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DOCUMENTARY  
TIME  FILM AND  
PHENOMENOLOGY

*Malin Wahlberg*



*Documentary Time*

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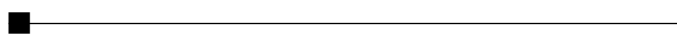
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*Documentary Time*



Film and Phenomenology

Malin Wahlberg



University of Minnesota Press

Minneapolis

London

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Portions of an early version of chapter 4 were previously published as “Wonders of Cinematic Abstraction: J. C. Mol and the Aesthetic Experience of Science Film,” *Screen* 47, no. 3 (2006): 273–90; reprinted with permission from *Screen*. Portions of chapter 7 are based on the article “Inscription and Re-framing: At the Editing Table of Harun Farocki,” *Journal of Art History/Konsthistorisk tidskrift* 73, no. 1 (2004): 15–26; reprinted with permission from Taylor and Francis Group.

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press  
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290  
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520  
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Wahlberg, Malin.

Documentary time : film and phenomenology / Malin Wahlberg.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 978-0-8166-4968-6 (hc : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8166-4968-5 (hc : alk. paper)

ISBN: 978-0-8166-4969-3 (pb : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8166-4969-3 (pb : alk. paper)

1. Documentary films—History and criticism. 2. Time in motion pictures.

I. Title

PN1995-9.D6W24 2008

070.1'8—dc22

2007019083

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## Contents

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|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgments  | vii |
| Introduction   | ix  |
| Part I ▶ Framing Change, Invoking the Moment               |     |
| 1 ▶ The Phenomenology of Image and Time                    | 3   |
| 2 ▶ The Time-Image and the Trace                           | 22  |
| 3 ▶ Frame-Breaking Events and Motifs beyond Representation | 44  |
| Part II ▶ Experimental Figures of Time                     |     |
| 4 ▶ The Interval and Pulse Beat of Rhythm                  | 63  |
| 5 ▶ Screen Events of Velocity and Duration                 | 79  |
| 6 ▶ Telling Signs of Loss: Beginnings of Possible Stories  | 101 |
| 7 ▶ The Trace in Contemporary Media                        | 118 |
| Documentary Time: An Afterword                             | 145 |
| Notes  | 151 |
| Index  | 165 |

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## *Acknowledgments*

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This book is the outcome of a long-standing theoretical and philosophical interest. The methodological reflection on film aesthetics and existential phenomenology grew out of my earlier work, but thanks to the inspiration and input of several Visible Evidence conferences, it gradually moved toward the problems and concerns of documentary theory. Many of the discussions in this text were presented at various conferences and were inspired by panels dedicated to the aesthetic and affective aspects of documentary film and video. The annual event of Visible Evidence has deepened my interest in the theory and practice of documentary cinema and provided a global network of research colleagues and friends.

First, I am grateful to the editors of the Visible Evidence series and especially to Michael Renov, who supported the theoretical aims of the manuscript and whose belief in this project was of great importance. This book would never have appeared without his encouragement and commitment. I am grateful for the insightful critiques and suggestions provided by the anonymous reviewer. Many thanks also to the staff at the University of Minnesota Press, in particular to Jason Weidemann, Adam Brunner, and Mike Stoffel, for their help and support throughout the production of this book. I also want to thank Douglas Korb who assisted in editing the text.

I am grateful to my colleagues at the Department of Cinema Studies at Stockholm University, who offered important critiques, pointers, and stimulating debates at various stages in this project. Astrid Söderbergh Widding and Trond Lundemo deserve thanks for their sincere and lucid readings of earlier drafts. Jan Olsson and John Fullerton helped me extend this work by encouraging related conference papers and essays, which propelled my theoretical interests in other research areas.



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I am equally indebted to the generous support of benevolent filmmakers who granted the use of images and who took time to discuss aspects of their work. I am especially grateful to Yo Ota, Péter Forgács, and Harun Farocki, whose feedback, along with their thought-provoking achievements in film and video, inspired the writing of this book.

