

Counting Time in *The Law of Enclosures*

Peter Dickinson

IO

In the final frames of John Greyson's *The Law of Enclosures* (2000), a dying Hank (Sean McCann), felled by a hunter's stray bullet in the woods adjacent his recently built retirement home, tells Bea (Diane Ladd), his wife of forty years and newly in love with him after a long period of estrangement and mutual recrimination, "It's better this way ... We would have just fucked it up again. This way we're saved." Hank then asks Bea to count down from ten, the slow but steady diminution of his own *being* as he slips towards death mirrored in the movement of the camera, which first tracks back, then up, Hank's body (and Bea's for that matter) literally disappearing before our eyes. But before Bea reaches zero, and in a characteristically Greysonian thwarting of narrative closure, Hank interrupts his wife, telling her – and us – to "Look!" There then follows a close-up of Bea's disbelieving gaze (whether because of what she sees or because of the circumstances in which she finds herself remains unclear) and then a cut to its object: the elusive male red deer that both the hunter and Hank had been stalking – the former to kill, the latter to photograph.

9

We have seen this deer before, as has Bea, whom we encounter at the start of the film as a young child named Beatty (Kelci Stephenson), first burying herself among sandy bluffs while likewise counting down (from five this time) and then stumbling upon said deer, using a disposable camera to snap a photograph that would eventually end up in the local paper. That image does not have the same significance for the young friend to whom an excited Beatty later shows her artistic handiwork. In the photo reprinted in the newspaper, the beautiful lumbering three-dimensional red deer Beatty saw in the forest is flattened and still and monochrome. Likewise, its reappearance at the end



Bea and dying Hank in *The Law of Enclosures*: one of the few portraits in mainstream Canadian cinema of older actors given licence to display their sexuality. Frame capture.

of Greyson's film does not so much induce in us, as viewers, associative certainty as it marks yet another moment, among many, of false continuity, the shots of the deer serving as an "interstice," in Gilles Deleuze's conception of that term (1989, 179), in this case between the void that is Bea's future without Hank and the void that was her past with him. To this end, the film concludes with a final cut to a scene from early on in the couple's married life, when they still called each other Beatrice and Henry (and were played by Sarah Polley and Brendan Fletcher), and when public displays of affection between them still had to be coaxed. In this case, Kenny (Rick Skene), Beatrice's uncle and Henry's boss, has demanded that Henry kiss his "beautiful wife" in front of guests who have gathered at Kenny's locksmith and alarm installation shop to celebrate his birthday and to watch on television the mayor of Sarnia announce the certification results of a record-breaking public lip-locking held in the town earlier in the year (in which, pointedly, young Beatrice and Henry had refrained from participating). Caught in the headlights of their on- and offscreen onlookers' refracted gaze, their automated response (initiated, it should be said, by Beatrice) is also reproduced internally on three surveillance monitors sitting on a shelf behind them. In a film replete with screens within screens, most broadcasting footage of the First Gulf War

(which serves as the temporal backdrop to both couples' narratives), this concluding *mise en abyme* is a striking visual representation of the feedback loop in which Bea/Beatrice and Henry/Hank find themselves. Contrary to what the dying Hank suggests, there is no outside-of-the-marriage plot. Nor, it would seem, is there one of wars fought over oil. In both cases, what appears to be a linear chain of events is exposed as a single, continuous, and infinitely repeatable catastrophe. Whether the film is counted backwards or forwards, rewound or fast-forwarded, Greyson, like Walter Benjamin's recording angel, shows us in *The Law of Enclosures* both how powerless we are to repair what has been smashed and how to look away from the wreckage that results.

