

Time & Hyperreality in *Twelve Monkeys*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the way time travel in Terry Gilliam's film *Twelve Monkeys* demonstrates Jean Baudrillard's science fiction theories, specifically in terms of hyperreality. The characters' constant rehallucination of the past throughout *Twelve Monkeys* suggests that time functions nonlinearly. The characters' attempt to assign time a linear narrative, in spite of its nonlinear nature, results in the dissolution of meaning in which the past functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy of the future.

Terry Gilliam's film, *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), experiments with temporality in ways that align with Jean Baudrillard's theories on simulation simulacra. In this film, time travel serves an apparatus through which the characters are able to investigate the past in attempt to remake their understanding of the present. Protagonist James Cole explores the relationship between the past, present and future by traveling back in time whilst attempting to unravel the riddle of the recurring dream that has haunted him since childhood. Cole finds himself leading a de-realized existence, wherein his inability to tell the difference between reality and fiction echoes Baudrillard's assertion that postmodern reality is no longer real, but a simulation of a reality that has been lost. Cole's return to the past is a return to Modernity; however, this Modernity has no place in the present, as it has been deconstructed past the point of relevancy. By rehallucinating the past and delving into a fictitious existence as experienced through time travel, Cole proves that Modernity's ordered distinction between reality and fiction cannot be recovered: in fact, it never existed.

According to Baudrillard's theories in "Simulacra and Science Fiction," the "SF imagination is dead." There is no longer enough distance between the real and the imagined for science fiction to exist. We exist in a state of hyperreality: "the implosive era of models." Models previously existed as "an imaginary domain with reference to the real." However, these models have now grown indistinguishable from the real. Because the real has been lost, the model now stands in for the real. The principle of reality has been replaced by the principle of simulation. The real "has become the pretext of the model in a world governed by the principle of simulation." There is no longer the real: only simulation of the real. In this condition, fiction transitions from "a mirror held to the future" that reflects reality to "a desperate rehallucinating of the past." We have reached the point of saturation wherein the

real and the simulated become synonymous. The “original essence” of reality is lost. Reality continues to function on traditional ideologies, yet these ideologies have become “defunct” and “empty of meaning.” In order to reestablish meaning and come to an understanding of reality in relation to the “events, persons...ideologies” that compose the real, it is necessary to turn to the past in search of some kind of “retrospective truth” (Baudrillard, 310).

Twelve Monkey takes place in an era where reality has reached the point of hyperreality and launched itself into an implosive state of reversal. Humankind has retreated underground and reverted to pseudo-Industrial era technology. In the film’s opening, James Cole is presented as a character that exists “in a total simulation without origin, past, or future.” The opening scene of Cole awaking in his cage—one among rows and rows of identical cages filled with other humans—portrays him as a “volunteer” destined to fulfill a purpose preordained by a force greater than himself. After being selected to volunteer, Cole is placed before a panel of scientists who examine and interrogate him. The overly synchronized motions of the guards that lead Cole into this setting imply that they are more mechanical than human; the scientists also appear integrated with machinery, as they sit surrounded by various instruments, almost completely obscured by technology. The scientists, guards and the optic structure that hovers above Cole, seeming to record and observe his movements, all operate “like a huge simulated and synchronous machine.” In Cole’s world, humanity has become mechanized in order to achieve a specific end goal in the most efficient way possible. Cole’s existence is one of utility, not individuality. Individualism has perished at the expense of utility; human society has reached the “saturation point” of utilitarianism (310). This saturation point has prompted a reversal: the system must “evolve implosively” by returning to the past (311).

By investigating the past, the scientists endeavor to find information that will allow them to create a better future. They hope to achieve this by retracing the course of history in order to develop a better understanding of the present in terms of the origin and course of the disease that forced humanity underground. Though Modernity presents time as a linear, continuous sequence, “our experience of time is much more diverse, created by the intersection of multiple temporalities.” Time is nonlinear, and therefore cannot be reversed or retraced in a simplistic manner, as the scientists attempt. Linear time is “modernity’s own invention,” an attempt to rationalize existence through the application of order (Joanna Page, “Retrofuturism and Reflexivity in Argentine Fiction Film: The Construction of Cinematic Time,” 8). However, Modernity only functions so far; it is doomed to reach a “saturation point,” from which the only direction to go is down. Time in *Twelve Monkeys* is nonlinear and self-reflexive; an individual’s understanding of time consists of “multiple, retrogressive and criss-crossing temporalities” that cohesively form the present (8). Cole demonstrates the lack of definitive borders between the past, present and future. What Cole accomplishes in the past has a direct effect on the present, just as what he sees in the past ends up dictating his future. Cole is continuously unable to distinguish the real (the present) from simulated reality (the past). His understanding of the world crumbles as his timeline becomes increasingly mixed up due to multiple trips between the past and present. The “poly-chronic” nature of time subverts the implementation of linear order; past, present and dream are tangled up in one another. When Cole attempts to impose order and division on these entities by reconciling them with one another and forcing them

to the point of simultaneous convergence, he ends up propelling himself towards his own death.

