternoon in Boston: 'Oh, I think for a change I'll just save it, instead of spending it.' Then, the sense of shared time slipping away reaches a pinnacle in the New York Museum.

The idea of a saved afternoon combines the desire to savour the passing moment with a wish to preserve it. Taking his leave from May and his family, Archer searches for Ellen in Boston, to capture some time with her. The film infuses the scene of their meeting with Archer's strive for fixedness. As the couple sits side by side on the park bench, he bargains with Ellen ('Just give me the day.') Acceding, Ellen is encouraged to write a note to cancel her appointment with Monsieur Rivière (Jonathan Pryce). As Archer presents her with his 'new stylographic' pen to write the note, a slight gesture encapsulates the desperate intensity of the occasion. As the camera looms over the bench, Archer stabs the pen in the air, loosening the ink. After recoiling from the action, Ellen scratches Rivière's name on the card. There is a sense of alarm contained in the giddiness of the moment.

Moreover, the act is charged with a sense of Archer's quietly frenzied purpose. It is performed as an entreaty, of Ellen signing a contract to spend the afternoon with him. As well as providing a sense of assuredness, the deed allows Archer to believe he is able to somehow preserve or own this brief time. However, as the afternoon progresses, the idea of a fixed bond with any passing moment is shown to be hopelessly misconceived. The film expresses the sense of time slipping away as the couple sits on the veranda. Here, in the dying moments of the day, all human presence fades away. In two dissolves, the characters slowly disappear from the setting.

In the couple's final private meeting at the New York Museum, this sense of futility encompasses each beat of the encounter. The chosen setting of a museum emphasises Archer's desire to preserve his time with Ellen. However, beside the mummies and vacuum jars, the lovers pass like ghosts. The substance of a brief rendezvous passes from ephemeral to ethereal. Their time together seems not to merely slip

away, but as already spent. The final encounter exists as an impalpable trace of their relationship, a diaphanous remembrance of things past. The meeting is formed of tiny, gossamer fragments. The characters are repeatedly glimpsed in passing dissolves (with Archer separated from Ellen in the rhythm of the fades; as one appears, the other disappears). The couple converses in disconnected echoes. Their words are formed as wisps of sound, fading in time with their images. As a whole, the moment acquires a gauze-like texture, woven out of translucent glimpses, near-touches and whispered voices. Whereas the characters once appeared to be able to create momentary suspensions of time, each gesture and utterance is now stripped of substance, borne into the past.

Elisions of a Lifetime: Ellipses and Dissolves

The scattered, passionate meetings of Archer and Ellen are encompassed by the broader circumstances of 'society life'. Yet, the surrounding affairs of New York share particular aspects with the lovers' brief rendezvous. Each encompassing scenario is presented in a particular form of compression. At points, extensive periods are condensed into passing moments. At others, the film trims and bridges individual happenings in a 'society event', compressing even the slightest occurrences of the elite world. As a result, all events surrounding the lovers' meetings take the form of compact vignettes.

The Age of Innocence condenses each episode with ellipses and dissolves. In each case, the film maintains a sense of the whole of each event (each dinner, concert and ball), whilst abridging the time taken for the occasion to pass. At the same time, the particular meaning of each event is expressed through a particular use of ellipses. Three key grades of compression can be noted, together with corresponding instances to be analysed further. First, at certain points, the film creates tiny compressions of time, eliding mere minutes or seconds of a passing action. It chooses to present the 'Duke of St. Austrey dinner' in this way. Second, on other occasions,

the film uses ellipses to convey the evanescence of a single, extended event. Both the wedding and honeymoon of Archer and May are presented accordingly. Finally, in its penultimate sequence, the film compacts many years of Archer's life into a single, unbroken movement of dissolves. Thus, differences in amounts of time compressed (seconds, minutes, days, years) are coupled with correspondingly distinct styles of compression.

To mark the occasion of the Duke of St. Austrey dinner, the film marries repeated ellipses of tiny increments of time with a focus on minutiae. The course of the dinner itself is shaped by multiple, dissolving views of ornate articles, set out for the guests to admire. Throughout the event, the attention of the camera is on the *objets* and paraphernalia of 'grand entertaining', not on the guests themselves. In turn, the significance of the occasion, for the characters, is refracted through this close study of trappings. Primarily, the steady focus and magnification of little, delicate objects makes a prominent point to guests and viewer alike. As Joy L. Davis remarks of this scenario, 'Crystal, china, centrepieces, silverware advertise their [the Van der Luydens'] affluence, their cultural heritage, and their aesthetic taste.'¹⁰ Further, the scrutiny allows the camera to obsess over the objects, as the people of this world would do. (Equally, it permits our own close inspection of the trappings.)