During the past two years I benefited from two longer periods of study abroad that allowed me to complete the manuscript. Consequently, many people outside Stockholm directly and indirectly contributed to this book. I am grateful for the scholarship provided by The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT), which made it possible to spend three months as a visiting research fellow at Instituut voor Media & Re/presentatie, Theater-, Film- en Televisiewetenschap at Universiteit Utrecht. It was a great pleasure to work in Utrecht and at the Amsterdam Film Museum, and I express my gratitude to Frank Kessler at Utrecht University for his generous invitation and for his research seminar, where I had the opportunity to present a section of this book. Thanks also to the very helpful and efficient staff at the archive in Amsterdam.

Because of the kind invitation of Dudley Andrew in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Film Studies Program and a much appreciated grant from The American-Scandinavian Foundation (ASF), I spent a rewarding time as a visiting research fellow at Yale University between 2005 and 2006. I am greatly indebted to Dudley Andrew, who facilitated my visit, showed generosity in introducing me to many interesting people, encouraged an invited speech, and provided new insights into classical film theory.

Last but not least, I thank family and friends for support and for providing welcome, beneficial distractions. Jens Rydgren followed the development of this project with unswerving interest. Aside from his love and consideration, Jens provided intellectual response as well as immeasurable inspiration and comfort throughout the writing process. I dedicate this book to Jens and our daughter Vera, who was born only a few days after I had finished the manuscript in September 2006.

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## Introduction

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Jacques Aumont once suggested that any approach to cinema and temporality should involve an initial choice between two possible perspectives: (a) the created space-time of the image or (b) the time of film viewing. The latter corresponds to the fact that images are viewed during a certain period of time and that, to be appreciated, they require the spectator's gaze. The temporal status of an image depends on a viewer's attention and, therefore, on the duration of contemplation. Aumont argues that we have to distinguish between these two axes of image-time and experienced time.<sup>1</sup> The *ocular time* spent watching a picture would therefore be separated from the *pragmatic time* of the image.<sup>2</sup>

Whether we look at a painting, a photograph, or a moving picture, the image requires the time of our perception. But in film and audiovisual media the image takes time; it unfolds and scrolls by. The border between the *time of viewing* and the *time of the image* becomes in itself an issue that may be explored conceptually.

Different from a painting or a photograph the viewer may look at for as long as she wishes, a film is offered to our gaze for a fixed duration of projection, which significantly delimits the screen-time. The moving image challenges the classical contemplative mode of watching an image during an elective moment. In this case our eye meets with the time of artificial views, not forgetting the time of edited sounds.

Aumont's suggestion is biased toward the iconographic, plastic, and symbolic aspects of visual representation. He overlooks the temporal contingency of photographic representation and the inherent quality of film as a *technology of memory*.<sup>3</sup> Still, Aumont's perspective has merit in that it recognizes the creative possibilities of film and video to transform and play with time and space. The temporal aspects of film narration, such as the order, duration, and frequency of story events, are subordinate here to the formal expression and sensory impact of film as screen event.

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This book aims at a reassessment of image and time from the perspective of documentary film. The aesthetic and affective dimensions of documentary film were once highly disregarded in a scholarly field traditionally dominated by discourses on social representation and the rhetoric incentive of nonfiction cinema. Hopefully, the discussions that follow will add to recent work on film and media, which has convincingly shown that aesthetic and psychological aspects of cinema are indeed issues relevant for studying documentary film. Documentary aesthetics has been the subject of several panels at the Visible Evidence conference, which in many ways inspired the writing of this book.

In classical film theory the varied expressions of documentary film have often been marginalized or overlooked. If the aesthetic and formal experimentation of documentary film calls for further research, aspects of temporality in these nonfictitious genres represent an even more significant lacuna. Not even Gilles Deleuze recognized the complex relation between the time of the image, allegories of time, and time experience in documentary.<sup>4</sup> This is remarkable given that his idea of cinema as the mnemonic machine par excellence has much in common with the sublime representations of time, history, and memory offered by documentary. Although documentary examples have been rare in the classical context of film aesthetics, important reflections have been made regarding the material and existential signification of cinema and temporality. Looking back at this long-standing debate and the related issues of television, video, and digital culture, it is striking to note how the problem of image and time has always oscillated between ontological claims about the specific medium and the experience of moving images.