8

In their consistently revisionist approach to history and historiography, Greyson's films and videos adopt a temporality that is both materialist and distinctly queer. As Christopher Gittings puts it, Greyson's activist aesthetic results in a "queer practice of temporal translation as a transformational strategy to re-vision imperial histories' constructions of gender, sexuality, and race in the context of present concerns" (2007, 141). From the time-travelling queer icons who descend on southern Ontario to protest the policing of toilet sex in *Urinal* (1988), to the three Peters obsessed with their peters (and a certain prime minister named Pierre) in *Un©ut* (1997); from Victorian sexologist Richard Burton and Québécois flight attendant Gaëtan Dugas's butthole duet in *Zero Patience* (1993); to the chorus of 1960s stenographers recording the 1735 Cape Town sodomy trial of the Dutch Rijkhaart Jacobsz and the Khoi Claas Blank in *Proteus* (2003), Greyson's narrative juxtapositions and visual anachronisms combine as part of a larger critical and creative method that, after Benjamin, is constellatory, bringing "the past forward to be part of the present" (Greyson, in Amsden 2000, 17) precisely in order to shock viewers out of a passive acceptance of the status quo and to arm them with tools to take political action in what Benjamin calls the "here-and-now [*Jetztzeit*]" (2001, xivff). By comparison, then, *The Law of Enclosures* would appear to be Greyson's most conventional work, a relationship drama played "straight" in both its (more or less realist) content and its (more or less linear) form. And yet, as Gittings remarks, traces of "Greyson's aesthetic signature" remain "visible in the film" (2007, 139). I would go even further. Whether because of the proleptic sense of déjà vu one necessarily experiences when re-watching the film in the aftermath of the Second Gulf War, or because of the break it seems to mark in Greyson's own



The Law of Enclosures: Henry and Beatrice in the *mise en abyme* of the surveillance monitors behind them. Frame capture.

career trajectory, *The Law of Enclosures* now reads to me as a powerful summation of the concerns with history, time, and the possibility of change that span Greyson's entire oeuvre. What, after all, could be a more apt metaphor for the "homogenous and empty time" (Benjamin 2001, xiii, xvii) of heteronormative historicism and political conformism than a couple and a country terminally stuck in domestic and foreign wars of attrition? Both Bea and Hank, and the Bushes *père* and *fils*, know what it "means to take control of a memory [whether true or false], as it flashes in a moment of danger" (vi). The question becomes, in the struggle over the interpretation of those memories, whether the shocks they effect will in fact blast us out of our complacent acceptance of the so-called normal and prescribed course of our lives and epochs, or whether they will lead to "regime changes" (again, domestic and foreign) that mask just more of the same. Hank tells Bea that death, which he cheated once before, is now their salvation. But Bea, her own body riven with cancerous cells and staring their past squarely in the face, knows "that not even the dead will be safe from [an] enemy" who gets to represent how things really were (vi).

7

What distinguishes images from the “essences” of phenomenology is their historical index ... For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding “to legibility” constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. (Benjamin 1999, 462–3 [N3,1])

What constitutes the crystal-image is the most fundamental operation of time: since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to split the present in two heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past ... In fact, the crystal constantly exchanges the two distinct images which constitute it, the actual image of the present which passes and the virtual image of the past which is preserved: distinct and yet indiscernible, and all the more indiscernible because distinct, because we do not know which is one and which is the other ... The crystal-image is, then, the point of indiscernibility of the two distinct images, the actual and the virtual, while what we see in the crystal is time itself, a bit of time in the pure state, the very distinction between the two images which keeps on reconstituting itself. (Deleuze 1989, 81–2)

6

Benjamin’s dialectical method crystallizes in the cinematic image. Indeed, in *The Arcades Project* he likens his method to “literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show” (1999, 460 [N1a,8]). Arguing further about the need “to carry over the principle of montage into history,” Benjamin says

that the key is “to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event” (461 [N2,6]). Likewise, in the second volume of his philosophical treatise on the cinema, Deleuze (1989) argues that starting with the advent of sound and cohering especially in the postwar experiments of the neo-realists and the New Wave, film developed a visual grammar that is more about the representational power of the solitary or fragmentary image than about linear storytelling. Clock and calendar time give way to a perpetual (and perceptual) immanence, what Benjamin refers to in *The Arcades Project* as “dialectics at a standstill” and, later, in “On the Concept of History,” as “Messianic time” (2001, xviii), in which objects, ideas, commodities, people, moments, movements are blasted out of the continuum of historical inevitability, or compulsory narratives of happy ending, and made “actual” in the present precisely in order to render visible their sedimented layers of “virtual” connection.

