Time the Redeemer: Time as an Object of Cinema in a Post-Metaphysical Age

Greg Watkins
Stanford University, gwatkins@stanford.edu

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss1/12
Time the Redeemer: Time as an Object of Cinema in a Post-Metaphysical Age

Abstract
This article was delivered as a paper at the 2015 International Conference on Religion and Film in Istanbul, Turkey.
There is a sense in which time is fundamental to the cinematic experience — on the one hand, the physical medium has a constant, mechanical rhythm (the frame-rate of whatever is being projected); on the other hand, the content of any particular movie is free to play with the pace and even the ‘direction’ of time. Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky titled his important book about cinema *Sculpting in Time*, as if that phrase somehow captured the essence of filmmaking. So, even though one could argue that the manipulation of time is inherent to film as an art form, there has been a curious increase in Hollywood movies that take time itself as a central narrative thread to achieve dramatic purposes (see *Inception* (2010), *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) and *Interstellar* (2014) as recent examples with very high box office receipts). And if it is working for Hollywood, it might be an indication of a larger, cultural trend, at least in the United States. The project of this paper is to take a look at this trend and to think out loud about what it might be saying about religion and religious sensibilities, at least in a preliminary way. In my own mind, I have been drawing loose connections between this trend and certain philosophers and theorists of religion. This paper will explore those connections and — at least, this is my hunch — will ultimately suggest that the experience of time as an express object of thought in movies has been driven by the operation of the religious imagination in what I will call here a ‘post-metaphysical age.’ In a secularized culture — where transcendental and supernatural realms are in competition with one another, highly contested, or flat out denied — the religious imagination turns to a meditation on the nature of time itself as a kind of hermeneutical key to human purposes and meaning in the broadest sense. The specific religious sensibility I see emerging in these types of movies aims at a kind of sacralizing of the here-and-now present moment of the audience rather than, as in most religious tropes,
connecting the present moment to some other, external sacred reality by means of which the present moment is transcribed into sacred narratives of time and space. Put another way, the sacred is approached not by way of transcendent movement but rather by eliciting an inherently sacred quality of the present moment itself. In turn, it is my view that this would be a distinctively modern expression of a religious sensibility precisely in the fact that it forgoes metaphysical claims about sacred realities and provides, instead, the experience of a redeemed or transfigured or otherwise sacralized present through narrative fictions that entertain a certain experience of time. That is to say, the movies that interest me are not religious in the sense that they make hard-nosed propositions about the actual nature of time; rather, they construct a fiction about the nature of time in order to arrive at a transfigured sensibility about the everyday here and now.

The Gnostic Trope in Space, the Gnostic Trope in Time

As part of a course I teach in – which is a year-long, great books program – we regularly show Chris Marker’s landmark film La Jetée (1962). In showing it, we are trying to accomplish two things: 1) it is the first film we show to the students, and it is meant to be their introduction to serious cinema. Indeed, the more I have seen it, the more I have become convinced that it is a kind of perfect gem of a movie – that it exhibits a kind of crystalline perfection of plot and style that is, at the same time, a meditation on the medium of film itself; and 2) we pair it with the students’ reading of Plato’s Republic, in particular for its resonance with the allegory of the cave (2004:208-213 [VII:514a-520a]).
For those of you who may not have seen this movie, its basic plot is somewhat easily re-told: in a post-apocalyptic age, after the third world war, men are confined to living underground. ¹ Because the world has become uninhabitable, the leaders of the underground camp have begun experiments in time travel, using the strong, personal memories of some of the camp’s inmates as bridges to the past. The protagonist of the movie is someone with precisely that kind of memory, a powerful childhood memory of the face of a woman standing on an outdoor airport terminal, or jetty (la jetée, in French), and of a man being killed. With some assistance from some kind of drug, this particular prisoner is sent back to the time of his childhood, just before the war, where he meets the same woman but now as his adult self. Through repeated visits to the past, he develops a relationship with the woman. Without going into too much detail, it eventually happens that the prisoner tries to escape his captors by returning to the earlier time permanently. Launched back to the past – for the final time, he hopes – he finds himself on the same airport terminal pier of his original memory. He soon discovers that the camp experimenters, in order to prevent his escape, have sent someone to kill him. In a sudden circling back of the plot, it turns out that it was his own murder on the pier that he witnessed as a child.

