Temporal Experience and On-Screen Violence: The Digital "Oner" in Action Cinema

Tom Livingstone

University of Kent, United Kingdom

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I.

This essay will focus on sequences of violence on screen in order to ask the question: what is the nature of temporal experience today? In order to do so, I need to first explain the relationship between screen media and temporal experience and then justify my focus on action sequences and more specifically digital "oners." I will begin by outlining what a digital "oner" is in the hope that this will shine some light on the inter-generative relationship between screen media and temporal experience.

The "oner" is a term used to describe an extended duration that resembles a single-take. The term *digital* "oner" hints at the true nature of these durations: they are created through the combination of live-action and virtual cinematography, as well as a variety of other procedures that disguise the editing together of discontinuous pieces of footage. Examples of digital "oners" range from long one-shot films such as *Birdman*[1], *Victoria*[2], or *1917*[3] and individual bravura sequences such as the opening meteor shower in *Gravity*[4] the skydive in *Mission: Impossible - Fallout*[5] or the staircase fight in *Atomic Blonde.*[6] In each case the principle effect of the digital "oner" is of a structured continuum that simulates an unbroken single camera take whilst occasionally signalling the ways in which the sequence exceeds and transcends the

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[1] *Birdman, Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*), directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu (New Regency Pictures, 2014).

[2] *Victoria*, directed by Sebastien Schipper (MonkeyBoy, 2015).

[3] *1917*, directed by Sam Mendes (Amblin Partners, 2020).

[4] *Gravity*, directed by Alfonso Cuaron (Warner Bros., 2013).

[5] *Mission: Impossible – Fallout,* directed by Christopher McQuarrie, dir. (Paramount Pictures, 2018).

[6] *Atomic Blonde,* directed by David Leitch (87Eleven, 2017).

practical difficulties of actually staging and filming such a piece of action. In each instance, the digital "oner" imposes a sense of phenomenological cohesion and spatiotemporal coherence, whilst here and there disclosing its construction and thus the underlying spatiotemporal fragmentation of film production and post-production. As such they demonstrate two things simultaneously about the relationship between temporal experience and screen media: firstly, that film creates durations that overwhelmingly resemble what can, after Mary Ann Doane, be called our "generalized experience of time."[7] Secondly, that this homologous relationship between screen time and real time is founded upon a number of technical operations that more often than not remain invisible within the representation.

A great deal of critical work has sprung from cinema's ability to project an isomorphic impression of lived temporality. Indeed, more than capturing and representing time, cinema has, since its inception, been central to how time has been understood and actively experienced. For example, the cinematograph plays a crucial role (if largely as an analogy) in Henri Bergson's work where "the mechanism of our ordinary knowledge is of a cinematographical kind."[8] Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* gives an account of cinema's role in the standardization of time within modernity, and the function of this standardization within the associated epistemologies of the early twentieth century and late-industrial capitalism. Alongside the work of Doane, Bernard Stiegler's philosophy moves beyond the ways in which moving image media set the parameters for certain epistemological framings of modernity. More than just a "synchronization" between cinematic time and consciousness, Stiegler implicates cinema in a direct "grammatization" of consciousness.[9] Under this banner, cinema's capacity to capture and represent durations not only structures time as a diegetic phenomenon but also structures our lived experience of time. Film is not just a temporal medium; it is a temporalizing medium.

But as has already been intimated, the durations produced within digital "oners" trouble and exceed any easy homology between lived temporality and its representation, even when they are designed to evoke a sense of thrilling and realistic continuity. Take the skydive in *Mission Impossible: Fallout* for example. The "oner" consists of an unbroken shot in which Agent Walker (Henry Cavill) jumps out of a plane against the advice of Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise), who is forced to jump after him. The pair tumble through a thunderstorm at which point, Walker loses consciousness. Hunt locates Walker mid-free-fall, transfers his oxygen tank, resuscitates Walker, spins him upside down and deploys his parachute. Hunt then deploys his own parachute and the pair land on the roof of the Grand Palais in Paris. Cut. The "oner" takes just over 4 minutes and maintains a degree of verisimilitude throughout, thanks in part to the fact that over one hundred skydives were filmed in an effort to capture three useable takes.[10] The important thing about this shot is the intensity with which it simulates an unbroken temporal continuity from multiple discontinuous fragments of actual time. More than just the duplication and editing together of real durations, digital "oners" actively

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[7] Mary Ann Doane *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 163.

[8] Henri Bergson *Creative Evolution* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2003), 332.