Thus, for example, in the opening title sequence of *The Law of Enclosures* (in which, it should be noted, Greyson more than once inserts cutaway images of stuck, but still ticking, table and wall clocks), Greyson juxtaposes shots of the giant oil refineries, industrial processing plants, and energy substations that dominate the horizon of Sarnia’s Chemical Valley with black and white footage of Bea and Hank touring the interactive heritage museum at nearby Oil Springs, where North America’s petroleum industry began in 1858 and where the world’s first oil gusher was discovered four years later. This is followed by aerial reconnaissance video of a US warplane tracking a “smart bomb” dropped on its Iraqi target and, finally, by images of young Beatty playing by herself in what is left of Sarnia’s denuded “natural” landscape. With this sequence, as Gittings notes, Greyson deftly implicates Canada in US foreign policy via the global appetite for oil (2007, 140), while also subtly telegraphing the domestic and material effects of such consumption in terms of environmental depredation and bodily illness. This is reinforced by the very next scene, which again eschews narrative chronology in favour of dialectics at a standstill, in this case placing Bea and Beatrice side by side at the pharmacy as they wait for prescriptions to be filled, Bea for herself, Beatrice for her father (who we later learn is already dead and whose pills Beatrice is now hoarding). Bea exits first, and as she goes to pay at the checkout she is confronted by a television advertising fiery-red nail polish by alternating images of a beautiful model covering her face with her hands and explosions of flames reminiscent of the oil fires that burned uncontrollably in Kuwait following the First Gulf War. However, when Bea attempts to switch the channel to find news of the war, she encounters only fuzzy snow – and a frosty look from the clerk serving her, who quickly returns the television



Queer temporality or “dialectics at a standstill” in *The Law of Enclosures*: Bea and her past self, Beatrice, side by side. Frame capture.

picture back to its appropriate product placement. Here, Greyson is, I would argue, less interested in making a direct causal connection between the conspicuous consumption that fuels capitalist modernity and the new imperial order being founded in the name of fuel security and supply than he is in adducing how that relationship shifts in response to the constantly changing demands and pressures of the here-and-now. As Bea and Hank’s friend Myra (a wonderful Shirley Douglas) puts it later on in the film, she could care less whether her American-born husband Stan’s (Victor Cowie) cancer is a result of his exposure to toxic chemicals while fighting in Iraq or to his years working in Sarnia’s oil refineries; what concerns her most is how she is going to pay for his funeral. For Greyson, following Benjamin, the course of a life, like the course of history, is not about culmination; it is about potential. And for both men that potential can be revolutionary or it can be reactionary.

5

The Law of Enclosures is Greyson’s second film to be adapted from a contemporary work of literature, and unlike with *Lilies* (1996), whose changes (most famously the ending) sometimes met with resistance from playwright Michel Marc Bouchard (Bouchard and Belzil 1998, 50–1), Greyson is on

record as stating how closely he hewed to Dale Peck's 1996 novel (Amsden 2000, 15). This seems strangely appropriate in a work examining the price of marital fidelity and ideological fixity. However, there are at least two significant ways in which Greyson's film deviates from its source text. The first is the shift in setting from Long Island, New York, in the novel to Sarnia, Ontario, in the film, a change that, as we have already seen, allows Greyson to probe Canada's proximate economic and geopolitical relationship with the United States, not least by featuring multiple forays by Beatrice and Henry and young Myra (Kristen Thomson) and Stanley (Rob Stefaniuk) across the border into Michigan. It also allows him to showcase onscreen a region and landscape he is intimately familiar with from his own youth. Paradoxically, then, the southwestern Ontario location serves as a kind of stand-in for the second major difference between novel and film, namely the necessary excision from the latter of the autobiographical family memoir by Peck that interrupts the narrative of Beatrice and Henry in the former. That memoir begins with a necrology-cum-genealogy that serves as a dedication both to the memory of Peck's dead mother, Eileen, and to the idea of his still very much alive father, Dale Sr, who remarried three more times, in and against whose image the son who bears his name now seeks to understand his own likeness and unlikeness, going so far as to imagine himself penetrating his father's body: "Now I enter my father. The skin which has served as his fortress all his life and protected him against me offers no resistance, and I crawl through all the holes left open to me" (Peck 1996, 167). It is a bold experiment from a writer obsessed with lineages, both familial and authorial. Henry and Beatrice, for example, turn out to be the parents of John, the protagonist from Peck's first book, *Martin and John* (1993), who mourns the death of his lover to AIDS by writing obsessively about their relationship in both first-person journal entries and third-person stories. And in *What We Lost* (2004), Peck again combines elements of fiction and memoir in recreating his father's difficult childhood on a farm in upstate New York.