Cole's recurring dream, a post-traumatic flashback of a past experience, is the guiding doctrine for Cole's actions during his pursuit of the Army of the Twelve Monkeys. The dream sequence as a recurring motif serves to continuously dismantle reality by disrupting the "illusion of continuity" of the plot's progression (Page, 8). The temporal space of Cole's dream is neither past nor present; by inserting it between instances of Cole's present and past, Gilliam demonstrates that time operates on a multifaceted level which is much more complex than the past/present division. Cole's dream originates in the past, as a voyeuristic experience of his own later death. The dream then transcends Modern temporality by resurfacing in Cole's present. Cole cannot experience the present, because he constantly defines his present by what has occurred in the past. Throughout the film, Cole interprets his dream as a premonition of the future, and is driven towards the realization of the dream's events. In other words, a series of fragmented images from the past becomes the driving force behind all of Cole's present actions. He desperately seeks to make his dream—a hallucination of the past—become reality. Like the scientists, Cole uses the past as a reference point. By reconciling the past with the present, Cole believes he can form a better understanding of his existence by creating a linear narrative. However, his attempt to do so is futile; the nonlinear nature of time undermines linear meaning. Cole's attempted return to Modern conceptions of time and significance result in death: they are no longer attainable ideals.

By attempting to return to the past, the scientists set back into motion the very evolutionary process that led up to their present state of reversion. Just as Cole's attempt to consolidate reality through realizing his dream leads to his death, the scientists' attempt to assign new meaning to reality by investigating the past leads to their future demise. Moreover, the scientists and Cole seem to have a hand in generating the events of the past through their interference in the past. Cole's presence in the past could have in some way prompted the destruction of the world through his influence on Dr. Raily, and indirectly on the man who released the virus around the world. The resurgence of the past in terms of its influence on the present, as well as the present's pre-occupation with the past demonstrate that time is unrestricted, reflexive and ambiguous in meaning or end goal. Time seems to function in the film as a clock ticking down to the hour of Cole's death; yet, even this is contradicted, as the film continues after his death before finally returning once more to the dream sequence flashback of Cole witnessing his own death. The dream sequence/hallucination as founded in reality yet simultaneously estranged from it is the only defining factor of Cole's existence. It is his reality, the model of his reality, and his simulation. By giving Cole's dream the power to transcend the temporal boundaries of past and present, Gilliam achieves "an effacement of the temporalities that seemed to govern an older period of modernity" (8). Temporal existence cannot be ordered; all order imposed on human existence is a construct. The ideologies of Modernity fall flat in postmodern times because they were formed around chaos to give the illusion of order and control. Gilliam's film serves to deconstruct this illusion by portraying ordered time as a series hallucinations leading up to nothing, resulting at best in the finality of death—but never meaning.

Cole's existence in the past is a fictitious one because it functions on the principle of "the double." Baudrillard defines "the double" as "artificial replication or imaginary duplication" of the real. Cole's existence in the past is not real; his real existence occurs in the present. His presence in the past is a double of his presence in the present. Like an actor on screen, Cole (initially) plays the part laid out for him by the scientists. He is a simulation of the real, removed from reality; however, in hyperreality the real and the imagined are indistinguishable. "There is no more double," as there is no original to be doubled (Baudrillard, 312). In hyperreality, everything is a copy of a copy. Cole loses his grasp on reality during his many trips between time periods, because he has no original to refer to when evaluating the difference between his real and fictitious existences. His life seems to take on more substance in its fictitious state than its real; far from being a piece of machinery trapped in a cage, fictitious Cole leads a life with meaning and direction. This however is paradoxical: the meaning and direction are pre-determined by the scientists of the real Cole's present. Lost in hyperreality, Cole demonstrates the confusion of an era where simulated reality is as good as actual reality. Cole's traversing of temporal boundaries and his confusion over which time period to define as real demonstrates that "there is little to appreciate about 'actuality' that was ever 'actual' in the sense of being 'of the moment'" (Page, 8). In hyperreality, actual reality and actual time are irrelevant. In the end, Cole chooses fiction over reality, announcing in his telephone call to the scientists that he is "not coming back." In doing so, Cole demonstrates that in a world of simulacra, subjective perception determines what is real.