There is a certain narrative pleasure that comes from this plot twist. Indeed, there is an even more general trend of this sort of movie which is coming to be called the ‘puzzle film’ – nicely characterized in the book *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Blackburn, 2009). These are movies that engage the intellectual pleasure of puzzling things out via plot twists, playing with time, and the like. But I think

¹ Some readers may be more familiar with the loose adaptation of this film, Terry Gilliam’s *12 Monkeys* (1995).
there is a serious religious trope being activated here as well, and it becomes clear in the link with Plato’s allegory of the cave.\(^2\) This link to Plato will also help illustrate what I mean by a ‘gnostic’ trope. Plato uses the allegory of the cave to talk about the relationship most of us have to true knowledge. The people in the cave – us, in our everyday reality – are stuck watching shadows dancing on a wall, convinced that the shadow dance is reality itself. The philosopher, sensing, through a kind of memory, that real knowledge is found somewhere else, escapes the cave and emerges into the light of day, a realm of absolute truth. Not only does the philosopher discover true knowledge, but it also becomes part of his job to return to the cave and attempt to turn the rest of us in the direction of the truth, to turn us away from the shadow dance and toward the redemptive light of the sun.

Though I am playing fast and loose with the terms here, I take this particular Platonic story to be paradigmatic of the gnostic trope to which I want to call attention. In broad outline, it describes a situation where our everyday consciousness is caught in some kind of fundamental misperception from which, if corrected, we could be released and, consequently, be born into a truer and more authentic existence. Although this is more complicated in Plato than it might at first appear, one way of putting what really interests me here is that the gnostic trope seems to always have a spatial/metaphysical construction: the ‘here and now’ is meant to be traded for – in the gnostic movement – a fundamentally different ‘there and then.’ We are trapped in a shadow realm, but, through knowledge, we can escape into a different place. What started to catch my eye in the Chris Marker film was that the ‘place’ of redemption was precisely the world of the audience; namely, the pre-apocalyptic, everyday world that the audience member lives in. The protagonist of

\(^2\) Although I arrived at these links to Plato on my own, I was pleased to discover confirmation of them in an article in *Senses of Cinema* entitled “Platonic Themes in Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*” (Lee, 2000).
Marker’s film is trying to get back to us. His trips to our time – though motivated by his interest in a particular woman – are presented in such a way that our everyday world is the ‘place’ of redemption in the gnostic trope. This is a strange twist on gnostic aspirations. The allegory of the cave is meant to convince us that our here and now is somehow deeply deficient and that there is some other place we need to be. In gnostic religions – again, in broad strokes – this sense of ‘other place’ is even clearer – these stories often tell of a shedding of the body that will come to pass, along with some kind of return to the light. So, the plot of Marker’s movie has this shape, but, through the element of time travel, the ‘place’ the protagonist is trying to get to is the here and now of the people watching the movie (watching, we might add, as shadows dancing on a wall). There is an important sense in which the audience will leave this movie, back into the light of day, but with the ‘here and now’ of the light of day being transfigured by the experience of the movie. If the here and now of our everyday experience is the redemptive target of the movie’s protagonist, perhaps it can be ours, too. This argument about Marker’s movie is my central insight for this paper as a whole. The rest of the argument below is to show how this kind of thing continues to show up in movies and to try to elaborate on what it might signal about the contemporary religious imagination.