The film deepens the effect through the style of its movements through the views. As well as magnifying the articles, the camera pans slowly over them, as if traversing a meticulously crafted landscape. Moreover, whilst maintaining a fluid pan over the objects, the film condenses its perusal into a series of dissolves. A graceful, passing view of one decorative plate or bowl bleeds into another. Through the dissolving moves, the film captures a particular manner of scrutiny. In abstract form, it conveys the way the guests of this elite event might survey the scene. Thus, in the smoothness of its close passes over the ornate pieces, the camera performs an intense, yet apparently casual inspection of the items. Further, in bleeding together views of



• A pocket of privacy

small clusters of articles, the film captures the sense of someone 'taking it all in, all at once', whilst noting, in passing, individual details.

Furthermore, in *The Age of Innocence*, the careful patterning of views suggests an all-encompassing sense of order. The regular pace of each dissolve to the next piece matches the symmetry of each move. The film measures out the entire dinner in this fashion, passing through close dissolves of crystal and china to flowers and food. The rigid structure of the moves is held in tension with their easy grace. As such, there is a mechanical elegance to the movements. With each dissolve, the film shows how, for the aristocracy, each movement is bound by a strict ordinance of rituals and routines.

Even the slightest act is imbued with this governing sense of ceremony. As dinner is served, the camera continues its fluent appraisal of the event. It attends to the fine detail of the food. Each dish has the same, ornate elegance as the trinkets on display. The camera focuses for a moment on a meticulously presented platter of whole salmon. Through a series of dissolves, the film traces the serving of the dish, from platter to individual plate.

The action takes the form of a 'momentary ceremonial.'¹¹ It is a fleeting moment, fluidly presented in the continuous glide of the camera, and through the bleed of the dissolves. Yet, this trifling act is performed with great procedure. The food is served with fastidious care by the waiting staff. The camera's trace matches the precise, dignified moves of the waiter. It continues the symmetrical patterning of moves across the objects, passing right to left, left to right. In turn, the rhythms of this minor act, of

the serving of one dish, feed into the flow of the event of the dinner as a whole.

Moreover, the mechanical grace of the act conceals a crucial omission. Through a dissolve, the act of the waiter skinning the fish before serving is elided. In its place, the film bleeds in an intermediary view of another dish, of a plate of prepared oysters. It offers a momentary diversion before dissolving back to the dressed fish. The miniscule, seemingly inconsequential elision carries a significant resonance. In the dissolve and ellipsis, the film removes the 'vulgar' sight of the fish being skinned. At the same time, the elision is barely noticeable, as the moment is carried through in a rhythmic flow of moves and views. Thus, the 'unsightly moment' goes unseen. For the members of this aristocratic elite, all activities they consider to be unsightly are elided, however trivial or momentous. Through the ellipsis of a passing moment, the film shows how the mechanical grace of rituals and routines absorbs such 'un-pleasantries' with absolute ease.

The occasion of Archer's marriage to May is presented with similar, mechanical grace. Again, the film uses a careful patterning of dissolves and ellipses to compress a grand society event, and to measure the ceremonious form of the affair. Yet, in this instance, the compact views are individually inflected. The precise use of dissolves and ellipses expresses Archer's personal overview of the occasion. Whereas each moment spent with Ellen appears enchantingly prolonged, his wedding to May is quickly passed over, marked in a matter of minutes. The film's brief treatment of the event makes it appear more as a glancing disturbance in the order of things, than a benchmark occasion. As such, the elliptical views form more of a contraction, than a concentration, of events.

Both wedding and honeymoon are presented as lifeless occasions. They are marked in a dissolving flow through fixed tableaux. The film bleeds together views of the wedding gifts – glasses, silverware – as the narrator recounts the bare-bones facts of the day. In turn, the honeymoon – an extended trip to Europe – is compressed into a passing series of painted

vistas. In both instances, fleeting images of *objets d'art* replace views of the newlyweds themselves. Equally, the guests' presence remains invisible, or rather, is represented by the gifts. For the honeymoon, all human activity is sketched onto canvas, as static illustrations. Throughout the sequence, people are substituted for 'things', by a series of tokens. Whilst noting the overwhelming importance of such trappings for this society, the film appears to strip the wedding of human involvement. The only activity of the inert scene comes from the camera's movement over the fixed compositions, and the passing dissolves through the views. Thus, the procedure of the social ceremony – the wedding day, the honeymoon – is marked by, reduced to, the mechanical process of the film's own movements.

