

BOOK REVIEW

Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique
Bliss Cua Lim, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, 346+xiv pages

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No less than feminist film and trauma specialist E. Ann Kaplan has hailed *Translating Time* as one of the most influential books in the field of cinema studies, a distinction made more remarkable by the fact that Bliss Cua Lim's volume has only recently been published. Kaplan cites Lim's achievement in drawing on "genre theory, feminist film research, postcolonialism, and feminist cine-psychoanalysis to think through the meanings that emerge in films about fantasy" (2009: 190). Well on its way to solidifying its early stature as a classic in the field, *Translating Time* bears the prestigious imprint of a John Hope Franklin Book Award, an annual honor given by Duke University Press to four books selected from the hundred-plus titles that it publishes every year. (Personal disclosure: Lim and I were classmates and fellow Fulbright scholars in graduate school.)

Prior to *Translating Time*, Lim was known for her volumes of poetry in her native Philippines, and her expertise in this mode of expression enhances the present book's correlation of seemingly disparate concerns, unified by the much-vilified yet inevitably overriding element of pleasure – the same factor that links *Translating Time* with

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an impressive array of feminist predecessors, from Laura Mulvey (who, in calling for the destruction of pleasure in Classical Hollywood, motivated an entire generation of scholars to reevaluate its importance and function) down to the present and, from what we can discern from current media studies trends, far into the future.

Translating Time reworks Henri Bergson's philosophical critique of so-called homogeneous time, regarded as the primary ideological mechanism for the historical ascendancy of European modernity, by infusing it with a postcolonial critique. Lim recounts how, starting with the late thirteenth-century invention of precise timepieces, homogeneous time became ensconced as the standard universal method of reckoning temporal experience, pervading all available areas of human endeavor within and outside Europe via the mechanisms of state control and colonial expansion. Crucially, she argues that homogeneous time overlays human societies with the twinned processes of measuring everyone, without exception, according to the timeline of Eurocentric development, as well as excluding from historical significance any form of anachronism – thus resulting, for example, in the refusal to accept people falling within certain categories – such as the "savage," the "primitive," the "superstitious," and the "premodern" – as belonging to the present. Homogeneous time means that people who exist, as it were, in periods marked as "past" by Eurocentric development cannot be considered of this moment, unless they were "modernized" one way or another. This reminds me of one of the standard arguments that links the colonizer with the rapist: the purported victim was merely being claimed by patriarchy in order to protect it (the nation) or her (the woman) from other claimants, as well as to provide it or her with the benefits of modernist progress presumably unavailable to those cursed with "backwardness." The narrative of the centuries-long quest of homogeneous time for global preeminence would

sound fantastic in itself if it were told to, say, a Renaissance-era subject or a contemporary Third-World tribesperson. Lim's retelling captures the appropriately fantastic quality of the now-seemingly-inexorable advance of this phenomenon.

Lim initiates her departure from Bergson's critique by propound-

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ing a concept of immiscible times, which she defines as "multiple times that never quite dissolve into the code of modern time consciousness, discrete temporalities incapable of attaining homogeneity with or full incorporation into a uniform chronological present" (12). As she puts it:

an anti-colonial critique of homogeneous time points out that the modern notion of progress and its corollary, the accusation of noncontemporaneity, translate multiple ways of inhabiting the world into a single, homogeneous time. This translation is arguably a deliberate *mistranslation* in that the allochronic gesture – the appraisal of the other as an anachronism – served as a potent temporal justification for the colonial project. (83)

Tellingly, inasmuch as Bergson had prematurely denounced film as the culmination of the popular perception of homogeneous time, Lim finds useful samples of immiscible times imbricated in the cinema of the fantastic. By her own admission, she incorporates Bergson further by resisting him at this juncture, specifically his dismissal of cinema for its collusion with homogenized, spatialized time, as well as its deceptive re-presentation of duration as an atomized succession of still moments.

Lest one acquire the misimpression that Lim's espousal of immiscible heterogeneous times could play into the cynical religious revivalism of conservative political leaders (as exemplified in the U.S. Republican Party's deplorable turn-of-the-millennium strategies), she takes the trouble to point to examples of what we could obversely term real fantasies, like the studies of Jean and John Comaroff on the "enchantments of capital" (2002: 782-87) in the Third World, wherein "amid glaring asymmetries . . . the enigmatic appearance of 'wealth without work' . . . is felt by the disenfranchised in particular to be opaque, occult, spectral" (135).

