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Temporality

Yvonne Förster

The concept of temporality is closely linked to modernity, postmodernity, and the contemporary *conditio humana*. The term covers a variety of related concepts such as finitude, progress, future, memory, or acceleration, to name just a few. Only with the modern era, the concept of care for the future emerged (Dux 1992). Temporality in its various aspects is a deeply historical concept. Though there is a more basic dimension of temporality at stake in the ontogenesis of time in living creatures, cultural aspects of time are dynamic and changing.

Postmodern concepts of time and temporality present a critique of modernity with its ideas of progress and homogeneous time. The idea that time is a universal flux from the past into the future or vice versa has long lost its credibility, with the horrors of the Second World War at the latest. That is the reason why the temporal concept of progress has been widely criticized in the humanities. Concepts of time, like the idea of a continuing progress of society or eschatological scenarios have always had an impact on culture and the value of life. With industrialization, urban life and the omnipresence of **technology** emerged. Within this historical atmosphere of the early twentieth century, time became more perceptible than before, because technology and industrial production produced new rhythms that structure life in different ways than before. Natural rhythms loose

200 importance and technological rhythms became more important. Those technological concepts of time structure historical and biographical narratives as well as everyday life. Instead of a continuous flux of time, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries envision time as fragmented and **perspectival**.

How can the concept of time then be a tool of critique? The way time is conceptualized influences narratives of history and individual identities. One very influential concept of time and temporal becoming is the arrow of time. In this image, time is a continuous and homogeneous flux that is future-oriented, with which constant progress in history is associated. This image has been widely criticized. One of the pioneers of this critique is Walter Benjamin. In his considerations in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), which he wrote facing the threats of the Second World War, he uses Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* to illustrate his critique of the concept of historical progress:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, *he* sees a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. (1940, 257)

Benjamin's famous interpretation of Klee's work makes palpable how historical progress is a dangerous idea, oblivious of the catastrophes that human culture produces. His concept of *dialectical materialism* implies a concept of time that focuses on materiality and simultaneity. These features are absent in traditional concepts of time, as for example Immanuel Kant's transcendental concept of time exemplifies, in which time is essentially non-materialistic (subjective and ideal) and homogeneous (an inner form of intuition, Kant 1997, 426/A 369).

Historical time for Benjamin is not “empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]” (Benjamin 1940, 261). 201

The notion of empty time implies an abstract structure, which can be filled by projects and ideas. Empty time is an intellectual construct that is suited to modern ideas of human self-creation and perfection, of rationality and progress. Benjamin contrasts this notion of time with an image of material temporality. His idea is that the historical moment is a compound of past, present, and future within historical materiality. He compares history to the temporal aspects of fashion, which represents a form of historical materiality, a material phenomenon, which is in itself temporal: “The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger’s leap into the past” (261). This *tiger’s leap* suggests discontinuity as well as material simultaneity. Benjamin’s idea of historical time implies the simultaneous presence of different layers of time, all present in the actual moment. A historical chain of events appears as progress because these events are represented in a certain narrative that makes sense of the “piles of wreckage,” as Benjamin puts it. Benjamin’s aim is to show how the apparent ratio and continuity of history is a product of a narrative that links events causally. What historians ought to do, according to Benjamin, is to understand the temporal constellations that events are made of and how the present comprises past times or “chips of messianic time” (263).

For another model of non-homogeneous temporality we might turn to cinematic time. Cinema experiments with various spatio-temporal forms of representation, such as the French movement *Nouvelle Vague* did. This allows for a representation of different temporal and perceptual strata in one scene. These techniques of montage do not adhere to rules of narrativity anymore, but invent a form of temporal clustering, which represents a critique of linear narration. Gilles Deleuze (1985) presents

202 two different conceptions of the cinematic image: One that is structured through movement (movement-image) and hence constitutes a continuous representation of the world; and one that is structured by time, what he then calls time-image. The time-image, according to Deleuze, is representative of precisely the cinema of his time, because techniques of cinematic representation also changed with the Second World War. Similar to Benjamin, who criticized the conception of historical time that orders events along a continuous causal chain, Deleuze diagnoses a change that occurred in the production of images.

New techniques of montage and camera-use create images, where time is not the measure of movement anymore. The time-image is a compound of past, present, and future as well as a presentation of different modes of consciousness. The driving logic in those images is neither simple action, nor a causal chain of events that leads to a certain result, but rather it is time itself. Film becomes a critique of the logic of progress, and it furthers an idea of original production (primacy of non-propositional subconsciousness) as opposed to capitalistic production, which creates a sense of need, negativity, and estrangement. The time-image is constituted by means of montage-techniques and can simultaneously represent different times and modes of perception, such as a memory of the past within an image of the present or the co-presence of undiscernible layers of the actual and the virtual, such as Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (USA 1947). The time-image thus makes visible layers of time which are neither tantamount to the present moment nor do they simply represent the history that led to one individual moment in present time. Cinematic images become a medium that is able to make visible fragments of time and their intertwining. Not only past, present, and future, but also actuality and virtuality, reality, and possibility can be represented in their **entanglement** through techniques of montage. This way cinema becomes a critique of simple, progress-oriented ideas of time and history

and proposes a view of the temporal process, which integrates varying perspectives, fragmentation, plurality, and discontinuity.

Within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the concept of time has been developed along the lines of cultural critique, where the above-mentioned aspects – plurality, discontinuity, and simultaneity – are central alongside a focus on temporal becoming and procedural ontology. The emphasis on becoming and the notion of **process** are the reasons for this entry dedicated to temporality. Contemporary concepts stress the dynamic and procedural aspects of time. This is what is captured by the term temporality.

Contemporary theories as put forth by Bernhard Stiegler (1994) or Mark B. N. Hansen (2004) focus on a temporality constituted by **technology**. Hansen understands human perception of time as embedded or informed by machine time (Hansen 2004, 235). That means that technologically constituted temporalities figure as ontological structures, which are not perceptible themselves but inform human perception of time. A plurality of temporalities is constituted by technology that does not necessarily relate or adapt to human perception. Technology is seen as the formation of consciousness-independent layers of temporalities. Contemporary art and cinema use knowledge of neuroscience research on human perception and the impact of digital technologies to induce experiences that affect the viewers on a perceptual level (see Hansen 2004, Pisters 2012). The various technological temporalities within our contemporary digital culture are described as being fundamental to human perception, yet they are of heterogeneous origin and thus introduce a transcendent element into human perception. This ontological view can be seen as a prolonged critique of the Kantian definition of time as an inner form of intuition and hence as a category specific to the humanities.

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