The phenomenological tradition in film theory demands recognition in this respect. A critical mapping of this philosophical inheritance may be helpful in contextualizing some persistent themes on time experience in film that remain salient in the contemporary culture of moving images. Aside from a contextualization of the phenomenology of image and time, the discussion in this book aims at a deepened account of the promises and pitfalls of a phenomenological perspective in film studies and, more specifically, aims to reconsider some phenomenological issues that may advance our current understanding of documentary film and video. I cannot aspire to exhaustive answers to the overall methodological problems addressed or touched upon here, although it has been my ambition to grapple with these concerns on both a metatheoretical and a practical level. The title of this book demands clarification, and I will begin by demarcating the French context of existential phenomenology, the philosophical tradition of primary interest for the following discussion.

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The last three decades of semiotics and poststructuralism have taught us to reject the fallacies of transcendental idealism and the solipsism that clings to the subject of classical phenomenology. Pierre Bourdieu's uncompromising opinion of phenomenology and aesthetic theory attests to this critique as he dryly questions the intellectual situation in France in 1965, commenting on the "seductions of intuitionism [which conjures up] the blinding evidence of false familiarity [and] transfigure everyday banalities about temporality, eroticism and death into false essentialist analyses."<sup>5</sup> Poststructuralist and deconstructivist projects that questioned classical thought and enclosed models of structuralism gained importance during the following decades. In the international scope of film and media studies, the influence of, for example, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida is not less important today than in the late 1980s. Yet the same era also witnessed a renewed interest in issues of subjectivity, otherness, and ethics, which in turn propelled constructive interrelations between poststructuralism and psychoanalysis as well as between phenomenology and poststructuralism.<sup>6</sup>

The theoretical framework of this book is firmly rooted in the latter group of attempts to reassess phenomenological themes in an interdisciplinary field of philosophy, aesthetic theory, narrative theory, and social psychology. *Semiotic phenomenology* is the generic term for these projects within and beyond French philosophy that address phenomenological problems of subjectivity, time, perception, and ethics from the horizon of the intellectual conquests of both semiotics and poststructuralism. Paul Ricœur, one of the initiators of existential phenomenology in France, is a crucial reference in this context. Throughout his career, Ricœur provided an ongoing hermeneutic approach to the problems of phenomenology, while continuously reflecting on, or questioning, the premises of his earlier work in relation to other, often opposing, methodological perspectives. His lifework includes the initial introduction and translation of Husserl's *Ideas* into French, and he made numerous attempts to map the methodologically parallel, yet historically converging, directions of phenomenology and poststructuralism.<sup>7</sup>

The expression *semiotic phenomenology* stands out as a provoking oxymoron. To put it bluntly, phenomenology offers a metaphysical inquiry into (time) experience, whereas semiotics radically opposes the totalizing project of metaphysics, while rejecting the incontestable notion of the experiencing "I." The former opts for a transcendental method to reveal sensory data through a precise system of description, whereas the latter draws upon the intersubjective realm of language and

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a systematic analysis of structural patterns that are primordial to specific meanings. The direction of existential phenomenology in France became a discourse of mixed influences in which interpretations of Husserl and Heidegger fused with existentialism and philosophy of religion and also with important influences from Freud and Marx. Still, the very opposition between phenomenology and semiotics was at the core of the 1960s structuralist movement.<sup>8</sup> The 1970s witnessed a growing mistrust for the enclosed models of structuralism, and from the 1980s on a renewed interest in issues of subjectivity, otherness, and ethics resulted in intersections between phenomenology and poststructuralism. What I find interesting are the ways in which this encounter between semiotic theory and phenomenology points to problems and shortfalls in both fields, while also highlighting some issues that the structuralist movement consciously bracketed and excluded. My impression is that the poststructuralist urge for open-ended systems of thought, for mapping philosophical themes rather than constructing philosophical doctrines, paradoxically offers an intellectual ambience that seems particularly apt for a renewed interest in phenomenology. Rejecting the totalizing perspective of a metaphysical agenda does not necessarily mean that the intricate problems of time experience, perception, and imagination are outdated subjects for a contemporary perspective. Semiotic phenomenology designates a project to re-posit the enigmas (Husserl, *Rätsel*) formulated by phenomenology but to do so with respect to the achievements of French structuralism, poststructuralism, and American pragmatism.<sup>9</sup> In recent years this debate reverberated in discussions on time, image, representation, historiography, and memory. I refer to many of these discussions throughout this book.

