

# Biding Our Time: Rethinking the Familiar in Steven Soderbergh's *The Limey*

• Lee Carruthers

For those familiar with the work of Steven Soderbergh, his rapidly expanding oeuvre will appear much preoccupied with what has gone before, whether in Hollywood or the European art cinema, and exhibits a playfulness toward established cinematic forms that insists upon their continued resonance. Among his recent films, the jokey and self-reflexive *Full Frontal* (2002), the remake of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (2002), two new installments of the 1960 caper flick, *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) and *Ocean's Twelve* (2004), and finally, his contribution, with filmmakers Wong Kar-Wai and Michelangelo Antonioni, to the tripartite project, *Eros* (2005), all evidence a concern to reference and revisit cinema's past.<sup>1</sup> Though the question of whether these films can be termed 'successful' is an apposite one that surely shapes our estimation of Soderbergh as a director, my interest here takes a slightly divergent course. Instead, I'd like to point to a prior film that invites us to consider Soderbergh's acts of appropriation as both a deliberate strategy and as a meaningful event for our critical practice. My claim is not so much that one film can help us make sense of the others – although it might – but that it opens up a space for thinking productively about filmic temporality and film history.<sup>2</sup>

Soderbergh's *The Limey* (1999) is in certain ways a familiar text: the film reworks conventional narrative tropes while gesturing self-consciously toward Hollywood's past. By 'familiar', I refer to its premise as a revenge quest: apart from the recognition value of this narrative type, *The Limey* was frequently compared to John Boorman's thriller *Point Blank* (1967, USA) upon its release.<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, *The*

*Limey* trades on the iconic status of its stars, Terence Stamp and Peter Fonda, and the intertextual associations they contribute to the project. In particular, what Stamp brings to *The Limey* is quite complex: once one of the most recognisable faces of 1960s cinema, Stamp comes to embody the hither side of 60s youth culture, marked by an accretion of experience and newly restored to visibility (Figure 1),<sup>4</sup> *The Limey* similarly exploits the laid-back persona of Peter Fonda, evoking his role in Dennis Hopper's emblematic biker film, *Easy Rider* (1969); finally, players in supporting roles, such as Barry Newman and Joe Dallesandro, import a range of relevant associations.<sup>5</sup>



• Fig. 1: A familiar face: Terence Stamp as *The Limey*

Yet the film's references to, and reiteration of, a filmic past are something more than a stylised flourish or a limited nostalgic gesture. When we examine its workings closely, attending to the relation that develops between film and viewer, we find that *The Limey* challenges us to think about familiarity as a specifically temporal issue. It asks us to reflect upon our capacity – or willingness – to recognise elements of the past both as aspects of our present situation and as

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determining features of the future. *The Limey* institutes such questions at the level of form, so that to cope with its shifting temporal parameters is also to participate in, and potentially confirm, a larger thematic agenda. In other words, the difference between 'what is familiar' and 'what is unfamiliar' is thematised by the film quite explicitly, and begins with our perceptual experience as viewers.

In what follows, I will propose a reading of *The Limey* that identifies within it two conjoined tendencies. First, *The Limey's* initially confounding formal structure acts as a guide to its operations; by requiring us to make sense of a welter of rhymes and repetitions, the film actually teaches us how to be its viewer. Secondly, however, this perceptual training does not accrue to the viewer an unambiguous mastery of its systems. Rather, it furnishes us with a set of tools that is finally inadequate; while these penetrate a surface logic, the film indicates that what has been at stake, all along, remains inaccessible. And it is this latter tendency that causes me to take up Soderbergh's film here, as an exemplary case: by acknowledging that *The Limey* rewards *and* resists our analytical efforts, we are brought closer to the principle of uncertainty that lies at its heart, and to a fuller appreciation of its richness as a text. Taken seriously, this thought will remind us that the task of reading a film does not always proceed in one direction, toward complete tractability; instead, *The Limey* performs a dialectical movement of old and new that finally questions the very idea of familiarity.

### **Finding Time: Temporal Structures and Defamiliarisation**

Given *The Limey's* concern to unsettle what is familiar, it seems right to think about the film's formal prerogatives in terms of their capacity for *defamiliarisation*. This technique, held by Russian formalists as essential to works of art, creates an ideal situation of perception that is characterised by an extreme awareness. As Victor Shklovsky writes in 'Art as Technique':

If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. [. . .] Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly habituation is part of our experience of film viewing. The formal language associated with classical narrative, for example, in its clarity and redundancy, does not insist that we continually notice it: thus, classical editing techniques, such as matches on action or limited temporal ellipses, can displace small pieces of time without sacrificing overall comprehensibility.<sup>7</sup> But what of films that strive to delay habituation, demanding greater vigilance from viewers? To this end, *The Limey* undermines familiar narrative mechanisms by exposing their limits, cleaving the continuous event into disparate fragments and reproducing the single instance in multiple manifestations. That these procedures frustrate our expectations of a legible temporal sequence is precisely their point: our awareness of time – and our confusion about it – is a vital component of the film's formal objectives.