The next thing I noticed – probably just through the accidents of my own movie viewing – was two blockbuster movies that employed this gnostic trope of the redemption of the here and now of the audience through certain ‘puzzle film’ features of the plot. These movies were *The Truman Show* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1999). In *The Truman Show*, the protagonist slowly awakens to the fact that his entire life is a false, constructed life; although it mirrors the everyday world of the audience, Truman’s world is the world of a
TV show where only he does not know that fact. As he comes to discover the artificial basis of his immediate world -- though in all other ways it looks and operates like the world of the audience watching the “Truman Show” TV show and the audience watching this movie -- he develops a yearning to join the ‘real world,’ a world that is like the world of the show he is in but is otherwise authentic. When he exits the false world of the Truman TV show, he literally steps through a door that leads to the world of the audience, and all of the authenticity and redemptive reality he hopes to find there, the movie seems to suggest, is already here with us, in the everyday lives of the members of the audience. So, I would argue, a religious trope animates the protagonist, but, curiously, and like Marker’s film, it leads the protagonist into our own world. The Matrix puts its own ‘puzzle film’ twist on this kind of plot structure, but the religious trope is the same. The central character, Neo, awakens to the fact that his everyday life is a false one -- having been created by a computer matrix -- and Neo develops the drive to escape that false world into a more real and, therefore, transfigured or redeemed world. In this case, in a curious inversion of the set-up of Marker’s movie, Neo wants out of the falseness of the illusory but pre-apocalyptic world of the matrix in order to be in the post-apocalyptic, underground world of suffering and struggle. However, what he and his companions would most want as an even more valorized place would be the world of the audience, the very real, pre-apocalyptic, everyday world of our here and now; they want to establish an authentic here and now that is free of the illusion of the matrix, even though that world is in every other way the same as the world of the audience.

The recent boom in movies that play with time as a central feature of the plot started to suggest to me that the gnostic trope was moving from a focus on place to a focus on
time. *Groundhog Day* (1993) was undoubtedly the breakthrough movie in this regard. Then *Run Lola Run* (1998) and *Memento* (2000) are noteworthy for having been ‘art house’ movies that achieved a great deal of commercial success. But then the pace, and success, of these time-plot movies really picks up, with some of them achieving blockbuster status: *Inception* (2010) (although a puzzle film that employs primarily dreamscapes, the emotional core of the plot, I would argue, involves manipulations of time that are principally aimed at redeeming the here and now), *Looper* (2012), *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Predestination* (2014). There are, of course, many more movies that manipulate time as a plot device, but not always for the sake of the gnostic trope. What is interesting to me with these movies is that the gnostic trope becomes even more specifically focused on manipulations of time. My intuition about all of this – and what I would want to pursue in a more systematic and thorough-going treatment of this topic – is that the phenomenological experience of time becomes of special interest to the religious imagination in a culture where traditional, metaphysical, space-bound and end-times focused religious tropes are deeply contested or otherwise problematic.4

In the next two parts of my paper, I want to make some more specific suggestions about how this clustering of time-based gnostic tropes in recent movies connects to the religious imagination. The first of these has to do with the modern sense of time and its relationship to the religious imagination, with special reference to the work of Eliade.

3 For a compelling argument about the connections between *Looper* and a Girardian concept of the sacred, see Brian Nail’s article “Closing the Loop” (2014). Connecting the argument of that article to the argument being made here goes beyond the scope of this paper and would require a comparison of the concept of the sacred in Girard to the concept of the sacred in Eliade. For insight into the basic differences between those two, see John Dadosky’s essay, “Eliade and Girard on Myth” (2014).

4 I think apocalyptic films are also a species of a fundamentally religious trope of valorizing the present by way of imagining a much more dismal future, but only by preserving our sense of the linear flow of time rather than by subverting or otherwise manipulating that linear sense of time.
Then, I want to define more precisely what I have been referring to loosely as redemption, transfiguration, and sacralization – that is to say, the language we would use to describe a renewed view (to put it in its most general terms) of the here and now of our present lives.\(^5\)

**Eliade on Time and the Religious Imagination**

“For it is important to underline this fact – that it is, above all, *by analyzing the attitude of the modern man towards Time that we can penetrate the disguises of his mythological behavior*” (italics in the original) (Eliade, 1975:34).

