

# Keeping (Revolutionary) Time: Conducting Political Counterpoints in Todd Field's 'Tar'

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Panel: Open    Moderator: Pranoo Deshraj

Thank you to the organisers of FP2023 for granting me the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon on a topic that marks a relatively new departure from my current research area. My doctoral work at Goldsmiths predominantly focuses on questions of embodiment and how sex comes to matter in visual culture, however, thinking through more traditional notions of temporality and difference when putting together this presentation has proved to be a fruitful exercise when trying to articulate spatio-temporal alternatives that might challenge the dominant model of sex that is currently developing on an international level.

'Keeping (Revolutionary) Time: Conducting Political Counterpoints' is a return to the question of time and difference in sexual politics, to consider whether a time for change in sexual living is truly possible. To this day, sexual violence and suffering imposes itself on individual temporal experience time and again despite mass media scrutiny in the wake of MeToo and I personally remain deeply troubled and sceptical about the legal or political interventions that promise to protect vulnerable bodies in society. Owing to the reality of slow change in sexual politics on a global scale, I return to this more traditional question of time and its relation to the body, as a means of addressing the urgent work still required in revolutionising the present condition of heteropatriarchal society.

I arrive at this question of whether a time for change is truly possible through a reading of Fanny Soderback's 2019 book published by Suny Press, 'Revolutionary Time: On Time and Difference in Kristeva and Irigaray.' As I will elaborate in a moment, Soderback's concept of revolutionary time is a temporal model of return and renewal that challenges the binary of sexual dualism, to return and revitalise the past so as to make possible a dynamic-embodied present and future immersed in the time for change.

I intend to adapt Soderback's model of revolutionary time into a sexual politics whereby we can begin the urgent work of revitalising aesthetic and literary possibilities for change, of finding the possibility for revolution in cinematic reading. Time in film, or linear progression, has traditionally been associated with masculine power and authority since the rise of the cinematic apparatus and Hollywood film industry since the twentieth century. Despite the pioneering role that women played in the emergence of film, from

early directorship to the female editors in the cutting room, the history of female authorship in film is often maligned by male temporalities and genealogies of cinematic experience. Counter to this, I propose a different conception for envisioning embodiment in film that is faithful to feminist film theory, where women occupy the screen as keepers of 'revolutionary time,' which I adopt from Soderback.

I will think this through a brief reading of the film *Tar* directed by Todd Field. As we can see in this clip, the character of Lydia Tar is someone who continually grapples with the prescriptive structures that time imposes upon us. By the end, I will hopefully have demonstrated how I see the character of Lydia Tar as female timekeeper who conducts revolutionary time in the hierarchal arena of the philharmonic orchestra, where music not only instrumentalises the regimentation of time itself but also acts as a modality whereby we can return, rehearse, replay and reinterpret the rules or codes that constitute our lived socio-political condition. While the film is not without its controversy, I see it as an example of how we might begin to identify aesthetic and literary forms of embodied return and renewal that offer non-oppositional entry points into futures yet unknown.

To begin, I should outline how I approach this question of a time for change in film itself and how I engage with Soderback's revolutionary model in particular.

Time and its ability to structure subjectivity bears significant influence today as an issue of power. The temporal frameworks that constitute our perception of being in the world frequently serve to normalise ideas of progress, growth and expansion, and ostracize those who fail to conform to our dominant form of temporal existence. By the eighteenth century, time became a colonial tool used to position non-European cultures as underdeveloped or obsessively tied to nature, whereby non-white communities were racially labelled as primitive or as proponents of 'slow time'. Since the nineteenth century, time became a medical device used to categorise queer folk in psychiatry, physiology and sexology as being stuck in the past or having no past at all.

Time is still the reigning regulation of labour around the world, where economies are successfully sustained by capitalist investments in time zones and productivity, yet women are continually oppressed by observable effects in the labour market, socioeconomic stratification and domestic divisions of labour. Women's time is still not considered valuable, judging by the continued pay inequities and the non-existence of wages for housework. These examples help illustrate how our dominant temporal model arguably serves patriarchal, colonial and heteronormative subject formations which in turn act to constrain the prospects of decolonial, queer and feminist futures.

It is from this position that Soderback enters into a critique of time and sexual difference in particular, and the manner in which time starts to become articulated in the Western tradition. For Soderback, traditional models of temporal existence have always been orientated around a dualism positioned according to what she refers to as a 'sexual division of temporal labour,' or what we can think of as a sexual difference divided between cyclical and linear time. Cyclical time is normally articulated according to repetition, immanence, nature, reproduction and time and again is associated with female subjectivity and embodiment. Linear time, on the other hand, is normally articulated in opposing terms, focusing on progression, transcendence, culture, and production and is conversely associated with male subjectivity or the category of the neutrally human. This notion of neutrality in relation to time is particularly salient when considering sexual difference and remains a principal moment of critique for Heidegger's renowned formulation of Dasein in *Being and Time* as the being-there or the locus of being where entities show themselves for who or what they are in the world.