This is in line with Shklovsky's proposition that 'the technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception'.<sup>8</sup> But if Soderbergh's film aims to defamiliarise time, this perceptual play is not just an aesthetic end, but also a guide to what the film means. Looking to *The Limey* in terms of the difficulties of its form, and with particular emphasis upon its articulation of temporality, we find that it is deeply invested in the idea of temporal experience, both as it pertains to viewing practices (how do viewers make sense of narrative time?) and to broader, thematic preoccupations (how do we reconcile the past with the present?). This concern informs *The Limey's* operations in crucial ways: both formally and thematically, the film relentlessly calls our attention to questions of temporal positioning.

*The Limey's* narrative centers upon Wilson (Terence Stamp), a British career criminal released

after nine years in prison. Having learned that his daughter Jenny died under suspicious circumstances in Los Angeles, he travels to America to find out who's responsible. With the assistance of an ex-con named Eduardo (Luis Guzman), and Jenny's friend, Elaine (Lesley Ann Warren), Wilson discovers that his daughter was involved with a man named Valentine (Peter Fonda), a middle-aged record producer capitalising on 1960s nostalgia. In his search for truth – and revenge – Wilson comes to see his relationship with Jenny with new clarity.

The opening sections of *The Limey* present a jumble of material that is not easily reconciled as a coherent narrative chain. Indeed, something of the film's prerogatives is signaled even within the opening shots: the first moments withhold the image entirely, instead offering a dramatic voice-over commentary ("Tell me. Tell me. Tell me about Jenny"), while the second shot commences as a blurred background, a faint relay of movements, that eventually snaps into focus. This initial displacement of the image, followed by an image that obscures its identificatory marks once again evokes Shklovsky's thinking. He writes: 'After we see an object many times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it [ . . . ] [Conversely,] Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object.'<sup>9</sup>

From the outset, *The Limey* plays with expectations of legibility by delaying the appearance of a conventional, establishing shot. Although Wilson is situated as a central narrative agent, emerging at the end of the second shot as an isolated figure, and positioned in the frame alongside the title credit as 'the limey', the film produces this information with some reluctance, and in half-measures: the viewer is required first to look for him, within the frame, for 12 of 15 seconds; further, the initial voice-over is not explicitly attributable to Wilson until he speaks, subsequently. It is clear, in retrospect, that these shots would establish a great deal, were they laid out differently: the formal rift between words and speaker deflect the film's immediate assertion of a narrative object ("Tell me about Jenny").

I privilege these details in particular because they indicate the degree to which *The Limey's* opening moments initiate a different mode of viewing; more specifically, they signal the film's requirement of an unusually high level of attentiveness from its viewer.<sup>10</sup> While the manipulations of the shots in question are subtle, they are also instructive: the instance of information 'projected' prior to its context (shot 1) and of a narrative landscape that is eventually clarified (shot 2) describe certain of the film's overarching strategies.

By examining the opening sequence, it is possible to obtain a sense of *The Limey's* temporal manipulations as a whole. Running little over four minutes, yet consisting of 39 shots, the film's first section compresses a wide array of spatial and temporal locations. Initially, the action moves from the public space of the Los Angeles airport to the more private space of Wilson's motel. We are presented with some of Wilson's personal effects, and specifically, with a newspaper clipping that reads, 'Woman dies on Mulholland', and a return address printed on a worn envelope. The shots that follow are discontinuous, depicting Wilson in a series of locales, repeatedly: on a doorstep, asking for the man named on the envelope ("Eduardo Roel"); on an aeroplane, surrounded by other passengers; in his motel room, lost in contemplation; in a moving car, holding up a photograph of a young woman to examine it in the sunlight; in a taxi, at night. These images are intercut with others, contributing further disorienting effects: a blue-filtered image of a young girl at the beach, smiling; a grainy, sepia-toned image of the same girl, gazing sadly through a doorframe (Figure 2); another blue-filtered image, where the young woman of the photograph appears as a passenger in a moving car. Finally, the sequence stabilises, as Wilson's encounter with Roel is reprised and extended as a full conversation. Supplementing the image track are shifting layers of diegetic and non-diegetic sound: first, non-diegetic music and the sound of aeroplane engines are audible; the music ceases, replaced by the sound of running water; next, the sound of running water

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• Fig. 2: Remembering Jenny

continues, accompanied by the faint tinkle of wind chimes; then, these sounds are replaced by the roar of the ocean, and eventually joined by a male voice (Wilson's), humming. Lastly, all sounds cease, save those clearly rooted in the diegesis.