In his various works on sacred and profane time and, by extension, on myth and historical time, Eliade makes an argument about a kind of fundamental difference between contemporary, historical consciousness and the sacred sensibilities of what he calls archaic consciousness.\(^6\) In his essay “The Myths of the Modern World”, published in *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities* (Eliade, 1975), Eliade argues that the historical fall into the thoroughly secularized time that is one of the hallmarks of modernity created a radical break from mythic thinking, from the fundamental stories of sacred time and purpose that inscribed all social and cultural practices until the modern period. Instead of cultural practices organized around stories and rituals of sacred time, our ‘fall into history’ has given us the world of the clock, of the endless ticking of secular time, second after second. Cultural practices

---

5 I would like to thank Clive Marsh for prodding me to define my use of the term ‘redemption’ more clearly after hearing a version of this paper given as a talk at the 2015 Conference on Religion and Film, Istanbul.

6 For an excellent synopsis of Eliade’s work as it relates to film and religion studies, see *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (Lyden, 2003:64-7).
around this secularized time have thereby tended in the direction of modes of distraction, of ways of escaping this profoundly profane, historical time: “Such disinclination to face historic time, together with an obscure desire to share in some glorious, primordial total Time, is betrayed, in the case of modern people, by a sometimes desperate effort to break through the homogeneity of time, to ‘get beyond’ duration and re-enter a time qualitatively different from that which creates, in its course, their own history” (Eliade, 1975: 34).

Consider the cultural success of sports, for example, where we are given a time-bound arena for a set of actions, where the clock ticking down to zero becomes the replacement for what had been, in archaic societies, sacred practices at the cosmic level. Indeed, Eliade makes the argument here that cinema itself, which has enjoyed such profound dominance as a cultural practice, owes its success to its function as an escape from historic time: “This ‘concentrated time’ is also the specific dimension of the theatre and cinema. Even if we take no account of the ritual origins and mythological structure of the drama or the film, there is still the important fact that these are two kinds of spectacle that make us live in time of a quality quite other than that of ‘secular duration’, in a temporal rhythm, at once concentrated and articulated, which, apart from all aesthetic implications, evokes a profound echo in the spectator” (Eliade, 1975:34-5).

For Eliade, there is a kind of loss in this change, but also a residue of this archaic consciousness in modern people that can not quite be shaken: “It is with this in mind [the disinclination to face historic time] that we can render the best account of what has become of myths in the world of today. For modern man, too, by means that are multiple, but homologous, is endeavouring to liberate himself from his ‘history’ and to live in a qualitatively different temporal rhythm. And in so doing he is returning, without being
aware of it, to the mythical style of life” (Eliade, 1975: 34). What I want to argue in this paper is that the prevalence and popularity of movies that manipulate time can be understood as an expression, or a kind of cultural solution, to the problem of the survival of archaic consciousness in the modern period. Our religious imagination, in other words, longs for the cosmos to be ordered in those old, sacred ways. With this kind of thinking, there is at least an opportunity to explore how the movies that interest me might be themselves evidence of a residue of an archaic religious imagination. Because the old, mythic stories of a sacred cosmos no longer have the kind of deep and wide cultural currency they initially had, the religious imagination of the culture, you might say, has found a way to use time itself as a narrative device to redeem time through a meditation on time, to transfigure the present through the manipulation of our perception of that present through imaginative adventures into alternative avenues of time, only to return to the present in its now transfigured state.