[9] Bernard Stiegler *Technics and Time 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011)

[10] See Jeremy Fuster "'Mission: Impossible – Fallout' How Tom Cruise Pulled Off That Insane Skydive" July 29th 2018, thewrap.com, www.thewrap.com/tom-cruise-mission-impossible-fallout-skydive-stunt, accessed January 7, 2020.

produce temporal experience through the prolific hybridization of cinematography with a variety of digital procedures.

Of course, the new articulations of time within digital cinema have been approached from many angles, prominent amongst which is Steven Shaviro's concept of post-cinema, and the related aesthetics of "post-continuity" cinema.[11] Related to David Bordwell's famed notion of "intensified continuity"[12] Shaviro's post-continuity names a spatio-temporal language "whose investments and energies point elsewhere," away from the concerns of classical continuity.[13] In short, where classical continuity places an emphasis on congruity and coherence, and intensified continuity amps this up to the verge of disintegration and beyond, post-continuity reconfigures spatio-temporal relations entirely. In post-continuity films "we enter into the spacetime of modern physics; or better, into the 'space of flows' and the time of micro-intervals and speed-of-light transformations, that are characteristic of globalized high-tech financial capital."[14] Likewise, Jonathan Beller, working in a similar vein, builds on Noel Burch's cataloguing of "Spatial and Temporal Articulations" in order to claim that cinema not only orders perception of time and space, but in doing so creates "new orders of spatiality and temporality that were technologically enabled and were previously impossible."[15] Together, the views of Shaviro and Beller make clear that digital cinema reflects and creates new forms of temporal experience that embed themselves, or are discovered within, lived temporality more generally. For both theorists, these new temporal forms are not just mere representations. Instead, similar to Doane's demonstration that cinema exerts a standardizing pressure on the general experience of time, digital durations for Beller and Shaviro possess an instrumentality capable of moulding and conditioning the spectator to the larger dynamics within which they operate. I will engage with Beller's thesis regarding the "attention economy" and cinema's relation to contemporary capitalism in my conclusion, but have outlined the theories in broad strokes here to not only set up a point of difference for my analysis, but also establish what is at stake in considerations of screen-media and temporal experience.

In my considerations of "oners" I am not setting out a counter-argument against these assertions, but I am suggesting that a head-on address of the digital "oner" in all its particularity, is necessary. At issue here is not the discontinuity and multi-linearity of contemporary experience, but the operative content of continuity itself. My analysis aims to glimpse the instrumentality of continuity as it is constructed in moving-image media and as it exerts a temporalizing force on the spectator.

There is one more thing to be addressed before moving on. Specifically, the question of violence: why are digital "oners" so often focussed on violent action, and beyond this correlation, how can this aesthetic phenomenon help us theorize violence more broadly? To answer the first part of the question: violence and intensified experiences of temporality go hand in hand. Time warps around extreme experiences, this is no less true in cinema as in real life. Addressing the second portion of the question: again, a focus on the operative effects of

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[11] Steven Shaviro, "Post-Continuity: An Introduction," in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, edited by Denson and Leyda (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016). Web. <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/1-2-shaviro/>, accessed January 7, 2020.

[12] David Bordwell "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film" *Film Quarterly* 55/3 (2002): 16-28

[13] Shaviro "Post-Continuity: An Introduction".

[14] Ibid.

[15] Jonathan Beller *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 3.

violent images will help provide an answer, not least because it will open up onto the well-trodden dialectic between representations of violence and the violence of representation.

A recent anthology edited by Graham Matthews and Sam Goodman, *Violence and the Limits of Representation*[16] features an essay in which Benjamin Noys admirably summarises the stakes of a theorisation of the violence of representation. Noys starts from the suggestion that "we have to consider violence as intrinsic to the act of representation itself." This is a key aspect of feminist or post-colonial deconstruction of the reigning texts in the canon, its relevance to film and special effects, however, requires a little drawing out. Noys makes an efficient tour of the relevant thought of Hannah Arendt, Claude Levi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida. From Derrida, Noys takes the notion of a generalised "economy of violence" and inherits the following task: "it is only by thinking about a *general* violence that we can truly capture the forms and specificities of violence; otherwise we cast out violence as only ever secondary and accidental to some primary innocence."[17] This *general* violence has specificities everywhere, in language (which Barthes describes as "quite simply fascist"), in the relations that language establishes, and, more specifically to my purpose, in the operations of visual representation and the special effects and digital manipulations by which violent scenes are imposed upon our time-consciousness. Noys' thesis is built around the task of identifying the "actuality of violence that lies *in* the abstract," and "certain forms of violence that lie occulted in the median space of representation."[18] This concept is related to Slavoj Zizek's identification of forms of violence other than the directly visible (what he terms "subjective" violence). These are "symbolic" violence (embedded in discourse) and "systemic" (understood as the "the catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.")[19] What I am drawing from these conceptualizations of violence is the following argument, that the representation of violence implicitly entails certain procedures that fall under the rubric of "symbolic" violence and/or the violence of representation. Specifically: the means by which the digital "oner" represents the unfolding of violent action provokes a re-articulation not just of cinematic time, but of the epistemic framing of time and temporality that follow in its wake.