I acknowledge semiotic phenomenology as a continuous, mind-opening, and nontotalizing discourse where the problems and shortfalls of both classical philosophy and contemporary theory meet with insights into existential, psychological, and aesthetic issues that were consciously bracketed and excluded after the structuralist turn. This post-Husserlian context of film theory, philosophy, and social psychology provides for the reassessment of image and time in this book.

The discussions that follow represent a critique of film and phenomenology in the sense of a nondogmatic reflection on the important influence of existential phenomenology in classical film theory and its persistence in more recent approaches to time and memory. Hence, I have intended a *critique* in Kant's sense of an unbiased study on phenomenology and documentary theory, which means that neither do I reject existential phenomenology, nor do I suggest a new phenomenology of film experience.

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The aims of this book are less missionary or polemic than hermeneutic and case oriented. I have attempted to illuminate the phenomenological inheritance of classical film theory and to discuss some of the ideas of theory from a documentary perspective. The chapters in this book provide a context- and problem-oriented discussion on the aesthetics and experience of image and time. The preferred theoretical framework of this book draws on classical film theory—primarily the French context of aesthetic theory and film criticism—and the interdisciplinary perspective of semiotic phenomenology. Film examples will furthermore challenge the assertions of phenomenology, while also affirming the persistence of phenomenological themes in film and visual culture.

The temporal contingency of film has been subject to a variety of theoretical and historical approaches, and scholars have addressed related issues without any reference to the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Among the recent publications on cinema and temporality, Mary Ann Doane's *the Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* is an outstanding contribution in its extensive picturing of time-based images and sociocultural aspects of temporality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>10</sup> Still, in the history of ideas there are important intersections between aesthetic theory, existential phenomenology, and the conception of cinema and temporality, which deserve a thorough consideration from a film studies perspective. In the contemporary discussion on documentary film we tend recurrently to make observations about aspects of image-affect and imagination, often overlooking the related themes of film and phenomenology. I hope this book offers a correction to this situation. Moreover, this book also considers the different directions and methodological assertions that characterize the contemporary field of film and phenomenology.

The following discussions center on two basic problems of cinema and temporality. The first problem corresponds with the time-space malleability of moving images and the creative possibilities of film to manipulate rhythm, duration, and repetition and to take advantage of the chance element of photographic representation in order to both stress and curb the accidental element of the represented event. I will refer to this formal and expressive quality in terms of the *time-image*, which denotes the various ontological claims that have defined film as a time-based medium and a temporal art.<sup>11</sup> As to the creative modes in film and video to experiment with the time-image, I will account for meanings of *time measurement* in documentary. Aside from the formal aspects of space-time manipulation and attempts to frame the unfolding of an event, this notion refers to the sensory and

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affective aspects of the moving image, that is, the viewer's qualitative judgment of a temporal dimension.

The second problem deals with the implied archive memory of film, that is, the mnemonic quality of recorded images and sounds that add to the cultural meanings and expressive potential of film as a time-based medium. In the context of film theory and photography the notion of *the trace* denotes the material and existential meaning of the image as imprint. This notion is at the core of the recurrent index argument and the analysis of film and photography, which has often involved a consideration of the image as a presence of absence. In the contemporary debate on film and media it is now customary to question the image-imprint from the perspective of nonanalog representation and digital technology. Yet, as Thomas Elsaesser argued in 1998, "our culture is evidently more than little reluctant to leave the episteme of the trace and the imprint, that is to say, give up the concept of record and evidence, of truth and authenticity."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in filmmakers' and video artists' approaches to historical experience the trace may be less about the ontology of film and the photographic per se than a reflection on the testimonial function and historical value of the moving picture as archive memory. Discussions in this book relate these ideas to the trace as a crucial theme of existential phenomenology. As a philosophical discourse the trace goes beyond the materiality of the imprint. Indissociable from affect, the trace is more "contingent than the image and richer than the index."<sup>13</sup> The trace opens up to time experience and recollection; it designates the transcendental impact of an image-memory, the aporia of memory and imagination, the now of reminiscence, and the then and there of the historical referent. In the context of film and historiography, documentary cinema, and historical experience, the creative staging of the trace in moving images demands recognition. With reference to Paul Ricœur, I will consider the historical and philosophical meaning of the trace as a persistent theme in classical film theory and in Western culture writ large. Despite Ricœur's bias toward narrative time and the written word, I argue that his phenomenology of time and memory may provide for the reflection on historical representation and the production of cultural memory in film and visual culture.