In 'Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference' Derrida takes issue with the sexlessness of Heidegger's argument, seeing his deliberate writing of Dasein in neutral terms as a refusal to invest ontological meaning in the matrix of sexual relations that fabricate our world. Soderback is equally critical of Heidegger's argument and views his notion of being as an obstacle for thinking time beyond traditional metaphysics and only serves to homogenise masculine subjectivity with the very specific constraints placed onto female temporal existence. This neutrality ultimately denies women the possibility of transcending any and all oppositional logic present within this sexual division of temporal labour.

In order to overcome this sexual dualism within the present, Soderback proposes a temporal model of revolutionary time which refuses to uphold the constraints of linear and cyclical frameworks. Soderback settles on the term 'revolutionary' as an engagement with the work of Julia Kristeva and the sustained invocation of the French *révolte* in her writing. *Révolte* as revolt, but also as return, a return to the material conditions of possibility, or the corporeal dimensions that were inevitably repressed when we entered into our current linear model of temporal existence.

Revolutionary time is a return to language, to the body and the affective registers of the maternal, of remembering and re-remembering the body, of giving life and vitality back to embodiment itself. It may seem from the outset that revolutionary time shares much in common with cyclical models. However, much like Luce Irigaray's ontology of mimesis and transcendence, Soderback's concept is not intended to be a repetition of the same but rather a dynamic process of displacement and alteration, of displacement through

variation and differential becoming. The time for change in Soderback's model is reliant on Irigaray's understanding of transcendence, where the body, which is commonly seen as that which limits our freedom and transcendence in philosophy, is instead the condition of possibility for transcendence.

For Irigaray and Soderback, the term transcendence should not remain exclusively a masculine claim. Instead, transcendence equates to freedom for all through a project of self-realization, as a way of overcoming time and denying the confines of finite embodied existence. Transcendence in revolutionary time is not an escape from the realm of embodiment and immanence, but rather it is a cultivation of the body to enable a dynamic embodied future free from the power of linear constructs.

If we think about transcendence as a cultivation of the body, then the materiality of film acts as a keeper or imprint of time itself, one that permits reading and rereading in ways that permit revolutionary work in sexual politics. Keeping time, in the most general sense, is a well-known phrase that refers to how we maintain a set rhythm, beat or tempo. Keeping time in music means to make a sound or movement that follows or plays the beat with others. However, even more than this, keeping time measures time as it passes and marks the occurrence of an event within a designated period or timeframe.

Film by its very nature keeps time and narrative sequencing in its celluloid DNA. The verb 'to keep' means to have or retain possession of something, to be in charge or control of something, it suggests a kind of physicality or tangibility that implicates the body or a body of time as an entity in control of time itself. 'Keeping time' in film, which suggests a literal holding or privileging of time's relationship with the body, might offer viable ways of giving life and agency back to the body in its various forms.

And it is with this notion of transcendence as an entry point for revolutionary time that I turn to the film *Tar* to consider the possibilities of return and renewal present within music and the possibility of a time for change, of *keeping in revolutionary time*, or in other words, of maintaining or following the rhythm of the other who normally remains unheard. As a brief overview, the film is centred around a fictional character Lydia Tar, the principal conductor of a major German orchestra, who is in equal parts passionate, demanding and autocratic.

The film is an outrageous and sensuous psychodrama where Lydia Tar, played by Cate Blanchett, starts to unravel in the face of allegations about sexual misconduct. It is true that the film has both captivated and frustrated audiences in light of its refusal to frontally engage with topics such as cancel culture, institution misconduct and power imbalances.

Some have even accused the film of being regressive. However, I would suggest that we do in fact witness Tar's eventual downfall and that she in turn becomes a victim of political fallout from linear constructs. Time's up for Lydia Tar, and while the film does not provide clear instructions on how we might mitigate institutional sexual misconduct, it does make salient the need for time itself to be rehearsed, reinterpreted and revitalised from all who takes up the baton at the conductor's podium.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation the character of Lydia Tar is someone who continually grapples with the prescriptive structures that time imposes upon us. Tar herself confirms this very fact while being interviewed by Adam Gopnik during an extensive opening scene. In her own words, Tar tells us that:

Time is the essential piece of interpretation. You cannot start without me. I start the clock. My left-hand shapes, but my right hand, the second-hand, marks time and moves it forward. However, unlike a clock, sometimes my second-hand stops... which means time stops. The illusion is that, like you, I'm responding to the orchestra in real-time, and making a decision about the right moment to restart the thing, or reset it... or throw time out the window altogether.

