

CAMERA STYLÒ **Adapting time in Robert Schwentke's *The Time Traveler's Wife***

Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*¹ was adapted to the big screen by Robert Schwentke (*The Time Traveler's Wife*, 2009). The protagonists, the librarian Henry and the artist Clare, are deeply in love with each other and attempt to live normal lives, although Henry is a time traveller. He suffers from Chrono-Displacement Disorder: unpredictably his genetic clock resets, and he finds himself in another time and place, attracted by experiences of emotional gravity from his life, during which he happens to meet his alter egos who are older or younger than himself. In both media the plot is complex, and the adaptation can be defined a puzzle film. According to Warren Buckland:

The puzzle film is made-up of non-classical characters who perform non-classical actions and events².

[It] embrace[s] non-linearity, time loops, and fragmented spatio-temporal reality³.

(...) the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but entangled⁴.

In the end, the complexity of puzzle films operates on two levels: narrative and narration. It emphasizes the complex *telling* (plot, narration) of a simple or complex *story* (narrative)⁵.

In this article I focus on the complexity of time in the novel and in the film, analysing story, plot, and personal time, duration, and repetitions in both media. It is my aim to discuss how, in the complicated, perplexing succession of time travels, of entangled past, present and future events, readers and spectators can understand and reconstruct the story, and which techniques are adopted in the two media to help them.

Reconstructing Story Time

In this section I discuss when and how readers and viewers are given information about story time, and whether and how they are able to reorder the events of the plot in a chronological chain or, at least, in a succession that makes sense of the story.⁶

The readers of the book always know when an event takes place, and thus are able to reconstruct the story time. On the other hand, the spectators of the film often cannot exactly understand when an episode is happening but, thanks to "relative" temporal clues, are able to reorder the events of the plot in a chronological chain. Indeed, in the novel, much like in a fictional diary, before an episode is told, a subheading reports in which day, month and year the event happens, how old are the two protagonists Henry and Clare and, when Henry meets himself, how old are his alter egos. From characters' dialogue and fluxes of conscience, the readers are often given other temporal information, such as from when the doppelgängers come from. But, unlike a canonical fictional diary, the events are not written following story time, and are narrated either through Henry' or Clare's point of view, thus the internal focalization is not fixed, anchored to the diarist, but mixed, either linked to Henry or Clare.⁷

In the adaptation there are a few temporal indications, and the majority of them is not "absolute", but "relative": they refer to other events allowing viewers to understand whether an episode happens before or after another event, but not to understand when it exactly takes place in the story time. For example, at the beginning of the film, a young Henry (Alex Ferris), during the car accident in which his mother dies, dematerializes to find himself in his house, watching his doppelgänger with his parents. In the subsequent scene, immediately after the accident, one of his older alter egos (Eric Bana) travels through time to explain to him:

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You were in the car. It was spinning. And all of a sudden you were home and it was two weeks ago and you were watching yourself. Watching your mom and dad read to you. You time-traveled, okay? Just like I did to come to see you. I'm you, Henry. Understand? When you're grown up. We're the same person.

Following plot time the car accident precedes the scene at Henry's, but according to story time the latter sequence precedes the former.