I take the digital "oner," then, to be not just a representation of violence, but the site of an abstracted form of violence wherein the means by which we live in the present tense, experience the specious present and the flux of time is dramatically reconstituted. Not only does the visceral impact of the "oner" have a temporalizing quality but they are sites of the overt manipulation of temporal flows. Furthermore, as the means by which violence is represented undergoes significant change, thanks to the ever greater affordances of digital imaging technology, so the means by which temporality is experienced in and articulated by moving image media is similarly re-written. It is for this reason that violence on screen allows us to ask what is the nature of temporal experience today?

II.

In the following section, I will argue that the procedures that go into representing onscreen violence as a digital "oner" – the construction of a continuum out of discontinuous durations, the layering of micro-temporalities, and the magnification of instances of agency or error – are precisely those that can be implicated in an overturning of

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[16] Graham Matthews and Sam Goodman (eds.), *Violence and the Limits of Representation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
[17] Ibid., 13.
[18] Ibid., 13.
[19] Slavoj Zizek *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2006).

the generalized experience of time. In order to catalogue some of the features of the digital "oner" I will look at sequences from *Kingsman: The Secret Service*[20] and *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*[21]. These films' claim to be light-hearted re-imaginings of the spy genre, self-consciously updating tales of gentlemanly derring-do to a contemporary context. This embrace of anachronism and irony disguises a number of distasteful decisions, in the representation of class and sex. The representation of violence, likewise, is offhand and pre-emptively shrouded in humour. One sequence from the first film is of note in this regard. In it, one of the heroes of the film – Harry Hart (Colin Firth) – attends a service in a fundamentalist Christian church where the pastor espouses violent prejudice. In the middle of the service, the villain Richmond Valentine (Samuel L. Jackson) releases a digital-audio signal that disinhibits everyone within a certain radius and prompts an orgy of violence. Rather than fall victim to the mob of violent extremists, Harry Hart single-handedly murders a huge number of them and remains the last man standing. The sequence revels in the ostentatious presentation of the violence in a "oner" and is an exercise in explicitly foregrounding technique over questions of agency, responsibility, taste and accountability. What matter most is *how* the violence unravels: to the sounds of Lynyrd Skynyrd's propellant "Free Bird"; utilising a variety of fast and slow motion effects as well as an array of match-cuts and whip-pans to keep the manic action in frame and the illusion of unbroken takes intact.

Interestingly, the church massacre scene just described has recently had an unexpected afterlife, which speaks to the issue of how techniques of representation overwhelm the violence of an action sequence in informative ways. In 2019 the face of Donald Trump was crudely composited over that of Colin Firth, so that it looked as if the President was carrying out a shooting spree in a church. Various news logos and faces of people considered antagonistic to the Trump agenda (CNN, The New York Times, Clinton, Obama, etc. etc.) were composited over the faces of the soon-to-be-massacred. This doctored sequence was then shown at a side-event at a conference in Mar-A-Lago attended by the president, provoking much outrage at the incendiary nature of the content.[22] This odd little tangent reveals the ease with which that the moral or ethical orientation of a film can be hi-jacked by a simple piece of compositing, and demonstrates the absolute primacy of technique (no matter how primitive), over what is actually contained in a piece of footage. The re-purposing of the *Kingsman* sequence for deluded MAGA chest-thumping is very much a triumph of form over content. Indeed, the crudeness of the compositing, its absurd visibility, serves as a reminder that even the simplest technical operation can add a determining layer of symbolic violence to an already violent scene. Vastly more significant than the visible violence contained within the sequence is the discursive or symbolic violence embodied in the re-purposing, a symbolic violence enabled, indeed entirely reliant upon, a crude piece of image manipulation. Of course, digital "oners" are built on image manipulation. They are combinatorial and modular deployments of a variety of temporal effects associated with both analogue cinematography and digital image manipulation, notably slow-motion, fast-motion, time-ramping and (sophisticated) compositing. The operations that make up the digital "oner" are far subtler than amateur compositing, but they are no less implicated in the dynamics of symbolic violence. Indeed, it is their increasing invisibility that gives this analysis urgency.

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[20] *Kingsman: The Secret Service,* directed by Matthew Vaughan (Twentieth Century Fox, 2014).

[21] *Kinsman: The Golden Circle*, directed by Matthew Vaughan (Twentieth Century Fox, 2017).