4

In Greyson's films and videos the question of inheritance – political, ideological, cultural, sexual, epidemiological – is similarly intermediated and recursive. To understand how we got here, we must simultaneously explode and arrest time, inserting ourselves like an orthogonal caesura into what Benjamin derides as horizontal progress narratives of "Once upon a time ..." (2001, xvi): "Once upon a time" there was a flight attendant named Gaëtan Dugas; "Once upon a time" there was a dictator named Saddam Hussein; "Once upon a time" there was a couple named Beatrice and Henry – hence

Greyson's repeated embedding of "real life" (and real live) footage from the Gulf War in *The Law of Enclosures*, showing us just how difficult it is for us to understand, or even register, events as we are experiencing them (Myra, in particular, has trouble getting a satellite signal at the trailer where she lives), but also our reluctance to change the channel (Myra, to her snowy TV: "We want to see the fuckin' war! Show us the fuckin' war!"). Better to press the pause button and rewind the tape. Only in this way can we subject to scrutiny not just the set of assumptions and procedures that reduces everything to a governing axiom, but the very basis and integrity of the axiom itself: AIDS is spread through gay promiscuity; Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction; marriage and family guarantee a happy-ever-after.

3

Is there ever even an after? In the rush to write the genealogy of queer theory (as sure a sign as any of the waning – if not outright death – of a discipline) and to account for a concomitant "post-AIDS"/same-sex-marriage-inspired rewriting, in North America at any rate, of the archive of queer political radicalism, the question of temporality has emerged as both a central preoccupation and something of a dividing line for opposing camps. On the one hand, there are the antirelationalists, represented most powerfully by Lee Edelman, who argues in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* that in a world where the "Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism" posits the upper-case Child as the "perpetual horizon of every politics," the only response for queers is to refuse this fantasy of eventuality and to embrace their negative, outsider status: "Not in the hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order – such a hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism, just as any such order would equally occasion the negativity of the queer – but rather to refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation, which is always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane" (2004, 3, 4). And then there are the utopianists, chief among them José Esteban Muñoz, who has recently countered that "queerness is primarily about futurity and hope. That is to say that queerness is always in the horizon": "Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (2009 11, 1). But, as Benjamin reminds us, to the extent that the future even remains a horizon of possibility within the "monstrous abbreviation" that is the "entire history of humanity," we must not just toil in the here-and-now of the present, but also tarry again and again with the past (2001, xviii).

2

The Law of Enclosures refuses the false binary of queer theoretical discourses on futurity. Henry and Beatrice have no future together at the same time as Bea and Hank (who long ago alienated their two children) have only the future together. The couple meet and fall in love while Henry is gravely ill and about to undergo a dangerous operation to remove an egg-shaped tumour from the back of his head. Against all odds, Henry survives and suddenly he and Beatrice must reorient a relationship initially based on what appeared to be a time-lapse to one that will hereafter be measured in terms of elapsed time. In their case this adds up to forty years' worth of accumulated asynchronies that Bea, having spent her life waiting for a largely absent husband, now puts into material perspective for Hank. Sorting through the plastic-wrapped furniture that has been delivered early to Myra's property in advance of their house being finished (whether by design or through a miscommunication between Bea and the moving company remains ambiguous), Bea greets an incredulous Hank by saying, "Oh, just like old times, Hank, eh?" When Hank asks what she means, Bea tips over an adjacent sofa and insists: "You remember fucking me on this couch, a few weeks after my miscarriage." She then invites Hank to sit, switching to the interrogative mode: "Or do you remember your mother sitting on this couch telling me to divorce you? No, of course not, you weren't here. You were at the bar." The use of the adverb "here," instead of "there," is significant. A move to a new house will not consign past battles to the dustheap of history. In fact, for Bea and Hank rebuilding becomes the excuse to fight those battles all over again, and Greyson includes a memorable sequence in which the couple go tooth and nail at each other – and at their harried contractor – over the plans for the house's design. At the same time, the extent to which both pain and pleasure in *The Law of Enclosures* are registered on and through the body does suggest something distinctly "queer" about what, after Elizabeth Freeman, we might call the "erotohistoriography" of Beatrice and Henry's relationship (2010, 95ff). After all, Beatrice's initial attraction to Henry is based in part on her misapprehension that he is gay and dying from AIDS, and at one point she is even shown masturbating to the purported visual signifier of Henry's queerness – the handkerchief he keeps in his back pocket. Later on, during an extended, close-up, and in colour elaboration of the visit by Bea and Hank to the Oil Springs heritage site that we glimpsed briefly in black and white long shots at the start of the film, the earphone-clad couple look on as an older girl counts down to the kiss she claims one of her two younger male companions is required to give to the other. When the boy backs out and kisses the girl instead, Bea decides to create some of her own sexual dissonance by asking Hank to kiss her. To the whistles and encouragement of their

onscreen teenage audience, the two senior citizens take the first step towards rekindling their erotic attachment to each other, providing, in turn, offscreen audiences with one of the few portraits in mainstream Canadian cinema of older actors given licence to display their sexuality. The *dissidence* embodied within such a representation was obviously not lost on younger co-star Polley, whose own acclaimed first film, *Away from Her* (2006), owes much in content and tone to *The Law of Enclosures*.