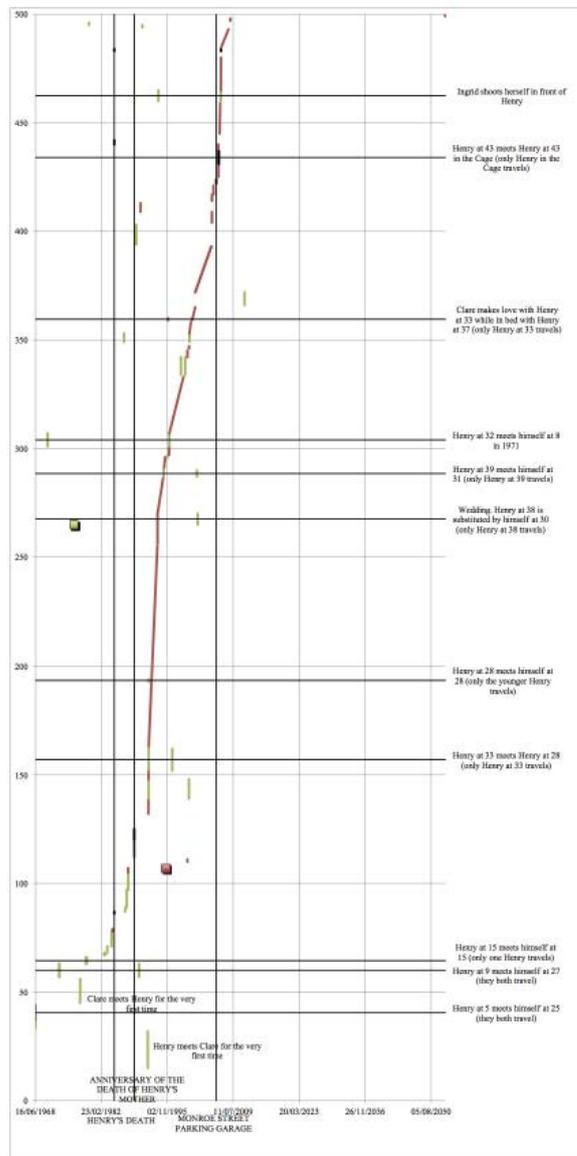


Fig. 1 | Graphic of story and plot time of the book. Story time is on the x-axis, and plot time on the y-axis. Vertical, black lines indicate story knots, that is to say episodes that happen once in the story, but are recounted more than once in the plot. Horizontal, black lines mark the events that happen once in the story, are recounted once in the plot, but during which Henry meets one of his alter egos. In red the episodes that happen in Clare's present, in black story knots, and in green all the other events.

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Thanks to the dates reported in the novel, I obtained a rather accurate graphic⁹ about story and plot time (Fig. 1)⁹. In the graphic, story time, which is the dependent variable, is on the x-axis, and plot time, the independent variable, on the y-axis. If plot time had followed story time, there would have been contiguous segments, which is to say each segment would have ended with the same abscissa with which the subsequent segment begun. But in *The Time Traveler's Wife* this usually does not happen. More interestingly, the graphic shows that plot time is very different from story time at the beginning and end of the novel, whereas in the middle of the book they almost coincide. In the central part of the novel, as in the adaptation, the main theme is the relationship between Henry and Clare, which mostly develops chronologically, following the wife's linear life, in what is the present for her, helping readers and spectators to reorder the protagonist's time travels in relation to her past and present.