Obviously, a single viewing (or hearing) of the sequence does not yield many certainties; upon closer examination, however, things do become clearer. In general, we can say that the film produces an ongoing 'present' that is insistently ruptured by projections of future events. Within the sequence, these are frequently 'near futures' that the present eventually overtakes; Wilson's first meeting with Eduardo, for example, is subsequently replayed as an event unfolding 'now'. On occasion these projections are of a greater scope, and are not contextualised until much later; the images of Wilson travelling by aeroplane can be understood as his flight home, by the film's conclusion. In this respect, the projections into the future drive the narrative, once the viewer recognises their method of functioning.

To complicate matters, the shifts between present and future are set alongside intrusions from the past. Once again, this temporal category is bifurcated, moving between events of the 'recent past', and a more 'distant past', produced as Wilson's memory. Significantly, these interventions not only signify a temporal difference, but also present certain problems of perspective. One of Wilson's 'recollections', for example, corresponds with his time in prison, and is thus impossible as his literal viewpoint: the medium close up of a young woman (Jenny), as a passenger in Eduardo's car, presents a view of

the pair that cannot logically be Wilson's. While an acceptable context for this shot is offered subsequently, as an illustration of an anecdote that Eduardo tells later in the film, it does not actually convey Eduardo's point of view: the shot is of the car's exterior, and observes the pair objectively. Similarly, while flashes from the 'distant past' can be attributed to Wilson, these are colored in a way that is enigmatic: if we take certain images to signify 'distant past/Wilson' by the use of a blue filter, it is curious that the shot named above, conveying 'recent past/Eduardo' is rendered likewise. Viewers of Soderbergh's other films will no doubt recognise this use of color filters as a characteristic gesture, but unlike the clearly demarcated chromatic zones of *Traffic* (2000), or the moody palette of his *neo-noir*, *The Underneath* (1995), the use of this device within *The Limey* does not always serve a clarifying function.

Hence, the viewer is required to extract a linear story from a highly fragmented plot without recourse to reliable visual cues, such as an unproblematic color coding, or communicative transitions, such as dissolves indicating leaps in time. Viewer comprehension, therefore, relies upon a system of familiarising repetitions; while we cannot explain these flashbacks absolutely, we *can* discern a pattern of their appearance. Moreover, we come to accept the narrative pieces in an approximate relation to each other; within these terms, key formal differences signify a generalised 'pastness', until the narrative places these details more specifically.

Additional formal effects convolute these arrangements even further. As with the use of color described previously, sound is deployed to form linkages between images and across temporal zones. In specific terms, only the non-diegetic music functions conventionally, ending abruptly before any temporal shifts occur. Elsewhere, the film constructs irregular sound bridges that tend to impede, rather than facilitate, narrative comprehensibility.

The sound of aeroplane engines, for example, is rooted in the 'present' of the airport and the airport motel, as is the sound of running water; these sounds continue across images from

various temporal zones. The sounds of wind chimes and of the ocean, however, are projections of future events: like the opening shot ("Tell me about Jenny"), these are aural references produced well before their context; both the wind chimes and the ocean's roar properly 'occur' at the film's conclusion. Beyond the obvious spatial and temporal conflation that these effect, the film's use of sound describes a general, defamiliarising strategy: what seems extraneous and non-diegetic is, more accurately, not yet diegetic, and will be familiarised by an emergent context. In this regard, the viewer learns to receive the film's sounds and images as partial revelations that will come to assume a more stable narrative positioning; concomitantly, the viewer's engagement must remain as dynamic as the film's manipulations.

### Telling Time: *The Limey* Describes its Own Functioning

On occasion, *The Limey's* dialogue seems even to refer to this situation, as though delineating the viewer's dilemma for us. Consider, for instance, an anecdote that Wilson relates about the things he has learned in prison; although his first impulse is to seek revenge on a prison guard when he meets him again on the outside, he soon reconsiders, as follows:

What I thought I wanted wasn't what I wanted; what I thought I was thinking about was something else. I didn't give a toss. It didn't *matter*, see? This bloke on the bench wasn't worth my *time*. It meant sod all in the end. 'Cause you've got to make a choice: when to do something and when to let it go. When it *matters* and when it *don't*. Bide your time – that's what prison teaches you, if nothing else. Bide your time and everything becomes clear. And you can act accordingly.