[22] See Michael S. Schmidt and Maggie Haberman "Macabre Video of Fake Trump Shooting Media and Critics is Shown at his Resort," NYTimes.com (October 13th 2019), www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/trump-video.html., accessed January 7, 2020.

In order to illustrate the density of operations undergirding the supposed seamlessness of a digital "oner," it is useful to first catalogue a few of the temporal effects in isolation. From there it will be possible to analyse how the appearance of continuity is constituted, and how this appearance might have a concatenated effect on our attention and experience of the cinematic present tense, as well as the passing of time in a more general sense. To break down the component parts of a digital "oner" I will first look at the temporal effects of fast and slow motion, effects that take place within the duration, before looking at speed-ramping and the use of compositing and virtual camera movements to disguise edits and integrate discontinuous durations. Slow motion and action cinema have a chicken and egg relationship. But I will focus here on what precisely slow motion does to our experience of the cinematic present tense. In recent action cinema (and the *Kingsman* films are no exception) the use of slow motion interpolates an otherwise fast-moving sequence. This use of the effect as a rhythmic component is enough to deduce some of its temporalizing influence. Slow-motion distends and elongates the present tense, most effectively when that present tense is overfull with action and other stimuli. As such it has a direct effect on the quality of the attention a spectator is capable of giving to an image. This results in an augmentation of the way in which we perceive time passing on screen. Whilst it slows, our own attention dilates to encompass more of the content of the frame, the details visible within it, the relations between objects, their vectors and trajectories. As Jean Epstein, an early theorist of slow motion recognised: "what the mind does not have time to retain, what the eye has neither the time nor the field to see in one expression… all this is what slow motion displays at will."[23] Or, in terms inherited from Doane's description of "cinematic time," slow-motion is essentially an extension of the cinematic medium's ability to capture and contain the contingent, promoting things that would have previously escaped the viewers' attention, offering them up as objects of scrutiny.

Kingsman: The Secret Service makes the most of this ability of slow-motion to re-shape our attention by using the technique to put forward very specific pieces of information that would otherwise be lost within a frame. Specifically, in the midst of the bar fight in the beginning of the film a passage of slow motion is used to trace the path of a bloody tooth past the face of a startled henchman. This shot is mirrored in the film's finale, where a frenetic climax is briefly slowed down to present a hat flying past the baffled face of Eggsy (Taron Egerton). Both shots are whip pans slowed down in order to frame both the object in mid-flight and the grimace of the performer, the comedy of which is magnified in slo-mo. In both instances, the gaze of the performer directs our own towards the flying object, but similarly in organising the frame around a single eyeline, the shot demonstrates the ability for the spectator's attention to take in more than could be perceived within the flow of diegetic time. The spectator sees the hat in flight just as Eggsy does, but more than that, they see the surprised look on Eggsy's face too, and have time to relish the micro-expressions of Egerton's performance. In short, the slow motion expands what is perceptible within a given moment, and in response our attention expands accordingly.

It should be noted that neither of these moments were staged profilmically and captured in any state resembling what appears in the final footage. The tooth and the hat are both elements that have been digitally composited into the frame in order to accentuate the slow-motion capture of the performance and the whip pan. Rather than contradict my ideas about how slow motion augments our attention I would argue that these digital interpellations extend and cement the way in which the slow-motion effects actively shapes

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[23] Cited in Christophe Wall-Romana "Epstein's Photogenie as Corporial Vision: Inner Sensation, Queer Embodiment, and Ethics" in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations,* ed. Sarah Keller and Jason Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 55.

attention. If anything, given the tendency for slow-motion to intensify our gaze, the compositing of an object into the frame merely provides focus. That said, unlike the use of slow-motion in an analogue context which represents contingent elements in the sequence by automatically ingesting a greater amount of information, the presence of such an object obviously not synchronous with the performance provides a different avenue for perceiving the unfolding of time on screen. This is the first example of how digital media can promote a sense of a structured continuum without dismantling the residual effects that slow-motion cinematography exert on our attention. The telescoping of time in slow motion offers a technological extension of our perception, and the presence of the composited object reasserts certain strict categories of meaning, whilst also divulging the processes (compositing) by which those meanings are now controlled.

Fast motion, like slow motion, has a long history as a temporal effect within action cinema. Again, its use within *Kingsman* shows that it is principally a rhythmic effect that nevertheless has a direct impact on the quality of attention that it is possible to pay to a given frame. Inversely to slow motion, fast motion makes the visible content of the frame less easy to perceive. Fast motion does not dilate our attention and invite analysis; instead it contracts it and invites a sense of temporal synopsis. This aspect of fast motion, the way in which it solicits the broadest of possible contextualisations – time is passing, day to night, night to day – is what makes it an ideal effect for establishing shots within the regime of classical continuity. But that is not to say that a fast-motion sequence does not produce its own characteristic temporal experience for the spectator. The use of time-lapse photography in, for example, *Requiem for a Dream*[24] or throughout *Breaking Bad*[25] has more than a merely synoptic effect. Instead, prioritising the experience of passing time over the content of any given moment produces a distracted and impatient time-consciousness analogous to that of the characters in those scenes who are so often waiting, for a come-down or a drop off.