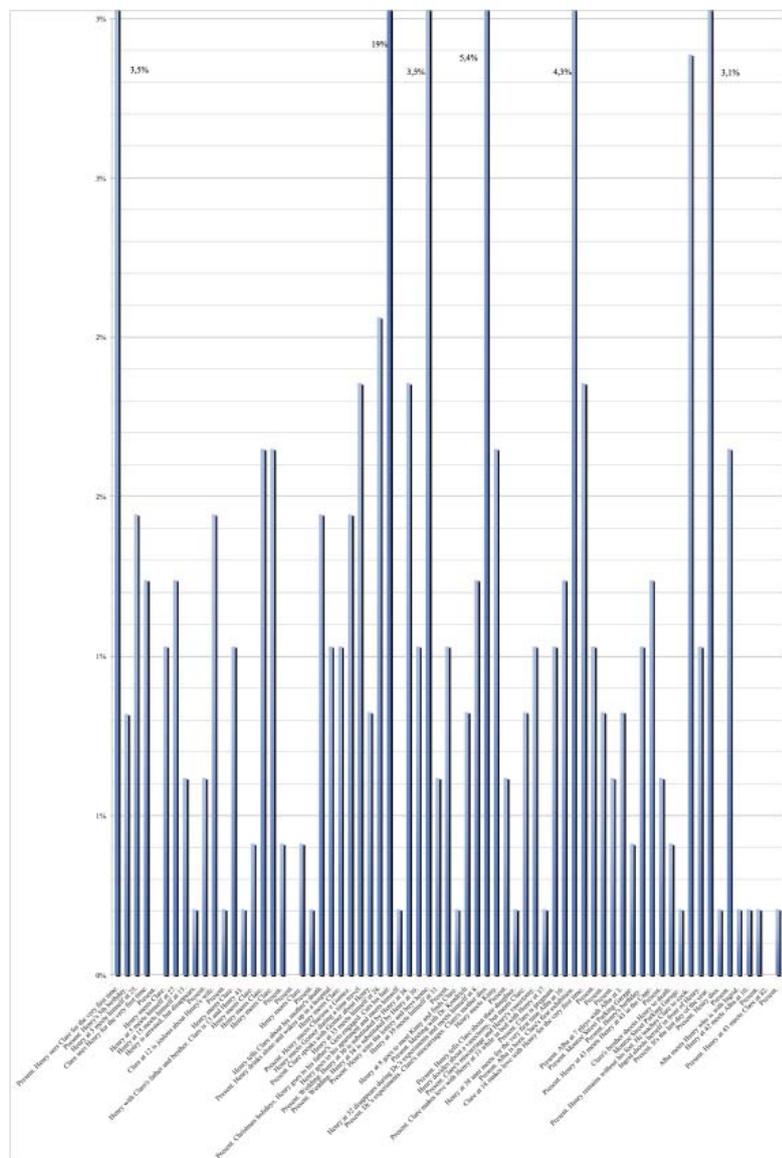


Fig. 2 | Histograms of the duration in percentage of the events of the novel. In each description on the x-axis I specify whether the episode happens in Clare's present.

CAMERA STYLÒ the entire story as an emotional journey”, developing and underscoring the two protagonists’ love story, because once the viewers’ interest and attention are focused, at an essentially emotional level, on the couple’s relationship, they are more likely to accept Henry’s time travels and doppelgängers¹¹. In both media the love story mostly develops chronologically, following Clare’s linear life, from the very first time Henry meets her at the library. Although she first meets him when she is 6 years old, and they meet several times during her childhood and adolescence, the most important events in their relationship, such as their engagement and marriage, and their daughter’s birth, happen in her adulthood. In Figure 1, the events that develop in the present of Clare and of the other characters who are not time travellers are marked in red. These episodes are the longest in both media, and are mostly developed in the central part of the story. In the adaptation the love story is further emphasized because a lot of events and secondary characters described in the novel are cut. It is not only the protagonists’ relationship that helps viewers and readers to understand time travels and alter egos, but also Clare’s present, what is the present for her: viewers and readers can usually reorder Henry’s time travels in relation to her past and present.

Reconstructing Personal Time

The second, main question that I discuss in this article is how time travels are presented to readers and viewers, and which instruments and clues are given them to understand the time traveller’s personal time¹². In story time the order of the episodes is chronological, is that experienced by readers and viewers in their extradiegetic life, and in the diegetic world by all the characters who are not time travellers. In personal time the order is that experienced by a time traveller. For example, as already mentioned, at the beginning of the film the spectators are shown the following scenes: (a) a young Henry who is in a car with his mother; (b) the young Henry who watches himself in his house with his parents; (c) an older Henry who, immediately after the car accident, explains to his younger self that he is his alter ego, and that in the previous scene he travelled two weeks in his past. According to story time, the order of the scenes is: (b), (a), (c), because (b) happens two weeks before (a), and (c) immediately follows (a). Henry’s personal time can be summarized as follows: (b), (a), (b), (c), ..., (c). The younger Henry is at home with his parents (b); two weeks after there is the car accident (a); he finds himself back home two weeks earlier (b); and then back in the place of the accident, immediately after it (c); finally years later, during his adulthood, he goes back to meet his younger doppelgänger after the accident (c).