Yet, at the same time, the particular nature of each mechanical movement can be seen to express a form of human influence. Primarily, the influence of the aristocracy as a collective can be detected. It guides the form of the couple's matrimonial affairs. Marking the honeymoon, the camera's rhythmic tracing of painted scenes (from top to bottom, left to right) recalls its strictly ordered moves at the Duke's dinner. In this instance, the patterned movements are carried out as the narrator dictates the details of the occasion, of how the couple travels to 'all the expected places.' Accordingly, the film skips through a series of impersonal, painted views of London and Paris: Westminster, the National Gallery, Tuilleries Gardens. Thus, the tight order of camera moves matches the brisk 'stepping through' of the 'expected' vistas. Altogether, there is a sense of the pre-ordained, of society's government of the couple's every move. Their honeymoon is prescribed by 'form'. Convention and tradition strip the occasion of individual personality, reducing it to a series of required moves.¹² The use of dissolves heightens the sense of the couple being effortlessly guided through the event.

At the same time, if we are to understand the sequence as infused with Archer's own sensibility, then these mechanical rhythms of compression can also be seen as particularly

expressive of his passage through the event. In this brief sequence, the film marries a sense of Archer being 'carried through' the wedding (by prescribed procedure), with a sense of his personal, emotional detachment from the event. On one level, the camera's course over the surface of things, of gifts and canvas, conveys the superficial nature of Archer's involvement in the occasion. Equally, the tight order of the moves expresses, in abstract form, a sense of Archer 'going through the motions.' Camera and character move in step and with pliancy through a set pattern of events.

In the closing moments of the sequence, the film uses a final ellipsis to suggest how Archer also sleepwalks through an extended period of his marriage, after the wedding. The couple is shown in close-up, in the honeymoon carriage. Gradually, from the far sides of the frame, the film blacks out the image, pushing inwards. The movement (together with the narrator's elegiac phrasing) gives the scene a sense of closure. Shutters are being softly drawn on the honeymoon. Archer's tentative hold on events loosens entirely. It is as if both Archer and the film are drifting into sleep. Yet, the sense of closure is short-lived, the sleep interrupted. After a moment's pause, the scene re-awakens. The black shutters of the fade open again. The characters are once more seen sitting side by side in carriage. However, within this brief, sleepy wink of a fade (and following the narrator's commentary), the film compresses the first six months of Archer's marriage to May. Compared to the iridescence of moments spent with Ellen, this period is so vapid for Archer that it disappears, in the fug of a doze. Through the sequence, to the last ellipsis, the film expresses Archer's indifference to the passage of his life with May. Ultimately, he submits himself to eddying turns of the social 'season', allowing procedure to carry him. (A further, white fade engulfs the scene, carrying the couple forward in time, to May's triumphant performance at the Archery Club.) The hollowness of his experience is as much marked by the eclipsed moments between events, as it is by the evanescence of the occasions themselves.

Towards the end of the film however, one moment with May is made piercingly alive for Archer. Any remaining hope of his to rekindle a relationship with Ellen is definitively snuffed out, as May announces her pregnancy. In an instant, Archer is locked into his life in New York. His vision of the world, previously filled with images of Japan and plans to travel, suddenly contracts. You feel he can see the remaining years of his life spanning in front of him, heretofore complete.¹³ The film combines all of these sensations in one fluid movement. As the news is heard, the camera arcs away from Archer, around the room. Again, Archer's life is being carried along in eddies of governing circumstance. This time, with all prospects of seeing Ellen again now gone, his submission is absolute. Eddies collect into a single, slow swirl of passing time. Decades of Archer's life now quickly dissolve in the unbroken arc of the circling camera. The portrait of his personal history is reduced to a single vignette of a single room. As the camera continually traces around the chamber, the sense of entrapment, of 'going nowhere, going round in circles' is starkly expressed.