*Documentary time* may suggest that in documentary film, the problem of cinema and temporality would be essentially different from that of fiction film. Although I will look at some aspects of filmic representation that I believe are of special importance for the expectations and experiences of documentary film, a major assertion of this book is that the sensory and affective implications of temporalization in moving images are crucial

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to the attraction and pleasures of film viewing as a whole. In some respects the affective dimension of cinema counterbalances the evident difference between documentary and fiction filmmaking with regard to production, exhibition, and audience expectation. Still, the traditional exclusion of nonfiction cinema in the scholarly context of film aesthetics justifies the focus on documentary time in this book.

The book consists of two parts. Part I—“Framing Change, Invoking the Moment”—demarcates the object of study and the current approach to film and phenomenology. Part II—“Experimental Figures of Time”—consists of four case-oriented discussions where the theoretical premises of Part I will be reconsidered in relation to specific examples of documentary representation in film, video, and digital media.

Part I accounts for the classical problem of image and time in film theory and in the practice of filmmaking. I argue that the ephemeral and concrete work in cinema of mediated rhythm, stasis, and the existential impact of the film image as a trace of the past represent two overlapping concerns of image and time that have always appealed to filmmakers and film critics and that illuminate the phenomenological inheritance of existential phenomenology in classical film theory. Two related analogies have been predominant in the attempts to define the ontology of film: the analogy between film and music and the analogy between the photograph and the film image. I will consider these classical perspectives, while relating the assertions of film and ontology to the context of phenomenology and contemporary theory.

A closer look at the philosophy of time experience and the mutual interest in duration and change further recognizes the important continuities between classical and more recent approaches to image and time, legitimatizing the fruitful exchange between film theory and phenomenology. André Bazin, Gilles Deleuze, and Paul Ricœur are crucial references in this context, and I argue that, together with their shared grounding in existential phenomenology, the problem of cinema and temporality justifies a consideration of their divergent perspectives.

An overall objective of Part I is to initiate a methodological reflection on phenomenology. Special attention will be paid to Vivian Sobchack and her pioneering approach to film and phenomenology in *The Address of the Eye*.<sup>14</sup> Aside from a broader charting of this and other attempts in film studies to promote phenomenology as a method and theoretical perspective, I will look more closely at a recurrent theme, with specific implications for documentary theory: the phenomenology of image and death. With reference to theoretical and cinematic approaches to this theme of visible excess and motifs beyond representation, I will suggest an alternative



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perspective on film and image-affect. In search for appropriate tools for dealing with concepts such as the viewer, experience, and expectation, I will turn to Erving Goffman's phenomenology of everyday life and, more specifically, to his analysis of frame-breaking events.<sup>15</sup>

Part II consists of a series of case studies where I develop the major themes of previous chapters in relation to individual films. Although some film examples are referred to in Part I, in Part II, I will offer more extensive analyses on the time-image and the trace. I also acknowledge the creative experimentation with interval and rhythm in moving images and the affective and sensory impact of images blurred by speed or extended into frame-breaking figures of duration. An important question regarding temporalization in documentary film deals with the expressive and symbolic function of space-time abstraction and how the formal elaboration of the represented realm may have an impact on our experience of the documentary film.

