

THE SHOW ROOM



c i n e n o v a



Waiting, Narrative and Modernity

Nooshin Farhid & Lis Rhodes

Nooshin Farhid has chosen a film by Lis Rhodes from the *Cinenova* archive in order to screen the two works within the same event. They bear certain similarities in terms of both their political content and their psychological intensity. However, this text focuses on formal similarities and fundamental concerns that they might share and which might have led to their being brought together for this event.

Art is not necessarily instant or gratifying, and in this way strives to preserve and promote some special quality concerning human life and experience, distinguishing profound and valuable nuances of human experience from the quantitative and primarily economic understanding with which we are indoctrinated and overwhelmed in a highly technologized, spectacularly consumerist society.

But we are not that society, we are something else, however it is only in privileged moments that we are given an opportunity to see that this is true. As Maurice Blanchot implies in *The Unavowable Community* 'the people' are not the state (and nor are they even 'society') but may be something else, something unknowable, something perhaps more ancient as much as they are something modern. This is why we need counter-narratives and counter-images, narratives and images that call into question just what narratives and images might be and do; counter-narratives and counter-images that thus compel us to wait before 'jumping to conclusions'; that encourage us to wait before hastily making pre-judicial pre-somptions about what and how we experience, what we are, need, and want.

Of all times there is a special and different time that is the time of waiting. This is the time by which we may be pinned to a spot, not a time in whose rush we are caught-up. Despite the indignation caused to our pride by the imposition of this passive state we might redeem our waiting as a rare opportunity to meet our neglected selves. Waiting is not a hole in time but another time, a special time that is perhaps more than other times, our own time. Waiting may seem smooth, dull, uneventful, and yet it can also be laced with anxiety, fragmented by fidgeting frustration and the flitting of our agitated, desirous and unoccupied minds.

Julia Kristeva once mooted 'women's time', a proposition that seems to suddenly wrest time from the quantifying or objectifying theorist and place it in the hands of culture, quality, and experience, proffering time as experience which -we might assert- belongs to us most of all at those times when we are most conscious of it. Waiting is surely one of those times. If we seem disempowered by waiting it is nevertheless its very denial of our purpose and agency, its dis-instrumentalisation of time that allows us to become conscious of experience in a new way.

Walter Benjamin, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, drew attention to various states of consciousness in which we might encounter various works of art. DADA doesn't wait to be contemplated, he said, it 'hits you like a bullet.' He also spoke of distraction and 'absent-mindedness' while referring to a history of aesthetics and technologies, connecting and comparing religion and politics, painting and photography, collage and cinema.

In the cinema we are used to waiting. We don't wait for photographs, paintings or collages in the same way. There are inevitably preliminaries before a movie is screened. We make ourselves comfortable, occupying a throne that entitles us to have an opinion about what we view. Early cinemas made a spectacular play of lights, music and curtains to fill this time. Today it is appropriated by seductive and glamorous advertising - as are so many of the times and places where and when we are forced to wait, or move slowly through a space.

The ways in which a film might begin or end are infinitely variable, as is its narrative form, and yet any narrative is a form of waiting, a slowing, turning and crafting of time. Scheherazade inevitably comes to mind, the story of the *1001 Nights* in which a lover, in fear of her life, finds infinite and inventive ways to extend and avoid a fatal conclusion. But any story creates and relies upon apprehension as it changes the banal, scheduled and regulated time of an instrumentalised life (as dutiful and compromised members of a capitalist, consumerist, democratic society) into suspense, intrigue and drama, as time is shaped by a narrator to 'ends' (purposes) in which we are invited to share.

In Nooshin Farhid's *Red Leaves No Residue* (2014), and in Lis Rhodes' *A Cold Draft* (1988) the narrator speaks, and in speaking shapes and suspends time. The voice rings out in dialogue with other sounds and alongside moving images that also narrate according to their own respective time and language. Do these films tell one story or many? If the answer is 'many' then how can they be coherent and comprehensible? Perhaps we appreciate them for the way they reflect our own incoherent and incomprehensible experiences, and yet they seem to have a certain reassuring majesty, a sovereignty and authority transmitted by artists who have clearly been on a journey and are here telling its story.