**Christian vs Nietzschean Redemption**

“His disciples said to him, ‘When will the Kingdom come?’ ‘It will not come by watching for it. They will not say, “Look, it is here!” or “Look, it is there!” Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth, but people do not see it.” *Gospel of Thomas*, 113 (as translated in Pagels, 2003:241)

---

7 Whether one concludes from this, as Eliade does, that there is some kind of essential *homo religiosus* is irrelevant to the argument here; the cultural success of the trope in these movies is evidence that this kind of religious imagination lingers, no matter how that lingering is explained.
In a journal entry in 1945, while working on his book *Cosmos and History*, Eliade expressed in a more personal way how the absence of sacred history left modern people with what he thought was the only myth we could still convincingly affirm, the myth of the eternal return:

I’d like to formulate in some way – in a play, a novella, an essay – the sad reconciliation that I feel sometimes in those late night hours: the cosmic alternation, the day which follows the night, without fail, *whatever happens*; the spring which follows winter. The eternal return. This myth must be revived, if life still has any meaning, if it still deserves to be lived. *Cosmos and History* poses the anthropological problem only, of the despair of modern man, devoid of any living myth which could justify, recompense, or give meaning to the sufferings, deceptions, and injustices endured on account of history. But not only this problem of ‘the terror of history’ demands to be resolved, but also the other, equally urgent, of the reconciliation of man *in time*, of his salvation through the simple fact that he participates in a temporal, rhythmic Cosmos, rich in alternations (quoted in Ricketts, 2014:45).

The power of the myth of eternal return, it seems, would provide a kind of ‘justification’, ‘recompense’, or ‘meaning-giving’ value. In making my argument about the religious dimension of these time-centric movies, I, too, want to argue for a kind of redemptive vision that comes from them – a kind of transfiguration, valorization, or sacralization of the here-and-now reality of the audience member. Redemption is a deeply Christian concept, of course, but I think it is important to retain it in this context precisely because it helps mark the profound difference between a concept of redemption in the sacred history told by the myth of Christianity and the kind of religious transformation that
attempts to live on in these kinds of movies precisely because our sense of the relationship between time and the sacred has changed so fundamentally in the modern period. For Eliade, it is impossible for Christianity itself to adapt in this way: “Christianity, by the very fact that it is a religion, has had to preserve at least one mythic attitude – the attitude towards liturgical time; that is, the rejection of profane time and the periodical recovery of the Great Time, illud tempus of ‘the beginnings’” (italics in the original) (Eliade, 1975:30). In this sense, the modern Christian has at least one foot firmly planted in pre-modern, archaic consciousness: “To the Christian, as to the man of the archaic societies, time is not homogeneous: it is subject to periodical ruptures which divide it into ‘secular duration’ and a ‘sacred time’, the latter being indefinitely reversible, in the sense that it repeats itself to infinity without ceasing to be the same time” (Eliade, 1975:31). Based on these essential features of Christianity, Eliade is led to ask what has taken the place of this myth among those moderns for whom Christianity is ‘nothing but the dead letter’ (Eliade, 1975:31). Indeed, if ‘redemption’ is the soteriological concept par excellence in the Christian West, might it not find a way to persist in the religious imagination of a new cultural moment, one with a sense of time that is divorced from sacred history? For Eliade, the myth of the eternal return had that potential.

According to the argument found in R. Lanier Anderson’s essay, “Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration” (2009), Friedrich Nietzsche was the prophet, we might say here, that articulated a new connection between religious redemption and the modern sense of time, now devoid of sacred history. I heartily recommend reading the entire essay to appreciate the full force of Anderson’s argument. Since it has had a defining impact on me and on my thinking about the religious resonance of these movies, I will highlight some
Anderson first establishes that Nietzsche—despite his reputation as a great critic of Christianity—is nonetheless interested in retaining certain religious tropes and religious purposes: “But in spite of such disenchantment [the death of God (GS 125)], Nietzsche remains surprisingly dependent on characteristically religious, and even quasi-Christian, materials in forging new comforts for life. […] His search for replacements to fill the former practical role of religious commitment repeatedly returns to desacralized versions of religious notions like atonement, salvation, transfiguration, redemption” (Anderson, 2009:227). Put in the terms that have concerned me in this article, Nietzsche charges himself with figuring out a logic of redemption (of making whole what is broken, of providing a solution to a fundamental problem of life) without the Christian idea of Time and without the Christian calculus of the paying of a debt.8 According to Anderson, this Nietzschean brand of redemption is on full display with the character of Zarathustra: Zarathustra, like Christ, promises a brighter future in which our shattered state will be redeemed and made whole. But the specific notion of redemption on offer is curious, at least from the point of view of the temporal logic of Christian redemption. Our restoration is to be effected not by deliverance into a radically different future, in which we are compensated for past ills, but instead by something new about the past. According to Zarathustra, […] the only thing worthy to count as redemption would be a certain kind of return to the past, in which the “It was” is transformed into a “Thus I willed it.” The