Time travel narratives create logical paradoxes or chronoclasms, which are Möbius strips of causality, causal loops¹³ that, according to several scholars, render the narrative inconsistent. For Umberto Eco these words are said to exist and are called with a certain name, but how they work is not explained.¹⁴ Without entering in this querelle, I simply observe, as Robin Le Poidevin does, that “these fictions are still intelligible at some level”¹⁵, and that distinguishing between story and personal time, if only intuitively, helps readers and spectators to make sense of time travel stories. Moreover, I have defined *The Time Traveler’s Wife* a puzzle film that, according to Buckland, “constitutes a post-classical mode of filmic representation and experience not delimited by mimesis”¹⁶.

In both media, readers and spectators are helped by temporal indications to understand story and personal time. In the novel these data are given explicitly. In the film temporal clues are not only given through dialogue; special effects, camera movements, and mise-en-scène advise the spectators that a protagonist’s time travel is beginning or ending. For example, Henry progressively disappears or reappears, dematerializing or materializing himself. Because he cannot travel with his dresses, he finds himself naked when he is misplaced in time, and when he dematerializes his clothes are shown falling or already lying on the ground. Sometimes, through another character’s point of view or false point of view shot, the viewers find out that Henry is not in the place where the character would have expected to see him, or mirrors do no longer reflect his image. Often when Henry appears in another space-time,

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the camera tracks forward towards him; on the other hand, when he disappears, the camera tracks backward away from him, or medium close ups or close ups are followed by long shots of him. The camera gets closer to Henry when a time travel begins, and farther when it ends, as if to underline what is happening. It is worth noting that the activation of the motor cortex is stronger when the distance between the spectator and the character is reduced moving the camera towards the scene¹⁷. When the protagonist is misplaced in time, camera movements further attract viewers' attention. Towards the end of the film, when the spectators are accustomed to time travels, there is a play with the space out of frame, and the protagonist simply enters in frame or goes out of it when he respectively appears or disappears; or a off screen diegetic noise advises that he has already appeared in the off screen space. Significantly, when his daughter Alba, who appears almost at the end of the film, is displaced in time, is just shown in frame.

Cinematographic techniques help viewers to understand whether the protagonist travels in the other characters' past or future. For example, the spectators get accustomed to recognizing settings and associating them to different story times, such as: the clearing outside the place of Clare's parents where Henry goes to meet her during her childhood and adolescence; and the house that the protagonists buy after having won the lottery. The characters' physical aspect is another clue that helps viewers to understand when Henry and Alba are travelling, and at what age. For example, the spectators can clearly distinguish among Clare in her childhood, played by Brooklynn Proulx, and in her adolescence and womanhood, played by the same actress (Rachel McAdams), but with very long hair in the former case; and among a younger and an older Alba, played by Tatum McCann and Hailey McCann respectively. As regards Henry, I call Henry 1 the protagonist in his childhood, but distinguishing among his different selves at different stages of his manhood is not simple because I do not find the makeup and hairstyle as different as they could have been. There is Henry with dark, long hair (Henry 2) (Figure 4), who cut it before his wedding (Henry 3) (Figure 5), there is Henry with grey, short hair who is in good health (Henry 4) (Figure 6), or who is on a wheelchair after one of his legs was frozen (Henry 5), and finally there is Henry, wounded, who is dying (Henry 6).



Figure 4 | Henry with long, black hair, called Henry 2 in the article.

According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

our abstract concepts are defined by systematic mappings of attributes and relations from bodily-based sensory-motor source domains onto abstract target domains. (...) we employ the logic of our sensory motor experience (i.e. image schemas) to draw inferences about abstract concepts¹⁸.

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Figure 5 | Henry with short, black hair, called Henry 3 in the article.



Figure 6 | Henry with short, grey hair, called Henry 4 in the article.

