

Excerpt from Richard Howells's *Visual Culture* (pp. 174-5).

Text:

The novel is similarly free from the constraints of real time. When we come back, for example, to our imaginary phrase, 'In what seemed an instant, I found myself at my destination...', we are aware that a journey of what may have lasted several hours has been contracted to the second or so it took to read the line. Imagine how tedious it would be if it took three hours to read a description of a three-hour journey! The novel is particularly good at cutting out the tedious or unremarkable portions of life and concentrating on the interesting parts – whether that is several generations of a family saga or a simple journey from one place to another. Sometimes, these transitions in time will be clearly signified with phrases such as 'the following day' or 'later that night'. This is not always necessary, however, because the reader is usually aware of the literary conventions that permit real time to be contracted into literary time without an explanatory phrase every time this happens. It is simply understood. Again, we can demonstrate this to ourselves by reading a section from a novel and noting each time there is a 'temporal transition' in the narrative. At the same time, we can observe how, even when there is no marked or 'signposted' transition, at the end of the section there is nevertheless a discrepancy between how long things took in the novel and how long they would have taken in the real world.

Film:

Now it is time to conduct the same experiment with film. We can take almost any popular film at random and subject it to the same analysis that we have the novel. We can begin with space. When we watch a film, we are usually at a consistent distance and angle from the screen (be that a TV or a cinema screen) just as we are from the stage in the theatre or the printed page in the novel. With film (just like the novel), however, we enjoy the illusion of joining in the action, of being drawn into the 'screen world', rather than watching from outside. This is because of the cinematic convention that equates the camera position with our position: we see what the camera sees and so not only do we become the camera, the camera becomes us. In the cinema, unlike the theatre, we feel that we are participants, not spectators. When we watch a scene on film, then, notice how often 'our' point of view changes even during a relatively simple conversation or action, such as someone leaving a house and getting into a car. If that is true of a simple scene, look at the transitions between scenes, which may transport us from continent to continent with cinematic ease. Next, examine the same section of a film while noting down contractions and transitions in time. What is the difference between natural time (real time) and film time (reel time)? If you do this well, you will start to perceive afresh conventions that previously you had probably just taken for granted. It is all a part of visual literacy.

Questions:

- ① In what ways do novels instruct a reader about the passage of time?

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- ② What dimension does film use to instruct viewers about the passage of time?

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- ③ According to Howells, both text and film share two special characteristics as story-telling mediums. What are they?