

# The Impact of the Network Society upon a Social Temporal Consciousness

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper the authors reflect upon the past thirty years since the emergence and public awareness of what Castells describes as the network society [1] with the shifts in a social temporal consciousness that are evidenced through popular cinema. The short paper contextualizes slow technology within larger societal concerns for time, before introducing four epoch's within recent cinema that give insight into the condition of a social temporal consciousness.

## **Author Keywords**

Temporality, time, network society, temporal consciousness

## **ACM Classification Keywords**

Design, Theory, Experimentation.

## **SLOW TECHNOLOGY IS...**

The concept of Slow Technology reflects an uncertainty in the speed and direction in current aspects of society and culture. The need to 'slow down' is a response to an uncomfortable circumstance that warrants an action. At present there are a series of global circumstances that are causing people to want to slow down in order to reassess a number of conditions that are beyond their comprehension such as: global warming, the collapse of financial systems, and even doubt in spiritual frameworks. The authors use a series of popular movies to evidence the shifts in cultural consumption away from reliable and traditional temporal frameworks, towards non-linear and unstable models of time. In brief the authors Slow Technology artefact is a collection of movies that from the last 30 years.

## **TEMPORAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

The authors adopt the term 'temporal consciousness' from Adam and Thrift [2, 3] who use it to describe the trend of understanding time by a particular group in a specific historical era. The researchers reflect upon the state of this 'public temporal consciousness' as we enter the second decade of the second millennium.

In the last twenty years, as the network society has grown to include a third of all people in the world, a series of events have placed pressure upon the models of time that have dominated Western society. From the millennium that evoked hysteria in the form of the Y2K bug and the

catalogue of Hollywood blockbusters that foretold the end of the world, to Harold Camping's prediction of the 'Rapture' in 2011, security in a stable model of time has been replaced with an interest in more flexible notions of time. Whilst teleological 'grand narratives' that offer a model of time remain largely intact, the researchers explore a series of cultural indicators that suggest how the internet and networked experiences are beginning to offer different social / temporal consciousness.

Given the speed and veracity of Hollywood's ability to produce depictions of the world using digital technologies, the researchers use a series of case studies taken from cinema since the 1980's that explore how the temporal models that operate within each 'environment' as network culture has evolved.

## **Keeping the Linear Intact**

In the 80s and early 90s a series of movies began to identify the symptoms of a condition of post-modernity [4]. Their narratives creatively played with new notions of time without changing the traditional linear model. In *Back to the Future* (1985) the main character travels to the past and back to the same point in future, and in *Groundhog Day* (1993) the character suddenly finds himself stuck in one day but the linear model is maintained. This movement can be compared with early moves from a modern to a postmodern model of flexible accumulation. In the same way, corporations such as Benetton and Toyota, anticipating a network culture, benefitted from a post-Fordist approach to production and consumption [5].

## **Anxiety for the End of Days**

As we approached the year 2000, Hollywood exploited an anxiety that was emerging from the increasing doubts in traditional and Western Christian models of time and a growing uncertainty in the clarity of modern values that were epitomised in subjects such as nuclear fuels, space travel, and the comfort in knowing who enemies were (during the Cold War for example). Films such as *X-Files* (1993-2002), *Independence Day* (1996), *Deep Impact* (1998), *Armageddon* (1998) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) all evoked the same fear for an 'end of days' that the Y2K bug played upon in order to sell more insurance.



**Figure 1. Tidal waves reach New York in Deep Impact, Paramount Pictures 1998.**

### Recovering Control of Time

In a subsequent trend within cinematic narratives, technology affords a capacity to overcome dominant temporal structures through subversive acts, collaborative practices and in particular the hero/heroine adopting a role that is anti-establishment. Many of films within this bracket also infer a vocabulary that is associated with network processes: mobilisation of crowds, distributed systems, programming and the role of code. From films such as *The Truman Show* (1998) through the *Matrix* (1999) and to *In Time* (2011), stories present a temporal hegemony that is used to control subjects, and plots unfold that adopt methods of hacking to contest these systems. *Inception* (2010), *Source Code* (2011) and *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011) deal specifically with teleological systems and adopt radical techniques that the protagonists embody in order to subvert or challenge a 'world'.



**Figure 2. An image of 'the paths' that the protagonists are on according to The Adjustment Bureau, Universal Pictures, 2011.**

### Network Time

More recent movies, directly reflect an influence of the network society, they reinforce the idea that technology is part of our lives, that it can provide alternative notions of time and space and that it is instrumental in producing new futures, one that is fragmented and highly contingent. Technology thus promises the unexpected, which is at the same time fascinating and frightening. *Life in a Day* (2011)

is perhaps the most literal example of capitalising upon the 'crowd' who contribute to the content of a film that documented multiple experiences from the 24th of July 2010. *Inception* (2010) and *The Time Travellers Wife* (2009) also relax any need to adhere to a teleological structure and the audience is required to adopt a very different temporal 'consciousness'.

### SUMMARY

In summary, the authors are aware of the many cultural artefacts including literature, theatre, fine art, cinema and television that have for many years asked questions about temporal systems. However, the purpose of this short position paper is to highlight the scale of consumption of a particular form of media in which temporal structures are manipulated. All of the movies cited are considered popular and successful, with examples such as *The Day After Tomorrow* grossing \$544,272,402, *Inception* \$825,532,764 and *The Adjustment Bureau* \$127,869,379. From this brief analysis of themes across the last 30 years the authors hope to have provided insight into what may be described as a 'turn' in the temporal consciousness of society. Although the research stands as conjecture, the authors feel that this position paper introduces a link between the occasions of the millennium, the condition of post modernity but crucially the introduction and growth of the network society with shifts in public models of time. Returning the theme of the workshop, an interest in Slow Technology may be understood to be a further characteristic of a society that has begun to put less faith in the grand narratives that made promises about a secure future. Critically aware of the technological determinism that has dominated much of the twentieth century both by selling new products but also solving problems, Slow Technology firmly situates design within a social, economic and environmental context and refuses to be seduced by the old Microsoft slogan "Where do you want to go today?"

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