Since the original real has been lost, the distinction between reality and fiction is no longer definite or relevant. Whereas fiction has served as a reflection of reality, there is no more reality to be reflected. In the postmodern era, "there is neither fiction nor reality—a kind of hyperreality has abolished both." Fiction once stood as mirror to reality; reality has come to reflect fiction by actualizing the imagined projections of utopia. We cannot "move 'through the mirror' to the other side" and find the original, in which meaning is rooted (Baudrillard, 312). The original doesn't exist; fiction has become reality and vice versa. Cole and Raily's response and imitation of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) demonstrate the extent to which fiction and reality have become synonymous, yet devoid of meaning. Right before heading to the airport, Cole and stop at a movie theater to disguise themselves. While watching *Vertigo*, Cole reflects, "It's just like what's happening with us" (Gilliam, *Twelve Monkeys*). *Vertigo* is an example of a work of fiction meant to reflect reality in an imaginative way. However, Cole finds the movie so uncannily similar to his state of reality that the parallelism between the two renders them near indistinguishable.

Vertigo is realized by Cole and Raily: fiction becomes reality. Cole and Raily simulate *Vertigo*, which is itself a simulation of reality. The point at which reality simulates fiction represents the point of hyperreality. There is no model, no origin, no past or future; only events, people and ideologies which seem to dictate reality without assigning it any real meaning. Cole and Raily's reenactment embodies the endeavor to "reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because the real has disappeared" (Baudrillard, 311). This reinvention is emphasized by the placement of the music from *Vertigo*. The transition from the diegetic sound of the music in the movie theater to the non-diegetic sound of the same piece of

music playing in lobby affirms Cole's statement that his and Raily's lives are "just like" what occurs in the movie. This happens again as Dr. Peters enters the airport security checkpoint. The music playing as Judy announces her death in the showing of *Vertigo* is played again non-dietetically as Dr. Peters' briefcase is inspected, just before Cole dies as a result of pursuing Dr. Peters. The ability of *Vertigo's* musical score to jump off screen and become the background music for Cole and Raily's interaction further blends the distinction between real and replication, fiction and reality.

This blending of fiction and reality is further developed when Cole leaves the movie theater, worried he has lost Raily, only to find her hanging up a payphone while donning a platinum blonde wig, cat eye sunglasses and a light gray trench coat. Her outfit bears similarity to that worn by Kim Novak in her role as Judy, the female lead of *Vertigo*. Later, Raily goes so far as to use the name "Judy Simmons" as a pseudonym to reserve flight tickets. Raily's transformation into Judy represents "a hallucination of the real... reconstituted" into the real, "but totally lacking in substance" (311). Raily imitates the fictional character of Hitchcock's film, which itself is an imitation of reality. Fiction, the model of reality, becomes reality itself. The model substitutes the real, because the real no longer exists. Raily becoming Judy demonstrates the reflexive nature of fiction and reality in an era where the original has been lost and the double no longer exists. Raily's assumption of Judy's identity is merely a disguise. Though this identity alludes to the ideologies of classic Hollywood romance, she fails to reassign meaning to these ideologies. Her transformation into Judy is a rehallowing of the past, devoid of substance or significance. Though she has undergone a process of reversal by reexamining the past in relation to the present, she, like Cole and the scientists, fails to assign meaning to reality. Her attempt to order the present by reconstructing the past does not enable her to prevent Cole's death. Again, Raily proves that meaning cannot be constructed through a linear reexamination of the past, because time does not occur linearly.

Temporal circularity as dependent on the lack of distinction between real and unreal shown through the past's continuous resurgence into the present demonstrates the dissolution of the model and the ideologies that framed the model. The scientists, Cole and Raily all approach their demise through a fallacious attempt to reinstate Modernity. The past is not a blueprint for the future; information from the past does not hold the ability to order the future. Death is the only certainty. Meaning is gone, and never existed to begin with. Modernity is dead; any attempt to resurrect it, as demonstrated by Cole, is suicide.

Works Cited

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Twelve Monkeys

Twelve Monkeys. Dir. Terry Gilliam. Perf. Bruce Willis and Madeleine Stowe. Universal Studios, 1995. DVD.