Although the extended deployment of fast-motion is rare, it is important to keep in mind the temporal experience it can produce as a discrete effect before investigating its incorporation within a vastly more prevalent temporal effect in contemporary action cinema: time-ramping. Time ramping or speed ramping is the oscillation between tempos within a single shot, exemplified in such films as *300*[26], where the battle of Thermopylae plays out in a fluctuating temporality or *Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows*[27], where Holmes' pre-emption of a fight-to-come telescopes between jittery fast-motion and super-slow-mo. Distinct from the analogue production of a similar effect, which would have to be produced in camera by the manipulation of motor-speed, time ramping is a relatively ubiquitous affordance of digital editing software. For this reason, Evan Calder Williams takes the following line:

> if one looks for an aesthetic equivalent of the… sways between total stillness
> and rapid acceleration, it isn't to be found in previous cinema so much as in
> the timeline of digital video software where on "scrubs" through with a cursor,
> the images flickering forward at speed until the arrow pauses for a moment
> and everything stops and hangs and waits.[28]

This insight, that the temporal flux of time-ramping has an aesthetic correlate in a digital technology in everyday use, leaves us with an extra term to add to our growing picture of the temporalizing effect of digital "oners." To recap, the attention of the spectator dilates and

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[24] *Requiem For A Dream,* directed by Darren Aronofsky (Artisan Entertainment, 2000).
[25] *Breaking Bad* , produced by Vince Gilligan (High Bridge Productions: ABC, 2008-2013).
[26] 300, directed by Zack Snyder (Warner Bros., 2006).
[27] *Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows*, directed by Guy Ritchie (Warner Bros., 2011).
[28] Evan Calder Williams, *Shard Cinema* (London: Repeater Books, 2017), 204.

contracts between fast and slow motion, with their associated effects on the perceived and perceivable content of the frame. In between, fleeting moments of standard time appeal to our intuitive recognition of "real" time and anchor the sequence in common temporal experience. Most crucially, however, this "scrubbing" between tempos introduces a *diachronic* dimension to the experience of the sequence. That is to say, the temporal experience of watching a time-ramped sequence is produced not principally by the profilmic duration that is being represented, nor by the diegetic time being screened, but by a sequence of operations – imagined, efficiently if simplistically, as an act of "scrubbing" – that occupy a wholly different temporal zone altogether. Time-ramping relies on the felt presence of a temporality heterogeneous to the durations of either the profilmic scene, or the screened duration. This heterogenous temporality intrudes on the cinematic present tense from the outside, exerting a pressure on the temporal flow of the sequence and the attention of the spectator. Unlike the discrete effects of slow or fast motion, where perceptual capacities are mechanically extended or curtailed, time-ramping does more than augment the act of looking; it directly interacts with it, micromanaging temporal experience and attention from the outside.

Some theoretical contextualisation of this phenomenon can be gleaned from Mark Hansen's discussion of digital technics. Hansen argues that "properly digital mediation… only enters human time-consciousness from the outside… as what I have elsewhere called a 'diachronic thing'."[29] This concept of the diachronic thing that inflects our experience of time is elaborated in Hansen's notion of post-phenomenological experience, defined, negatively, as "temporal experiences that are not mediated by what Husserl, and Stiegler after him, call the temporal object: a surrogate object – a melody or real-time media in flux – that materializes the evanescent flux of time in the brain."[30] For Hansen, then, digital media produce time-consciousness at a sub-perceptual level, through objects and processes that break the homology and feedback loop between the temporal object and temporal experience. I argue that the pressure exerted upon the temporal experience of the time-ramped duration can be thought of as this "diachronic thing." The experience of time-ramping undermines the stability of the sequence as a temporal object whilst overtly micro-managing our attention at the same time in ways that are not immediately available to our perception. I will connect the management of attention to the concept of abstracted violence in my conclusion, but mention it here as a common characteristic of the temporal effects that constitute the digital "oner," several of which are still to be identified.