If these works also tell the story of their own making, and thus encapsulate the time of their making, this may sound modern and progressive but it is nothing new. What is probably a self-portrait by Jan van Eyck in London's National Gallery is inscribed *Jan van Eyck made me on 21 October 1433*. It may be that discoveries in the (then) new (or 'Hi-') technology of oil painting provided Jan van Eyck with both the time and the hubris to make such an inscription, but perhaps this is no different from a graffiti tag or, for that matter, the negative trace of a stone-age hand sprayed onto a cave wall. Perhaps every artwork will tell us the story of its own making if we look hard enough to find it. We can trace this self-reflexive art tradition from something very ancient through to modern artists including Joyce, Woolf, Brecht or Jean-Luc Godard, all of whom have used the time of the artwork and the time of the making of the artwork as part of its content and value and as one of its several stories.

The world is full of art in storage, in vaults, in backrooms and basements of galleries and museums, waiting to be seen as its *raison d'être*, and even in today's fast moving and demanding environment art remains something that doesn't like to be rushed. It seems to have a time of its own to which the artist must defer. It remains the outcome of an exceptionally caring, and often superhumanly industrious approach to time.

Making a work of art invariably involves waiting, for an idea, for inspiration, for funding or other forms of assistance, waiting for the work to begin, to begin to work, for a work to start to have an identity, a value, ultimately waiting for it to be finished, only to then wait to be seen, or be seen again after a period in obscurity. In this way the artist makes by a kind of will but is always ultimately tempered by what Heidegger referred to as (a less forceful, less wilful) 'revealing.' For Heidegger, it is not only the traditional, figurative sculptor who can claim to reveal something already latent within a material, but all of our mental and physical, creative and constructive activity that is a continual revealing of a certain truth.

Both Farhid and Rhodes are present within their own artworks, in the form of their voices, their writing, their politics, perspectives, ideas and handiwork. Since Eisenstein, Woolf, or Duras we have become used to what is now almost a conventional liberty by means of which artists explicitly demonstrate the part that the author is playing in assembling their art and translating a particular experience. This can be done, or *must* be done in infinite ways. Not only does every author have their own way of dividing time to assemble or reassemble an experience, but every artwork has its own particular way of doing so -and perhaps every experience and every self has its *own* time.

Walter Benjamin was intrigued by slow motion, a technological means by which he claimed we access a 'different nature' thus seeing in the most banal of acts a new significance and a heightened drama. Eisenstein made no disguise of the shocking effect of cutting time out of narrative flow so as to create a jump from one perspective, one moment, to another. What has been eviscerated in the jump cut is precisely the natural 'waiting', the time it should and did take to pass from one perspective and one moment to another. Cinema thus invited us to time-travel, in unusually smooth progressions or extraordinarily uncomfortable jolts. Meanwhile Henri Bergson championed an understanding of temporal motion as an entirely non-incremental *durée*, and, recently, Antonio Negri revived the classical distinction between *Chronos* and *Kairos*, favouring the latter as the time charged with greatest significance and most likely to serve the purpose of his revolutionary demands.

Both Farhid and Rhodes, unexpectedly brought together for this event, can be said to work in a tradition that uses the artist's time as a technology to extend the legacy and possibilities of narration as made available by modernity and as a response to modernity. Yet narration has, of course, a long history, to which we have already alluded, and is perhaps as old as time itself. Which came first we might ask (and wisely decline to answer), the time of narration or the narration of time? And (it follows) did one then have to wait for the other?

What distinguishes narration from time and experience is the fact that narration is the form by means of which time and experience might be communicated. A narration is a time and an experience that might be retold. So, what are the times and experiences told and retold in the work of Farhid and Rhodes? Strangely we cannot specify, both use elusive juxtapositions, uncertainties, deviations, obscurations and abstractions as if to purposefully evade exposure or discovery of any particular coherent and cohesive narrative. Perhaps we can simply say that this is an art that speaks in codes, that its truth and its community is revealed only slowly, through a covert, elusive, ephemeral and unstable dialogue.