Chapters 6 and 7 aim at a deepened consideration of the material and existential significations of the trace. I will develop my reading of Ricœur and the phenomenology of memory, in order to illuminate strategies in film and media to realize an enactment of historical time and to animate (in Jean-Paul Sartre's sense) the film image as a mnemonic sign. Examples will show that the phenomenology of the trace is both affirmed and radically questioned in the process of staging cinematographically the imprint of the past. There will also be reason to challenge Ricœur's assumptions about memorizing and forgetting, by taking a closer account of the culture of preservation, reproduction, and oblivion, which in various ways affects the documentary representation of past events.

The case studies of Part II exemplify and celebrate the expressive possibilities of documentary film as a poetics of social representation and historical experience. The preference for experimental film and video—and the historically important interrelations between experimental filmmaking and documentary cinema—is in tune with the aesthetic perspective of this book. I turn to films where representation itself, the formal and narrative process of mediation, becomes subject to reflection. I think of these examples as “meta-cinematographic gestures,” to quote Roger Odin.<sup>16</sup> The reflexive approach to film and media representation offered by experimental cinema is often illuminating in the ways it questions any simplified assumption of what cinema normally is and usually offers.

The classical discourse of image and time involves an outspoken interest in the materiality of the image-object. The predominant reflection on cinematic temporality is inseparable from the film image, and accordingly ontological ideas have always been primordial

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to discussions on the *temporal status* of cinema. Although this book offers a discussion that hopefully opens up beyond such a narrow perspective, some of these classical discussions are still relevant for a consideration of time-based media and the representation of time in film. My aim throughout the book has been to recognize the coexistence of different media technologies in contemporary film production, which contradicts any ontological notion of the cinematic. A conscious strategy to balance the bias toward the film image has been to relate the notions of classical film theory to a wider conception of the moving image. I will also refer to examples that transgress the border of different media technologies and screening contexts, such as the work by Chantal Akerman, Péter Forgács, and Harun Farocki, which have been shown outside the movie theater, in television and art galleries. Moreover, despite the actual mode of production, a figure of time in video may, for example, relate to a 1920s discourse on visual rhythm, and yet the mosaic outline of a digital editing may exemplify a layering texture that requires a special consideration of nonanalog representation. I have chosen to acknowledge this ambivalence as a creative possibility and a pragmatic issue beyond the enclosed problem of ontology.

As meta-cinematographic gestures, the examples accounted for in this book provide theoretical references that force us “to reflect on the definition of the cinematic object such as it functions in social space.”<sup>17</sup> The reference to individual films and experimental approaches to image and time will both affirm and question the premises of a phenomenological perspective. The examples illuminate the phenomenology of time and the persistence of related motifs in cinema, while also bringing attention to the limits of philosophical abstractions in the sociocultural and political realm of media culture.

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Part I. Framing Change,  
Invoking the Moment

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[ 1 ] *The Phenomenology of Image  
and Time*

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In documentary theory the phenomenology of the image as imprint and record fuses with the classical index argument, which has commonly been associated with the ascribed veracity of documentary representation. Hence, the trace status of photography and film represents a crucial problem in the ongoing discussion on film and historical representation. More recently, various approaches to the aesthetics and experience of documentary film have dealt with classical issues of image and time, including an important recognition of the affective and psychological impact of documentary representation in film and media. In this context the phenomenology of image and time corresponds with theoretical perspectives that aim beyond any a priori account of the documentary truth claim. These approaches address aspects of desire and imagination, which shed light on problems of image-affect and the specific expectations and experiences that belong to documentary cinema.

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▶ **Unfolding Moments and Representations of Lived Time**

Ontology has been crucial to film theory where critics and filmmakers have defined the film image in relation to other images and arts. For an overview of time experience in film, I recall two analogies of particular importance for the conception of cinematic temporality in theory and practice: the analogy between film and music and the analogy between film and photography. In retrospect, these analogies stand out as competing models of importance for attempts in film history to theorize the physical medium of cinema and the existential impact of time in moving images.