The affairs of Archer's family life also appear to contract into this one small space; as the narrator observes, 'It was the room in which most of the real things of his life had happened.' Through ellipses, significant events are compressed together: the christening of Archer's eldest son Ted, the announcement of his daughter Mary's engagement, her wedding day. Through dissolves, the events are reduced to glimpses of defining gestures: the baptism of the child, embraces between May and Mary, Archer and Mary. Each glimpsed event, although significant, appears intangible. The continuous revolution of the camera around the room, and the rhythmic flow of dissolves disallow a prolonged marking of the events individually. As soon as it is witnessed, each event ebbs into the governing flow of motion. Momentous occasions are seen in passing, passed over.

This sense of impalpability extends to the views of the room itself. Through a gradual progression of ellipses, the design of the room alters by slight degrees. From the middle of the

room, the camera traces smoothly over the walls and furnishings. Through dissolves, the style of particular objects – table lamps, a desk chair – changes with the period. The changes are moderate, yet collectively transformative. Altogether, the film creates a continuously shifting sketch of the room, re-designing itself through the years. As a result, this solid place, filled with a lifelong collection of personal mementos (the sculpture of May's hands; the photograph of her archery triumph), is presented in a constant state of flux. The established and fixed parts of Archer's life are also insubstantial, uncertain.

The film deepens the sense of displacement through the measure of each dissolve. It inverts the expected relationship between the amount of time elided and the amount of space covered in a dissolve. In this sequence, the more fractional a move, the more extensive the temporal period covered. Thus, instead of an inchmeal movement between two points in the room conveying the ellipsis of a few seconds (as in the 'Duke's dinner' sequence), here it compresses many years of Archer's history. The dissolve is almost imperceptible. The camera passes slowly across Archer's desk. In the move, the image of the desk chair bleeds into a more modern design. In the space of the bleed, the film seamlessly connects together the moment of Ted's christening with the announcement of Mary's engagement.

Conversely, a more prolonged and discernible dissolve is performed without the elision of any time at all. For Ted's baptism, the camera strokes past the assembled group of Archer, family, and priest. A lap dissolve moves through views of the wetting of the baby's head. Yet, the move does not condense the moment, or connect it immediately with a future event. Instead, the movement chimes with a moment described in the previous section, of Archer watching Ellen across the room at the Duke's dinner. In both instances, the film breaks the continuity of a particular view without interrupting the flow of the sequence. Whereas in the earlier instance the effect conveys the intensity of Archer's gaze, on this occasion it emphasises his displacement



• Archer prepares the pen

from an event. The dissolve fragments the sight of the baptism as it takes place. In troubling the association between the amount of time and space covered in a dissolve, the film expresses Archer's sense of disconnection from the events of his enclosed world.

Throughout the compact scene, the camera traces the circumference of the room, from a fixed central position. In turn, the 'real things' of Archer's life are performed against a mercurial backdrop of changing surfaces. Events and objects shift together to form a tableau, moving continuously across the walls of the room. The centre of the room remains unseen. From this perspective, the film encapsulates the sense of Archer's life with May as hollow, as devoid of a core. The absence of Ellen creates a lack at the centre of his being. In this brief moment, Archer's later life is reduced to a series of ephemeral images, encompassing a void.

Concluding Remarks

It has been the aim of this article to show that the consideration of time in film does not have to lead, by design, to the application of quasi-scientific language, or the 'mapping' of theoretical models. Rather, it posits the suggestion that, in holding onto moments in a particular film, in finding words to match one's experience of them, a clear understanding of cinematic time may be achieved (and, in turn, one's understanding of a particular film enriched). In *The Age of Innocence*, precise measures and modulations of time are inextricably linked to the shifting grades of intimacy felt between the film's protagonists. A

close concentration on moments from the film, through each section, enables a focus on the intricacies of its handling of time. Equally, the act of sustained attention reveals the synthesis of distinct points of style: time and gesture, movement of camera and character, framing and fixing an instant, ellipses and dissolves. At the same time, the concentration on singular elements shows how different techniques and measurements of time reveal distinct aspects of intimate expression.

Precise articulations of time shape the dramatic pitch of the film, and carry delicate negotiations between the characters. The relationship of Archer and Ellen achieves a sense of coherence and development through words and gestures, across disparate spaces and times. In stolen moments, the couple compresses meaning in brief exchanges. The film traces across the length and breadth of New York aristocracy, marking time as a series of fashionable and extravagant events. It charts Archer's relationship with Ellen through the events and in more private rendezvous, across the years. Through dissolves and ellipses, the film brings both sets of circumstances together. At first, stolen moments of shared time are richly textured, savoured as they pass. Ultimately, the expansive world of society is measured out as a vast, hollow experience for Archer, when he is apart from Ellen. Events and objects shift and slide together as empty tableaux. Whilst desire remains, the possibility for Archer to hold onto moments with Ellen slips away.