Narratives are here mixed from several sources and the relation between them left to form in the viewer's perception. Where a certain word or phrase is spoken it may not tally with the image that accompanies it, but simultaneity is not necessary as we are capable of assembling meaning from nebulous echoes, or intuiting the mere promise of a possible future empathy between one event and another we have not yet encountered. A story is thus neither here nor there, now or then, but virtual, latent within a cloud of possibilities, waiting to shift and re-form itself momentarily, as a unique, unrepeatable event in the experience of the audience, of each audience member. Thus an artist shares their story while sharing their power, empowering us as both their critic and their friend.

And what is a work of art if not something that declares the true value of human beings who are routinely intimidated and insulted, if not by others then by life itself. These *are* works of art, assembled, defined, resolved and archived as completed stories, albeit the kinds of complex, occasionally incoherent stories we have become accustomed to as reflections, re-tellings of modern experience.

We are all Scheherazade now, in this threatening modernity where life is lived 'in fear of our lives' and as we each strive to keep our story alive, inventively deferring and ever evading its ending. But all forms of narrative - disruptive and smooth, circular or fragmented- are equally available to us today. Homer's *Epic Odyssey* satisfied itself with a wholesome, circular form and a tale of constant returning while the model of a road or river (consider Conrad's modern classic *Heart of Darkness*) may also suffice.

Modern experience has been influenced, in its turn, by the various technologized means by which it can be retold, so that we might today see ourselves photographically or cinematically, in terms of advertisements, models, pop songs or movies, as 'Live' (rather than life) or as 'recorded highlights' of a life. We might even find that we are changing our lives to suit our social networking posts. There is no possible way to extract, to rescue our 'true' story or 'true' self from this crossfire of influences. Instead we accept a self as kaleidoscopic collage.

And yet, there *are* moments, times (perhaps imprisonment can even be like this) when our movements are restricted, choices limited almost to zero, when we confront and contend with waiting and in which a special, perhaps fundamental form of being manifests itself, a certain innocence born of an absence of purpose, agency and desire, when forces greater than our own hold our fate in their hands. Thus, there and then we rendezvous with a special experience which, significantly, is 'non' modern. Modernity, by definition, does not wait. It grasps, rushes, aspires and competes, along with modern human-kind who simultaneously make modernity and are made by it. And yet, in certain moments of waiting, albeit within the most modern of scenarios - an airport lounge, a surgeon's ante-chamber, a tiny capsule atop a space-bound rocket, or in front of a computer negotiating a heavy download - a certain non- or pre- modern experience of something exceptional can nevertheless shine through.

Watching, hearing, recalling the films of Farhid and of Rhodes we might find that there is not, and never was a point in waiting for their narratives to clearly announce themselves to us, rather they deliver, by means of their particular assembly of time, and as a ponderous monologue echoes over a changing image, a particular kind of experience that, as Benjamin also acknowledged, lay at the heart of even the most ancient art, and which, despite Benjamin's wish for a less mysterious, more rational, political and democratic approach, nevertheless seems to remain intrinsic to our current valuation of art.

Paul O'Kane, March 2015

Nooshin Farhid was born in Tehran, Iran and now lives and works in London. Farhid makes distinctive use of filmic genres and tropes, nonetheless film is not a primary concern, but the portrayal of the human condition both in a direct documentary format and an allegorical style. Her recent exhibitions includes: UN-SPEAK, The Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos, Nigeria, 2015, Bubble & Blast - art against the crisis, Motoren-halle, Dresden, Germany 2015, Mardin Biennale, Mardin, Turkey.

Lis Rhodes has exhibited widely at film festivals since the 1970s. She was cinema programmer at the London Filmmakers' Co-op in the 1970s, founding member of 'Circles: Women's Work in Distribution', and taught at The Slade, University College London. She lives and works in London.

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