Time-ramping is merely one of a collection of effects that exert pressure directly on the attention of the spectator. In doing it folds the sub-perceptual, or post-phenomenological, inscription of time within digital media into the legible temporal and spatial continuities of the "oner." Another example, briefly touched upon above, is the obvious presence of a composited object within a frame, or the combination of pieces of virtual cinematography with live-action durations, such as stitch together pieces of action within the same "take." The integration of stretches of virtual cinematography is another effect that is most visible when it is being used, like fast motion, to mark a narrative transition as well as a spatio-temporal one. For example, in *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* there are a number of elaborate transitions enabled by virtual cinematography. Chief amongst these is a shot that takes us from a London flat, where some friends are smoking weed, to the jungle hideout of Poppy Adams (Julianne Moore) that is the distribution hub of all the drugs in the film. The segue occurs when the camera tracks into the bag of weed, pushing into the contours of the

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[29] Mark B. N. Hansen "Technical Repetition and Digital Art, Or Why The 'Digital' in Digital Cinema is not the 'Digital' in 'Digital' Technics," in *Technology and Desire: The Transgressive Art of Moving Images*, ed. Rania Gaafar and Martin Schultz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 96.

[30] Ibid., 85.

buds until it transforms into the canopy of a jungle seen from above. Without a cut, a deep close up transforms into an aerial tracking shot, thanks to the invisible stitching of virtual cinematography. In this instance, the effect is reflexively deployed, and the temporal effect of impossible continuity is cancelled by the clear acknowledgement of a huge jump in space and time – from London, evening, to jungle, day.

I highlight the effect here to demonstrate the affordances of virtual cinematography and bring the procedure into the fold of techniques that are used to constitute the "oner." Along with compositing procedures, the use of virtual cinematography to disguise edits, is most effective when entirely invisible within a sequence. Nevertheless, it is integral to the production of continuity. Furthermore, the sub-perceptual nature of these processes does not diminish their instrumentality or the effect they have on the spectator. They are diachronic operations producing temporal experience, yet without the self-disclosing over-emphasis of time-ramping.

It is now my task to examine how the modular and combinatorial deployment of fast and slow motion, time-ramping, compositing and virtual cinematography overlap and interact and what effect this might have on the spectator. Seeing the "oner" as a palimpsest of temporal effects can bring into view the sub-perceptual operations holding the continuity together. From this vantage point we can start to query whether or not the re-conceptualization of time that goes hand in hand with onscreen depictions of violence is, in and of itself, a procedure that has the qualities of violence.

The climax to *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* features a show-down between the two English protagonists, Harry and Eggsy, and their erstwhile American collaborator turned arch-villain Whiskey (Pedro Pascal), as they fight over a briefcase containing the means to save the world. The sequence includes a digital "oner" that lasts for roughly one and half minutes, and involves the protagonists tumbling back and forth over a diner counter, various pieces of gun-play, an extended knife-fight, a lasso, a giant mincer and a plethora of stunt-work. Considered as a "temporal object" in the Husserl-Stiegler sense, the sequence materializes a temporality oscillating to the point of disintegration. The camera moves both flow and judder, and the bodies and objects that fly back and forth in the frame stretch the plausibility of continuity beyond any possible homology with an actual staged duration. Thought of, on the other hand, as a continuous duration produced under the pressure exerted by the interventions of digital media, the temporal flux of the sequence discloses the nature of its own production. The over-abundance of temporal effects *within* the continuity means that the sub-perceptual processes that underpin it shift dramatically in and out of the foreground, marking the temporal flow of the sequence in a variety of legible ways.

Speaking in a VFX breakdown featurette, VFX Supervisor Mark Breakspear described the production process in the following terms:

> The sequence is a huge single camera move that's made up of hundreds of different clips. On set we shot a combination of first and second unit, and some cases third unit, we shot motion control, steadicam, standard lock off, just general plate reference, we would shoot green screen equivalents for face replacements and there are an awful lot of face replacements in this sequence. We shot all the different types and we positioned it together, we used LIDAR to line things up and for a good couple of months, just assembling the footage that made up the multiple minutes that that sequence is, took an awful long time and was incredibly complicated.[31]

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[31] FilmIsNow, "Kingsman: The Golden Circle 'Fight Over Briefcase' – VFX Breakdown by Imageworks (2017)," *Youtube video* (January 2nd 2018), www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnqwTHOdvqc.

The result is an artificial continuity whose true content is not a representation of violence but a demonstration of the means by which a violent present tense can be constructed. The sequence is so overfull of technique that the intensifying experience of continuity, building as the duration extends and extends, inevitably comes to signal the underpinning technical procedures that produced it. By insisting on a spectacle of spatio-temporal coherence, the sequence allows us to intuit the contours of the "diachronic thing" that determines its structure.