The comparison between music and film originates from the theory and practice of avant-garde cinema in the 1910s and 1920s. The filmic

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production of rhythmic entities and the organization of sequences within the overall montage motivated the musical analogy. Filmmaking was compared to both composing and mathematics, and film was first recognized as a time-based medium, dependent on the artistic elaboration of rhythm and tempo. Chapter 4 will exemplify the creative elaboration of filmic inscription and space-time abstraction, which characterizes the cinematic experiments of both avant-garde filmmakers and scientists and which continues to revitalize documentary practice. In this context the belief in the ideal matching of sound-image rhythm with the pulse of the viewer, who engages both intellectually and physically in film viewing, is important.

During the 1920s critics based the kinship between music and film on the idea of a visual rhythm. A similar focus on measured views and the unfolding of a flow of images and sounds resulted in describing film as *Zeitobjekt*. The notion of the *Zeitobjekt*, or “temporal object,” was ascribed to the melody by Edmund Husserl, who used the melody as a conceptual model for his analysis of time experience. The melody permitted him to grasp time within its transit as flux. In the famous seventh paragraph on the temporal objects in *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)* Husserl writes, “By temporal objects in the specific sense we understand objects that are not only united in time but that also contain temporal extension in themselves.”<sup>1</sup> Although the notion of the *Zeitobjekt* may affirm the analogy between music and film, the analogy between film and the flux of perception has been subject to critique and modification. In Bernard Stiegler’s opinion Husserl overlooked the possibility that the melody can be recorded.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective the model of flux contradicts the recorded sequence, which may be preserved and repeated beyond the memory of the subject. The legitimacy of the musical metaphor in moving images, however, resides in the rhythmic and sensory aspect of unfolding movement and changes in tempo.

The inherent time of the image combines with the filmmaker’s skills to stress the sculptural and existential dimension of time in film. Different from music, of course, transformation and tempo materialize in the audiovisual and imaginative space of the film image. A recognition of this kinetic impact of metamorphosis is implied in André Bazin’s emphasis on photographic inscription and filmic duration as the ontological and psychological kernel of cinema: “Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were.”<sup>3</sup>

Related to, although different from, the pure rhythm and transcendence suggested by the musical analogy, this recognition of

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film as a phenomenology of sound-image transformation is more akin to Ovid's sense of metamorphosis: "water constantly gives and receives new figures."<sup>4</sup> The metamorphic quality of cinema is, of course, taken for granted and therefore usually transparent to film experience. In trick film devices, however, this metamorphic quality has been the very locus of attraction, in order to produce disappearances or uncanny substitutions of one space by another. Metamorphosis is also akin to the abstraction of photographic detail provided by the poetics of cinema. Hence, films as different as those made by Georges Méliès—staging of imaginary realms—and Joris Ivens—contemplating events, things, and gestures—focus attention to the creative representations of time within and beyond the mimetic attempt of filmic representation.

This space-time malleability is not restricted to the film image. Electronic and digital media also demonstrate this plastic quality. Bill Viola's video *The Reflecting Pole* (1977–1979) offers an illustrative example beyond any narrow, ontological sense of the film image. *The Reflecting Pole* stands out as a striking parallel to Ovid's metamorphosis. Although this video is a playful celebration of the plasticity of moving images, the magic (of this video) primarily resides in its play with representation and abstraction of a pro-filmic space. Viola's approach to image and time relates to early motion studies where film offered a tool to analyze the physical laws of movement; in this case, however, the focus is on the electronic image and the sensory aspect of audiovisual rhythm and change.

The first image shows a pool surrounded by dense vegetation. During the seven minutes of the video the static camera is contrasted to the dynamic play with movement, stop-motion, and change, as a man (Viola) loudly takes off to jump into the water. His body freezes in midair and lingers like a sunlit ball, although the surface of the pool is still in motion, denying this unlikely presence by not reflecting the body. Owing to the mode of editing the passing of time materializes in the shifting daylight, which alters the lights and shades of the water that is now and then agitated as by invisible touch. The surface of water becomes an impossible figure of time, the locus of constant transformation mocking the relation between reflection and reflected, screen and referent. As the restrained figure starts to dissolve, Viola's reflection appears on the water and he walks out of the frame. After a series of similar reflections he finally leaves the pool to walk solemnly into the woods and out of frame. "Water constantly gives and receives new figures," although in this case the metamorphosis provided by a natural event is doubled by the constructed time-space of video editing.



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