Following CMT, our abstract idea of time is structured through the mappings of attributes and relations from the source domain space onto the abstract target domain time¹⁹. Camera movements, and movement in a different setting and body visualize movement in time. Moving from this metaphor, as specifically regards movement in a different body, Krystian Aparta claims: “The rationality of time travel depends on the selected conceptual model of location: the location of a person is the body. The person travels between their different bodies”²⁰. Similarly, in the written medium, there are descriptions of settings and characters’ physical aspect that help readers to understand personal time, and simplify the numerous temporal data.

There is a long take in the film that summarizes the main characters’ life from Alba’s birth to her fifth birthday. The camera tracks in the protagonists’ house, and whenever a character enters in frame, there is temporal leap in the future. In this case movements of the camera and characters translate flashforwards instead of time travels.

In both media, the longest events are in the middle of the plot, and regard the couple’s love story that mostly develops following Clare’s linear life. Therefore, readers and spectators can easily arrange the episodes and Henry’s time travels in her past and present. On the other hand, in the book time travels and dates are so numerous that following and reconstructing Henry’s personal time is arduous. Whereas

CAMERA STYLÒ in the adaptation, which presents fewer time travels and relative temporal clues, understanding Henry's personal time seems easier. Moreover, in the cinematographic medium, although differentiating among Henry's alter egos is not so easy, special effects, camera movements, and mise-en-scène help viewers to distinguish among different times and spaces, and to reconstruct the story more intuitively.

Repetitions

My last, main goal is the analysis and comparison of the events of the novel and the film that happen once in the story, but are recounted or shown at least twice in the plot. Leif Frenzel calls these episodes in time travel narrative "story knots", and claims that, each time that they are recounted, they are narrated from the point of view of the different protagonist's alter egos involved in the events²¹. In the graphic of story and plot time, the story knots in Niffenegger's novel are the episodes that have the same abscissa and a different ordinate. I traced black, vertical lines to underscore them (Figure 1). They are: Henry's death, the anniversary of his mother's death²², and the event set at Monroe Street Parking Garage²³. The protagonist's death is narrated four times. The first one from Clare's point of view: it is the 27th of October, 1984, she is 13 years old and, waken up by Henry's voice who is calling her, she sees the protagonist, who is 43, speaking with her father and brother, and she thinks that something horrible must have happened.²⁴ The second time Henry's death is narrated from his point of view: it is once more the 27th of October, 1984, Clare is 13, he is 43 years old, he is with his father and brother in law, and realizes that someone has shot to death his doppelgänger²⁵. The third time it is the 31st of December, 2006, Clare is 35, and Henry, who is 43, knows that he is going to die soon, and organizes a party with his friends. Clare' and Henry's points of view are alternated, and each one describes a different moment of the night, except when Clare does not find Henry who is outside with Gomez.²⁶ Similarly, the last time that the protagonist's death is narrated, it is told from Clare' and Henry's point of view: it is the 1st of January, 2007, she is 35, whereas Henry is coming from the 27th of October, 1984, when he is shot to death, and dies.

In the written medium the story knots are important events that delimit Henry's life: the death of Henry's mother marks his past, and his own death defines his future. The event at Monroe Street Parking Garage leads the protagonist to have his feet frozen, to their amputation and, consequently, to his inability to run, and to his death. Similarly, in the cinematographic medium, the protagonist meets himself only when his mother dies and when he dies. In the latter case, the first sequence that shows his death is set in his house while he is cooking with his wife and his friends Charisse (Jane McLean) and Gomez (Ron Livingston). After they listen to a groan, from a medium close up of Henry (Henry 3), the camera quickly tilts down till a medium close up of an older Henry (Henry 6), who is lying on the floor, shot to death. In the second scene there are two shots in which a hand held camera tracks first to precede and then to follow Henry (probably Henry 5 because he limps), who is naked in the snow outside his house. After these protagonist's medium close ups, through his point of view shot, the spectators are shown a long shot of an older Henry (Henry 6) who is dying, in the same position of the previous sequence, with his wife, father, and daughter gathered around him. There follow two younger Henry (Henry 5)'s medium close ups, and other two of his point of view shots during which the viewers are shown his older self (Henry 6) who is dying. But in the last two shots what is in frame of the younger Henry (Henry 5) dematerializes. In the third sequence the protagonist finds himself in the wood, near a deer, and the spectators are shown in foreground a close up of Henry and, in background, his father and brother in law who are shooting (probably Henry 5 because he does not run when he sees the hunters). There follow a close up of the protagonist, shot to death, and shots of the hunters who see blood trail, but no sign of their prey. The last scene that shows Henry's death follows the previous one, and roughly repeats the second one. The sequence is set inside the couple's. From a long shot of Clare, the camera pans right till a long shot of