Drilling down into specifics, the range of temporal effects continually overturns, re-establishes and re-configures the way in which the action is perceived. For example, the fast motion whip-pans hint at hidden edits, whilst the acceleration of the temporal flow overwhelms the spectator's ability to attend to the specificities of the frame. That said, a pistol dropped on the floor and, micro-seconds later, lassoed by Whiskey and returned to his hands, becomes the focal point of the spectator's attention. This is achieved through a combination of slow-motion cinematography, which dilates the temporal flow and allows for an intensified perception of the content of the frame, and compositing and digital re-framing, which guides that sharpened attention to specific elements in the frame. This closely managed action is bracketed by the whiplash of further time-ramps as the present tense is constantly re-constituted. The instability of the temporal flow of the sequence continually re-moulds attendant attentional structures and disintegrates any sense of stable relationship between lived time-consciousness and the distending and contracting temporality on screen.

Indeed, the sheer abundance of temporal manipulation within the continuity of the "oner" becomes an effect in and of itself. This effect cannot necessarily be approached descriptively, not least because in describing the sequence in prose, the temporalizing effect is immediately lost. Rather than being operative as isolatable and sedimented effects within a static structure, the scene suggests that digital "oners" generate a temporal experience that exceeds sequential description, deconstruction or demodularisation. Digital "oners" whilst demonstrably consisting of a number of carefully ordered temporal effects, match-cuts and virtual camera manoeuvres, aren't coherent as a chronology of one effect after another. Instead, the continuum of the "oner" consists of fluidly interchanging attentional cues that restlessly re-orient the viewer second by second. What we are most receptive to as spectators, what most informs our sense of time passing in these extended durations, is the transitioning or phasing between one temporal effect and attentional structure and the next.

This is significant to my argument because this destabilised articulation of time within the regime of digital effects is extremely dominant within this sequence, but also within action cinema at large. The maximalism of the effects in use marginalises all other modes of spectation and alternative ways of paying attention to the sequence. This is where we get to what is characteristic of the digital "oner," the kernel that demarcates the structured continuum of a sequence like those in the *Kingsman* films, from a more traditional one-take shot. Namely, the digital "oner" is directly operative upon the attention of the spectator, in ways that are not true of its analogue counterpart. Nowhere is this clearer than in a comparison between Mary Ann Doane's summation of the (analogue) long-take in early cinema and the impression given by the *Kingsman* sequences. Doane writes that "in cinema, the long take incarnates the meaninglessness of lived reality."[32] This is simply not the case in the digital "oner," where extended durations only make meaning more acute. There is no room for ambiguity, let alone "meaninglessness," within a digital "oner" given the degree to which its various temporal effects impact the attention of the spectator. The violence inherent to representation emerges here as the parameters imposed upon our attention by these operations, manipulating attention within the image not only guarantees the meaning of the

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[32] Doan, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time,* 105.

sequence it excludes certain interpretive strategies, dependent on different forms of attention, altogether.

The experience of paying attention to a digital "oner" is highly determined. As I have tried to demonstrate the techniques involved operate directly on the very means by which we typically interpret moving images and draw meaning from a given sequence. As a result, one encounters the raw instrumentality of the sequence as soon as one attempts to deconstruct its content. For example, watching the final sequence of the *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* with an eye on where the edits fall, as opposed to an investment in the unfolding duration, causes the sequence to fall away into the thousands of fragments from which it was produced. The continuity that digital media can produce is difficult to grasp, in its instrumental quality, precisely because it is experienced as continuity. Formal analysis falls short of assessing the true impact of digital continuity, because it holds the most visceral aspect of the experience at a distance. Ultimately, we experience digital continuity *as such*, despite our intuitions as to the discontinuity of its component parts, and despite its excessive relation to the time-consciousness that it is supposedly representing, and despite our best analytical intentions.

III.

It is at this point that I would like to return my argument to our generalised experience of time and re-address the question of violence as something that is not just represented but also present as an abstract process within these sequences.

The digital "oners" of the *Kingsman* films demonstrate how digital media can impose continuity on a diverse set of fragmented durations and construct temporal experience from heterogeneous durations and processes. It does so through the micro-management of the spectator's attention and the way in which that attention translates into an engagement with the screen and its content. Within these "oners" and within action cinema more broadly, the reconfiguration of continuity and temporal experience is a secondary effect of the films' displays of violence, and yet this abstract violence hidden within the means of representation comes most clearly to light when what is being represented is violent in the extreme. Thus, the digital "oner" manifests a form of abstract violence most clearly when it puts forward a display of violent action.