What is intriguing about this dialogue is that Tar seems to suggest that she works with both cyclical and linear time, one in each hand. She tells us that her left-hand shapes time, moving melodies in cycles. Traditionally the left hand of the conductor cues the entrances and exits of individual players or sections and indicates dynamics, phrasing, and expression. The conductor's left hand also creates the space for solo parts, singling out players or sections to pierce through the ranks and the hearts of the audience. In this sense, the left hand of the conductor is indeed cyclical but also offers the possibility for transcendent realisation and contemplation. Tar also tells us in this dialogue that her right hand moves time forward in linear fashion, similar to other right hand dominant conductors throughout the history of music who hold the baton on the right to manage the tempo.

The right hand traditionally maintains the beat, regulates progression and, for want of a better word, lays down the law for the expectant orchestra. In many ways the orchestra is in fact a political arena, and the conductor is a master or maestro who wields the baton of culture and reason. As Tar suggests in this scene, both hands work in tandem, yet not necessarily in opposition. Tar even tells us of her ability to stay her right hand, the hand of law and progress, and stop time itself. The fact that the ability and the decision of when to stop time lies with the conductor illustrates the privilege inherent within this position, but also its possibility for revolutionary change and reinterpretation. Tar is entirely aware

of this. In fact, the whole film is centred around her ability to completely reinterpret the work of Mahler, a prominent composer, in ways that confound her male contemporaries. As such, we all come to watch the hands of Tar for guidance in the face of a future as-of-yet unknown. We do not know what comes next in the piece. However, Tar asks the orchestra throughout the film to 'give her their eyes', to trust in her instruction and follow her vision for reinterpreting the work at hand. As viewers, we too watch the hand of Tar in the process of rehearsing, reinterpreting and revitalising time so that we too may enter into this dynamic embodied symphony of individuals working collectively towards a future dependent on a time of change.

It is not only Tar's hands that act as the keepers of revolutionary time, but also her constant return to the heart. In fact, we could argue that the film is a mediation of another motif of oppositional dualism in sexual difference, that of the hands and the heart. Hands are traditionally associated with masculine authority and pedagogy, the authoritative hand of man, the hand of the law, while the heart speaks of sentimentality and poetry, of the affective registers associated with female subjectivity. But the time kept by the human heart is even more dynamic than this logic. The human heart exists at the intersection between linear time and cyclical time. On the one hand, the human heart follows the rhythmic cycles of the repetitive heartbeat, mechanically pumping blood around the body.

On the other hand, the human heart follows a mortal line from beginning to end, beginning with the first heartbeat in utero and ending at a time where the heart eventually stops. As such, the temporal frameworks which govern the human heart seems to present this individual organ as the locus for a dynamic embodied present. Tar seems intent on getting to the heart of this dynamic embodied present, in order to lend meaning to this time for change. We see this in the many instances where she secretly steals and swallows her partner's heart medication pill in an attempt to control or intervene on the heart's ability to continually revitalise the body itself.

This desire to control her heart and conduct music which touches our hearts illustrates a viable strategy for bodily return and renewal. The regulating hands of the conductor act as a metronome, or metro-nomos, meaning 'measure' metron and 'law' nomos. But the heart of the conductor acts as a kind of counter metronome or counterpoint, it beats of its own accord and remains open to the variation of temporal frameworks that constitute its centre. Counterpoint in music is the relationship between two or more musical lines or voices which are harmonically interdependent yet independent in musical rhythm and melody. Taking up the baton at the conductor's podium, Tar's conducts music according to her time as a counterpoint to the dominant political and patriarchal arena of classical music, where the time for change is at its most pressing.

We would be forgiven if we considered Tar to be cold hearted after watching the film, owing to her numerous misdeeds throughout. Yet the film illustrates that Tar is, in fact, not impervious to the consequences of her actions. Her rituals of hand sanitisation and superstitious gestures, presumably to ward off the ghosts of past misdeeds, fails to preserve her as conductor of a major orchestra. In fact, Tar's decision to not intervene in time to change the outcome of her fellow conductor's suicide leads to her effective cancellation from the world of classical music, or in other words, for the temporal erasure of her relevance in the changing times.

In closing, I reiterate that the film does not offer clear guidance for sexual politics but instead acts as a form of revolutionary potential. It suggests that, if we want to ensure that time is on the side of decolonial, queer and feminist futures, we must intervene on the dominant model of time as it exists in the present. Now is the time for change, to take up the proverbial baton and impose on the regimentation of linear time itself, of conducting a different kind of temporal model, one that transcends oppositional difference so that we may arrive at a dynamic embodied future free from the power of linear constructs.

Thank you.