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Henry (Henry 6), shot to death. There follows a shot in which wife, husband, daughter, and other guests are in frame together. The scene closes with a detail of the window where it disappears the handprint of the younger Henry (Henry 5), who saw his own death from outside the house in the second sequence discussed above. In both the novel and the film, slightly different details about Henry's death are added each time that the event is narrated, and the curiosity about the reason of his death is satisfied later in the narration. These repetitions increase the spectators' curiosity, and help them to accept the protagonist's personal time. He dies in the other characters' past because he is shot during one of his time travels in their past. In the written medium, the points of view of different protagonist's alter egos help readers to understand personal time, in the cinematographic medium viewers are helped by montage and mise-en-scène.

In Niffenegger's book there are also several episodes that are recounted only once in the plot, but during which Henry meets one of his alter egos. These events are narrated from the point of view of one of the protagonist's doppelgängers. In Figure 1 these episodes have the same ordinate and a different abscissa. I drew black, horizontal lines to underline them. Thus both the novel and the film underscore the events that delimit Henry's past and future narrating them differently from all the other episodes: the written medium through story knots, the cinematographic one showing more than once the same event, and shooting two protagonist's alter egos in the same space-time.

Conclusions

The readers always exactly know when an event happens because they are helped by the literary genre of the novel, which is much like a fictional diary, and by other temporal indications that appear in the characters' fluxes of conscience and dialogue. On the other hand, the viewers cannot precisely understand when an action takes place in the story time, but they can reorder the events in a chronological chain thanks to relative temporal clues. For the novel we can make a graphic of story and plot time, and easily compare them. For example, plot and story time are very different at the beginning and end of the story, but similar in the middle of it. Both for the book and the film we can make histograms of the duration of the episodes. These graphics allow us to understand that in both media the longest events are those about Clare's adulthood and her love story. These features help readers and spectators to reconstruct the story time. Paradoxically, it is much more difficult to reconstruct the protagonist's personal time in the book than in the adaptation because in the cinematographic medium his time travels are less numerous, and temporal clues are relative so that the episodes can be more easily reordered in a chronological chain. Moreover, in the film, special effects, camera movements, and mise-en-scène help spectators to understand Henry's personal time because movement in time is translated through movement in space, especially through camera movements, and movements in different settings and times. Finally, the events that delimit the protagonist's life, his past and future, that is to say his mother's and his own death, are underlined in both media because are narrated in a different way than all the other episodes. In the novel are story knots: they happen once in the story, but are narrated more than once in the plot, and each time from a different alter egos' point of view. In the film are the only episodes shown more than once, and during which Henry meets himself.

Elisa Pezzotta

Notes

1. Audrey Niffenegger, *La moglie dell'uomo che viaggiava nel tempo*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 2005.
2. Warren Buckland (ed.), *Puzzle Film. Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2009, p. 5.