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that digital "oners" have the potential to disclose an abstract violence that lies at the heart of contemporary temporal experience and not just how it is funnelled through action cinema. In order to make this conclusion, I will first consider the "oner" as what Mark Hansen describes as an "artifactualization" of "the flux of consciousness." Hansen uses the term to distinguish media objects from the more ineffable flux of life in order to sketch their inevitable interdetermination.[33] Under an artifactualizing lens, the digital "oner" becomes an exemplification of the ways in which the broader operations of the digital inscriptions of temporality mark our sense of time passing: our experience of the present tense is constantly under pressure from considerations far beyond the near at hand (that are experienced, that is, as pressure exerted by diachronically). For example, just as in a "oner," in everyday life the structures of our attention are constantly vulnerable to manipulation, sensations such as distraction and focus, dilation and intensity, are shown and felt to be the effects of media operations that escape our direct apprehension, even as they give shape to the contours of our experience. Attending to the action — as Eggsy and Harry do battle with Whiskey — is explicitly enabled by a continuity laboriously conjured up from uncountable fragments of camera footage and other pieces of data. The specious

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[33] Mark B. N. Hansen, "Media Theory," *Theory, Culture and Society* 23/2-3 (2006): 297-307.

present of the sequence possesses a continuity that is legibly the product of multiple intersecting temporalities. As an artefact of digital mediation, it crystallizes the ways in which temporal experience is not an ineffable flux, but a complex system of mediations.

However, an artifactual reading sets the ongoing temporalization of our experience by digital visual media at a conceptual distance, and plays down the possibility of the following point: bluntly and polemically put, the content of the continuity in a digital "oner" is also the content of our experience of continuity more generally. In order to answer the question "what is the nature of temporal experience today" as fully as possible, I would like to return to some of the theory introduced at the beginning of this article, specifically the essay by Benjamin Noys' and the work of Jonathan Beller. Noys' hunt for abstracted forms of violence led him to a consideration of the factory as a site in which the question of abstract violence can be posed. Summarising portions of Lyotard's *Duchamp's Transformers* (1979), Noys describes how "the intensity of the worker's experience in the factory results in a 'mechanical asceticism,' the ability to transform the extreme demands of factory labour into a new sensorium." Cautiously diverging from Lyotard, Noys writes that "the celebration of the forced stretching of the worker's sensorium threatens to render violence sublime and so immunise if from criticism."[34] Noys is seeking a way of updating the inherent critique-ability of the violence exerted by industrial capitalism on the labour force to a contemporary, specifically post-Fordist, context. To this end, the work of Jonathan Beller can help extend Noys' argument and also bring this article to a conclusion, by implicating the digital "oner" in the production of a new sensorium that transforms the extreme demands of contemporary temporality within a regime of digital media into a sensation of continuity.

Beller's thesis can be summed up in the canny aphorism "to look is to labour." In *The Cinematic Mode of Production* he argues that "cinema brought the industrial revolution to the eye," insofar as its formal properties organize habitual modes of perception and introjected the formal properties of the assembly line into consciousness."[35] For Beller "'Cinema' means a fully mediated mise-en-scene that provides humans with the contexts and options for response that are productive for capital."[36] In Beller's conception, the cinema becomes the post-Fordist factory floor, with the proliferation of screens in everyday life deterritorializing the factory further. Lyotard's vision of the 'mechanical asceticism' of the factory worker adapting to the demands of the factory, doesn't need to be altered too much to approach the practice of binge-watching, an ascetic immersion in a single text, where even the task of cueing the next episode is automated for us onscreen. From this perspective, the best way to interpret "to look is to labour" is as literally as possible. It makes possible a critique of the abstract violence of representation pursued by Noys and provides an answer to the question 'what is the nature of temporal experience today?'

Temporal experience today resembles the artificial continuity of the digital "oner," which is to say, our experience of continuity is a construction of discontinuous temporal fragments bound together by a range of procedures operating diachronically, beyond the perceptual parameters of the continuity of lived-temporality. What is more, what we are doing when we experience this continuity is work. Shaviro's perception of "the time of micro-intervals and speed-of-light transformations, that are characteristic of globalized high-tech financial capital,"[37] is an elegant summation of how time can be conceived, but doesn't help us understand how it is experienced. Only by understanding the operations involved in the production of continuity by digital media can we understand how we stretch our sensorium

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[34] Noys, "The Violence of Representation," 22-3.
[35] Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production*, 10.
[36] Ibid., 29.
[37] Shaviro, "Post-Continuity: An Introduction".

to match them, in a manner akin to workers in the extreme environment of Lyotard and Noys' factory. Temporal experience then, as crystallized in action cinema, is an encounter with multiple layers of violence, or after Derrida, an economy of violence. Firstly the violence on screen, secondly the violence of representation, and lastly the *general* violence that stretches our generalized experience of time to produce spatiotemporal continuity from its opposite, and make a "oner" out of all the inassimilable stimuli of everyday experience, producing seamlessness out of fragmentation, linearity out of discontinuity, coherence out of incompossibility.

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