Translating Time is exceptional as an extended study not only for what its so-far mostly western appreciators prize it for, but also for what mainly subaltern scholars will be able to perceive: Lim's

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thorough immersion in postcolonial culture, to a point beyond mere familiarity, well within the realm of (for want of more appropriately academic terminology) sheer and unadulterated passion. A disheartening number of cultural studies scholars in particular, once they realize the exploitative potential of the Philippines's unique status as the U.S.'s only ex-/neo-/post-colony, tend to indulge in the country's popular culture only to come up with undeniably well-meaning but erroneous, if not preposterous or potentially injurious, interpretations of local phenomena. Perhaps the most famous example was Fredric Jameson's one-time incursion into Third-World, including Philippine, popular culture in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992), whose long list of Filipino objectors included Lim (1993).

While explicating her take on Bergson (partly by way of Gilles Deleuze – on which more later), Lim proceeds to survey the fantastic in cinema, beginning with a Philippine “Second Golden Age” prestige production, Mike de Leon’s *Itim* (1976), coursing through Etienne-Jules Marey’s proto-filmic motion studies and Fatimah Tobing Rony’s personal experimental film *On Cannibalism* (1994). Her bravura readings of the recent *aswang* (segmented viscera-sucking monster) horror-film cycle of the Peque Gallaga and Lorenzo Reyes directorial team (commencing with their eponymous 1992 blockbuster), and the female specters of Butch Perez’s *Haplos* (1982) and Hong Kong filmmaker Stanley Kwan’s *Yin ji kau* (English title *Rouge*, 1987), are models of close textual inspections that enrich the too-scant literature on these largely overlooked marvels of Asian film-genre productions, even as she painstakingly develops her notions on the values and limitations of immiscibilities in subaltern cinema.

After duly disclosing how early colonial chroniclers insisted on the feminine nature of the *aswang* as a way of demonizing the *baylan* (pre-Hispanic female shaman), Lim proceeds to discuss the politicized peasantry’s conflation of World War II’s Japanese occupation army with the contemporary Philippine Constabulary (hence *Haplos*’s always-already doomed revenant), and acknowledges CIA operative Edward G. Lansdale’s (1972, rpt. 1991) possibly fictional and defi-

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nately self-aggrandizing psy-war exploitation of the *aswang* myth in his counter-insurgency operations in the Philippine countryside. More to the point of feminist interest, Lim owns up to the necessarily patriarchal containment which *Haplos*’s and *Rouge*’s resolutions build toward, yet insists on pointing out how the real-life female characters find themselves attracted to their supernatural rivals, to the point of even fusing with the specter, as in the case of the ending of *Haplos*.

In advancing toward *Rouge*, in fact, Lim might initially appear to be falling into the same predicament of engaging with the unfamiliar that scholars like she and I excoriate overeager outsiders for. Yet Lim’s differences – as woman, as Chinay (Chinese-Filipina), as gender and queer theory specialist – secure for her an enviable position from which to read not just the spectrally inflected relations between Hong Kong as a former crown colony (not quite a nation yet not fully striving for integration) and the People’s Republic of China, but also the role that the larger regional area of East Asia has played vis-à-vis the cannibalization of the Asian horror cycle by Hollywood. By looking at the trajectory of particular examples like Takashi Shimizu’s *Ju-on* (2002) as well as its U.S. remake, *The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2004), she manages to point out how such a ground-breaking scholar of national cinema as Andrew Higson (1989) “remains regrettably one-sided” (230) in discussing the role of Hollywood:

His argument emphasizes Hollywood’s contributions to national cinema, especially national-popular cinema, but he fails to mention the converse: Hollywood’s debts to other national cinemas, its founding reliance on émigré talent, its appropriation of aesthetic hallmarks, its practices of borrowing and remaking, and its eye on foreign markets. (230)

Just as it had done with earlier film trends in Europe, Hollywood’s appropriation of story material and qualities associated with Asian genre cinemas results in a deracination via the

process of transforming “mark[s] of innovation, of originality, of newness or novelty greeted by vigorous, profitable audience demand” into signs of iterability

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(222-23) that result in a “softening of contrast, the quickly accomplished reduction of the distance between generic innovation and generic repetition” (223).