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3. *Ibidem*.
4. *Ivi*, p. 3.
5. *Ivi*, p. 6.
6. For the distinction between fabula/story and syuzhet/plot, and between story and plot time see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Routledge, London 1985, pp. 49-51.
7. For a definition of fixed and mixed internal focalization, see Gérard Genette, *Figure III. Discorso del racconto*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino 1976, pp. 208-258.
8. The duration of story time was approximated, otherwise it would not have been possible to obtain a graphic. And when, during an episode, Henry meets himself, the event appears twice in story time because it happens twice in the story, even if it is recounted once in the plot.
9. In the adaptation viewers do not know in which day, month and year the events of the plot take place, thus it is impossible to draw a graphic of story and plot time. Furthermore, temporal information do not coincide with those of the novel and, consequently, it is not possible to supplement the dates of the adaptation with those of the adapted text. For example, Clare in the book was born on May 24, 1971 (Audrey Niffenegger, *op. cit.*, p. 48), while in the adaptation on May 24, 1972.
10. For the written medium, I counted in how many pages each episode is told, and I calculated the percentage of the duration ($[\text{duration in pages of an event} \times 100] / \text{total pages of the book}$). Similarly, for the cinematographic medium, I counted how many seconds each episode lasts, and the percentage of the duration ($[\text{duration in seconds of an event} \times 100] / \text{duration in seconds of the whole film}$).
11. Robert Schwentke, "The Making of *The Time Traveler's Wife*", <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyoFe75815Q>> (last accessed 31st of March, 2016).
12. For the distinction between external and personal time see David Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 13 n. 2 (April 1976), pp. 145-152, pp. 146-147.
13. Elana Gomel, "Shapes of the Past and the Future: Darwin and the Narratology of Time Travel", *Narrative*, vol. 17 n. 3 (October 2009), pp. 334-352, p. 335.
14. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explanations in the Semantics of the Texts*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-London 1979, pp. 233-234.
15. Robin Le Poidevin, *The Images of Time: An Essay on Temporal Representation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 158-159.
16. Warren Buckland, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
17. Vittorio Gallese, Michele Guerra, "The Feeling of Motion: Camera Movements and Motor Cognition", *Cinéma & Cie*, vol. XIV nn. 22/23 (Spring/Fall 2014), pp. 103-112, p. 112.
18. Maarten Coëgnarts, Peter Kravanja, "The Sensory-Motor Grounding of Abstract Concepts in Two Films by Stanley Kubrick", *Cinéma & Cie*, vol. XIV nn. 22/23 (Spring/Fall 2014), pp. 77-90, p. 80.19.
- Maarten Coëgnarts, Peter Kravanja, "The Visual and Multimodal Representation of Time in Film, or How Time is Metaphorically Shaped in Space", *Image & Narrative*, vol. 13 n. 3 (2012), pp. 85-100, p. 86.
20. Krystian Aparta, "What Does Time Run On? Conceptual Models of Time and the (Ir)rationality of Time Travel in Science Fiction", *TrekSfera Conference*, Warsaw (July 2009), <<http://timetravel.net46.net/page1.html>> (last accessed 30th of March, 2016).
21. Leif Frenzel, "Narrative Patterns in Time Travel Fictions", (2008), <<https://leiffrenzel.de/papers/timetravel-narrative.pdf>> (last accessed 31st of March, 2016), pp. 1-18, pp. 4-5.
22. Audrey Niffenegger, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-125.
23. *Ivi*, pp. 422-424, 443-444.
24. *Ivi*, pp. 86-87.
25. *Ivi*, pp. 440-442.
26. *Ivi*, pp. 471-480.

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Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* was adapted to the big screen by Robert Schwentke (*The Time Traveler's Wife*, 2009). In both media the plot is complex, and the adaptation can be defined a puzzle film. I aim to discuss how, in the complicated, perplexing succession of time travels, of entangled past, present and future events, the readers and the spectators can understand and reconstruct the story, and which techniques are adopted in the two media to help them. In the novel, which is similar to a fictional diary, temporal information are numerous and given explicitly to the readers, whereas in the film there are fewer and "relative" temporal clues. Paradoxically, it seems easier to understand the film story because in the cinematographic medium movement in time is visualized and translated through camera movements, and movements in different settings and bodies.