I

In countdowns we rarely get to zero. We say “Liftoff!” instead, or “Ready or not, here I come.” Or we try to buy extra time, forestalling the inevitable *terminus ad quem* by starting all over again after the decimal point: 0.9, 0.8, 0.7. Even in the head leaders that used to be attached to the beginning of a reel of film to assist in the threading of projectors and the synchronization of picture and sound, the countdowns always cut out at number two, when a quick beep – the “2-pop” – was often heard, followed by two seconds of final frame alignment before the start of the film. Digital video has changed all of that, at once speeding up time (between 25 and 30 frames per second instead of 24), and expanding it infinitely: if there is no film or tape to run out, one can keep the camera rolling forever. With film, by contrast, time is money. Deleuze, paraphrasing Fellini: “And the film will be finished when there is no more money left ...” (1989, 78; ellipsis in original). If, however, everyone with a cell phone is now a potential cultural producer, a concomitant proliferation of video surveillance by the state means that everyone is also figured as a potential enemy of dominant culture. It just so happens that private video surveillance is a market Uncle Kenny is expanding into when he hires Henry, and from the equipment in his own store that will eventually record over his niece and nephew’s fresh young faces, to the ultrasound that captures but cannot save Beatrice’s unborn fetus, to a television announcer quoting Colin Powell on the use of night-vision goggles in the Gulf (“We can see the enemy, but he can’t see us”), to the animals and people who wander in and out of the scopes of cameras and rifles, Greyson reminds us repeatedly just how much we are in each other’s sights – and just how vulnerable we are while there. Which makes the war of interpretation over who or what we may or may not be seeing (missing or doctored footage notwithstanding) all the more high stakes. Bea and Hank, surveying the detritus of their past, know, along with Benjamin, that “[t]here has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism” (2001, vii). Likewise, Greyson has demonstrated consistently in his work, and no more spectacularly than in a certain musical extravaganza about AIDS, that he has little patience for

zero-sum explanations. Rather than apportioning praise or blame to winners or losers, Greyson adopts an approach to cinematic time that is akin to Benjamin's "zero-hour [*Stillstellung*]" (2001, xvii), freezing or speeding up a frame to reveal, within a small, personal moment or within random accidents of adjacency, the totality of a larger event's relation to a particular present. Thus it is in the brilliant dramatic pause that underscores the crosscutting between the announcements of the end of the war in the film's parallel time frames (which, as we know, is no end at all) that Beatrice and Henry fill this interruption in time as they have come to know it not with shouts of jubilation or tears of joy, but with repeated utterances of each other's name.

(Addendum)

In *The Law of Enclosures*, Greyson cheekily includes eleven countdowns (Amsden 2000, 14). Some, like the ones mentioned above, are easy to spot. Others are embedded more subtly, such as the Oil Springs point of interest markers that Bea and Hank traverse in reverse order with their audio guides, or the video monitor countdowns on the "smart bomb" footage from Iraq. If we count backwards to its completion and release, it becomes clear that the film, a critical and box-office disappointment following the success of *Lilies*, also marks the end of Greyson's flirtation with *auteurist* filmmaking, its own kind of creative enclosure. Not that he has been idle since. It is just that in works like *Proteus* (2003), *Rex vs. Singh* (2008), and *Fig Trees* (2009), among others, Greyson has eschewed narrative cinema, returning to his roots in experimental docudrama while also branching out into new territory, including video installation and opera. He has also largely worked collaboratively: with co-writer and co-director Jack Lewis on *Proteus*; with co-directors Richard Fung and Ali Kazimi on *Rex vs. Singh*; and with composer David Wall and documentary subjects Tim McCaskell and Zackie Achmat on *Fig Trees*. Combined with his work training a new generation of image-makers in the dialectical interpretation of the here-and-now, Greyson has chosen to blast through the narrow gates of Canadian film distribution and reception with the insurrectionary aid and force of the commons.