---

8 I am skewing this argument in the direction of Eliade. In Anderson’s reading of Nietzsche—which I find convincing—it is equally important that the Christian logic of redemption fails on its own terms by setting the self against the self: “The compensatory character of Christian redemption is therefore a fatal flaw: it leaves the actual afflictions of life unredeemed, even condemned, along with everything that is merely ‘world.’” Otherworldly redemption fails to make a person's actual life (here and now) better by one whit. And in fact, the case is worse. It is a precondition on admission to redemption in its Christian form that we reject many events of our lives, in our considered view. We are all sinners, and redemption requires repentance for sin” (Anderson, 2009:254).
proposal is surprising in that it does not look forward to any removal of the injuries that engender our need for redemption. On the contrary, every piece of the “It was” looks set to remain in place. Only our attitude toward them is to change. In that new future, we are meant to will the “It was.” (Anderson, 2009:233-4)

“Something new about the past” – this phrase captures how the dynamic of redemption, formerly grounded in archaic consciousness and sacred time, shifts to each individual life in its own, self-identical fullness; we have nothing but that life and our attitude towards it. The nature of that attitude is the field of redemption, and the myth of eternal return is the crucible that can effect the transformation: “The thought of recurrence was always supposed to provoke a change in attitude in the one who undergoes it. Nietzsche even presents that change as especially dramatic: ‘if this thought gained possession of you it would change you as you are, or perhaps crush you’ (GS 341)” (Anderson, 2009:242).

Concluding Thoughts

“And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

(Little Gidding, T. S. Eliot)

The arguments of Eliade and Anderson suggest to me that the recent trend of time-loop movies have their deepest source in the depths of our religious imagination. Unable to
sustain the archaic mode of sacred myth, we are left with time itself, with life itself, and with the struggle to come to terms with a life that can not be anchored within a sacred story of cosmic dimensions. But by staying within the eddies of time, within our own actual past, present, and future, we can still find our way to redemptive, transfiguring modes of consciousness. I think that is what these movies are doing. Convinced as I am of this general way of looking at these movies, I think the next step would be to explore them on a case-by-case basis and to try to uncover there the particular texture, the particular religious sentiments, evoked by each movie.

To close, let us revisit La Jetée for a moment. I think the power of that movie comes in part from the kind of religious transfiguration of the present moment that it is trying to achieve. At one level, it does this simply by suggesting that we view our present moment from the perspective of an apocalyptic future, to consider, in other words, how ‘precious’ otherwise mundane realities can become in light of possible disaster. But by using the time-loop plot device, the religious power of this movie runs more deeply. The particular shape of this movie gives us a visceral experience of that transfigured present moment when the sequence of photo-montage ever so briefly becomes the moving image of film, that is, when the sequence of photos of the woman in bed speeds up to the point of becoming a real, cinematic moment – the representation of everyday reality through moving images. As the protagonist of that film follows his own attraction to this woman and to the past, we are being cultivated to feel a kind of awakening to the present moment that we suddenly experience when the photo-montage becomes the moving images of cinema. Then, at the end of the movie, the “puzzle film” feature of the circling around of the time-travel plot, and the resulting death of the protagonist, only move us further, I
would argue, in the direction of a kind of transfiguring, religious sentiment about the everyday world and the people in it. What bursts through as a kind of sacred moment in the moving-image sequence is even further valorized through the loss of that possibility for the protagonist at the end of the movie. He can not stay where he most wants to be, in a kind of redeemed, transfigured past. But that place is our place; we find ourselves there already. How will we see it?

**Bibliography**