A concentration on details of the film has allowed for an appreciation of the film's concentrations of details. In each interpretation and discrimination, the article seeks to 'do justice to the visual and aural specifics of a film's expressive personality'.¹⁴ In doing so, the study brings to light a particular trait of the film's personality, of its explorations and expressions of time. The article advances a vocabulary of criticism to match the rhetoric of the film, to appreciate the work's handling of time. Detailed consideration of this achievement allows for a greater understanding of the designs and possibilities of time in cinema.

- Holding onto Moments in *The Age of Innocence*

Notes

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1992); *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1989).
- 2 For a noteworthy appraisal of Deleuze's writings, see Luc Moullet, 'The Green Garbage Bins of Gilles Deleuze', *Rouge.com*, 07: 2005, www.rouge.com.au.
- 3 Lucio Angelo Privitello, 'The Impossible Language of Natural Aristocracy: Deleuze's Misreading of Visconti's *The Leopard*', *Senses of Cinema*, 05: 37, www.sensesofcinema.com.
- 4 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 9.
- 5 The article from this point onwards is an abridged version and collation of passages taken from my doctoral thesis, 'Magnificent intimacy: a relationship of style in contemporary Hollywood cinema' (University of Kent, 2005). The second section ('A Momentary Suspension') has also been presented as a paper at the University of Kent at a symposium on gesture in film. Thank you to Andrew Klevan for his continual support, and for helping me refine my understanding of *The Age of Innocence*.
- 6 This article does not claim *The Age of Innocence* to have been critically ignored. There is a substantial, pre-existing body of writing which recognises the film as intelligent and of value. However, rather than highlighting the particular, individual concerns of the film, the majority of critical attention on *The Age of Innocence* is devoted to comparative analysis of the film with its source novel (see, for example, Philip Horne, 'The James Gang', *Sight and Sound*, January 1998, 8:1, 19–21; and Karli Lukas, 'Creative Visions: (De)Constructing "The Beautiful" in Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence*', *Senses of Cinema*, 3:25). In general, although the writers see the work as a 'good adaptation', they refrain from exact accounts of the particular measure and manner of the film's achievements. (A notable exception is Leslie Stern's essay, 'Time's Covetousness: The Age of Innocence', in *The Scorsese Connection* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 200–226). If the film is not discussed in terms of its 'fidelity' to the source text, it is positioned in relation to broader contexts: within the director's body of work, in relation to generic formulae, within ideological or socio-political frameworks. Whilst many of these comparative and contextual pieces offer worthy considerations, little attention has been paid to the particular merits of the film as film, in and of itself. These treatments are symptomatic of a failure to sustain a discussion of a film's detail.
- 7 Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Appleton Century, 1948), p. 60.
- 8 Joy L. Davis, 'The Rituals of Dining in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*', *Midwest Quarterly*, 34:4, 1993, 471–472.
- 9 Leslie Stern, 'Time's Covetousness', p. 225.
- 10 Joy L. Davis, 'The Rituals of Dining in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*', p. 466.
- 11 In 'Time's Covetousness', Leslie Stern describes another scene in the film thus, as Archer delicately removes Ellen's glove in a stolen moment 'in carriage': 'Through a series of dissolves he takes one of his gloves off and touches a pearl button on her wrist. The buttons are undone. Prising apart the glove's opening he sinks his face into the inside of her wrist. A momentary ceremonial.' p. 225.
- 12 In the same vein, Mrs. Mingott presses upon May the necessity to have her hands sculpted by 'the great Rochet.' This May dutifully performs, on the honeymoon trip.
- 13 Martin Scorsese provides an insightful passage of commentary to further this notion: 'Later on I figured out that as she gets up from the chair we should do it in three cuts, three separate close-ups because I think he'll never forget that moment the rest of his life. I think he'll play it back many times. When she gets up I thought we should play it back like a memory. It's a medium shot, then a shot of her coming into the frame, and then a third one – she almost grows in stature. It's just his perception, his memory of what it's going to be like.' Taken from 'Street Smart: An Interview with Martin Scorsese', Gavin Smith, *Film Comment* (May/June 1998), p. 72.
- 14 Andrew Klevan, 'The mysterious disappearance of style: some critical notes about the writing on *Dead Ringers*', in Michael Grant (ed.) *Dead Ringers* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997), pp. 163–164.