As a detailed demonstration of a home-grown achievement whose qualities would prove immiscible when (as it actually turned out) a Hollywood producer attempted to remake it, Lim discusses a Korean horror film, Kim Ji-woon’s *Janghwa, Hongryeon* (English title *A Tale of Two Sisters*, 2003), an experience that “slowly unfurls its secrets, yielding narrative clues and formal motifs whose significances are only apprehended on repeated viewing” (243). The scandal of the DreamWorks remake (Charles and Thomas Guard’s appositely titled *The Uninvited*, 2009, repudiated by Kim), wherein the production pitch “was based only upon having watched the trailer – not the entire source film – beforehand” (304n), thus resulting in divergent second halves between the two versions, is aggravated by the fact that such a supercilious approach was never even exposed and regarded as a scandal in the first place.

Lim concludes her book by recounting similar predicaments experienced by Bergson and a subaltern scholar who explored a postcolonial critique of homogeneous time: Bergson described how, in the midst of writing *Time and Free Will*, “the hour strikes on a neighboring clock but my inattentive ear does not perceive it” (1889, trans. 2001: 127; qtd.: 247); Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 102-03), from another place and period, recounted how an ironically sympathetic historian had wound up distorting a rebel leader’s account of political agency in an anti-colonial uprising, only because the leader had expressed his tribe’s action in supernatural terms. Given such lapses in even the most well-intentioned people’s best efforts, Lim echoes Elizabeth Grosz’s call to restore ontology “to its rightful place at the center of knowledges and social practices, [inasmuch as] the ways in which ontology has been previously conceptualized – as static, fixed, composed of universal principles or ideals, indifferent to history, particularity, or change – require transformation and revitalization” (2005: 5; qtd.: 251).

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Within the specific area (film studies) that it sets as its *donnée*, *Translating Time* fills a gap noticeable in the otherwise densely constructed work of Gilles Deleuze, who had set out in two volumes (1983 and 1985, trans. 1986 and 1989) to reclaim Bergson for film, but whose critique of homogeneous time’s insidious valorization of European modernity is severely blunted by his use of canonical samples from art cinema (mostly European, with the usual Hollywood favorites such as Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* [1941], the standard all-time critics’ favorite, thrown in). As a cineaste-come-lately, Deleuze may have been understandably swept up by what David Bordwell (1994) has termed the “standard version of stylistic history” and its aftermath, in which the aesthetic innovations that radicalized film style originated in Europe; such a formulation required the existence of Classical Hollywood film as a mode of practice that had dominated world cinema for the better half of the previous century – and which indeed was challenged and eventually overturned roughly by mid-century Euro art-film practice. What Deleuze could not overcome was the limited range of his subjective universe of western film culture, so when he in effect celebrates the deconstruction of Classical Hollywood film language enabled by filmmakers who could trace

their inspiration, if not their training, to such movements as Italian neo-realism, the French New Wave, and avant-garde filmmaking, he is actually upholding a higher stage of modernism over an earlier one – in effect locking his argument within the same sphere of Eurocentrism that he had sought to contest.

Several other types of cinema whose recuperation is being spearheaded mostly by feminist critics – trash, porn, camp, in short anything subsumable under “pleasure” including even select Classical Hollywood titles – have already been reinscribed, with varying degrees of success, as emblems of transgression in popular culture. With *Translating Time*, Lim manages to liberate Bergsonian critique by convincingly demonstrating how resistance to an ultimate western temporal ideal finds its most useful samples in similarly pleasurable products that originate in places far removed from the center. In do-

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ing so, she contributes her share to a valiant multi-generational project, one initiated by Bergson himself over a century ago but only recently being tackled in earnest, in acknowledgment of struggles by European and non-European peoples that have somehow persisted all the way to the present. On the one hand, one may argue that this proves that homogeneous time is an exceedingly difficult system to dismantle (and in fact just now I remember telling Lim, when she first described her project to me, that she was confronting an ultimately impossible task). On the other hand, it may be precisely the excessive, extravagant nature of the challenge that has yielded material as wondrous and forward-looking as the works of the authors Lim has engaged, with her own volume taking its rightful place in a deservedly exalted but still-too-short list.

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