This emphatic assertion (Figure 3), offered by Wilson midway through the film, actually tells us what we already know, as viewers: the film's earliest moments direct us to 'bide our time' to ensure narrative comprehension.<sup>11</sup>

Relatedly, the film suggests another way of thinking about its formal structuring by



• Fig. 3: Bide Your Time

foregrounding Wilson's use of Cockney rhyming slang: when Wilson says 'china', for example, it's short for 'china plate', a rhyme that stands in for 'mate' (his actual meaning). Evidently, this vernacular points to Wilson's cultural difference, and situates him as a figure whose very manner of speaking seems out of place and time.<sup>12</sup> More compellingly, this riddle-like, abbreviated code resembles the film's operations, in important ways: we receive a term (i.e. the *sound* of the ocean), corresponding to a larger term (the ocean *itself*, as it appears in the diegesis), but actually indexing something else (the final confrontation between Wilson and Valentine, *at* the ocean). In this way, the film's formal arrangements may be seen as a self-conscious 'roughening' of language that defamiliarises conventional usages. As Shklovsky indicates: "Every riddle pretends to show its subject either by words which specify or describe it but which, during the telling, do not seem applicable (the type: "black and white and 'red' – read – all over") or by means of odd but imitative sounds ("'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves/ Did gyre and gimble in the wabe")."<sup>13</sup>

As with the literary language cited above, *The Limey's* defamiliarising mode of articulation is initially confounding, but eventually penetrable; once the viewer has witnessed one such riddle unfold, subsequent effects are more familiar, and increasingly legible.

### Taking a Second Look: What Falls Outside our Familiar Concepts

So if on one hand we can say that the film's details are patterned in a way that assumes an

eventual coherence, on the other, there remain certain elements that do not observe this logic. The film's use of sound again supplies a good example: Wilson's humming may occur in the 'present' of his motel room, although this seems unlikely; otherwise, it is linked in a later sequence to a song Wilson sang in the past, and to his reflections, more generally. I raise this issue because it qualifies any simple assessment of the film's prerogatives: the humming not only resists a precise temporal location, it also presents a kind of experience that exceeds such designations. It seems apt to say that Wilson's humming somehow refers to *both* past and present, or to the hazy ground that lies in-between; in either case, moments such as these evoke a sense of time that is subjective and elastic and does not proceed logically as a series of consecutive instants.

Similarly, an episode occurs a little later in the film that asks us to rethink our preliminary understanding of its systems. Wilson persuades Eduardo to accompany him to Valentine's house, and upon arriving, they find a large party in progress and decide to pass themselves off as Valentine's guests. Wilson first explores the house, and then stands with Eduardo, observing the gathering at a distance. The film presents Eduardo pointing out Valentine to Wilson, and then, quite suddenly, a flurry of images depicts Wilson shooting Valentine. This action is presented repeatedly, generating three versions of the shooting. While the film has suggested to this point that such projections are indicators of coming events, on this occasion, they are allied less reliably with Wilson's subjectivity, as a *wish* that is never fulfilled within the diegesis. The film introduces, then, a fresh set of defamiliarising possibilities, describing subjective phenomena: memory, daydreams and wishes exist alongside concrete events. What this effects is significant: although the film's fragmentary network of past, present and future becomes manageable, approximately, as 'motivating events', 'ongoing activities' and 'events to come', the details associated with Wilson's psychology remain elusive. As I have intimated, these elements forward a kind of critique by their very presence

because they point up the deficiency of our interpretive scheme. Though we have endeavored, as viewers, to 'bide our time', this strategy uncovers only half the picture; there is, it seems, *another order* of experience to be reckoned with. So if we have learned, through familiarisation, how to assess much of the profilmic material, *The Limey* poses questions that surpass these recuperative efforts, as well.

We might say that the film asks us not just to see things 'out of their normal context', as Shklovsky would have it, but also to consider that sometimes the relation between a thing and its context is imprecise and mutable.<sup>14</sup> An additional example expresses this point quite lucidly: as I have indicated, the first meeting between Wilson and Eduardo is presented briefly, and then replicated by the film, so that the viewer receives the latter as a fleshed out repetition of the former. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the repetition is inexact, and instead offers a near identical, but different *version* of the same action. Specifically, a very slight camera movement is discernible in the first version, but not in the second; the angle differs slightly from one 'take' to another; the actors' delivery of lines differs slightly, also. Thus, even at this early stage, *The Limey's* articulations are more problematic than they appear.

In other words, *The Limey* generates two kinds of movement: a relay of defamiliarisation / familiarisation that promises an eventual clarity, and conversely, an assertion of problems of temporal experience that are less easily resolved. In so doing, the film indicates that its own explanatory map necessarily misses its mark: despite our efforts as viewers to place details within firm analytical categories, other factors persist that are potentially of greater significance.

Admittedly, this is awkward terrain to navigate, requiring us not just to account for the patterns spread across the film's surface but also for those details that seem not to form patterns at all. So might there be another way to think about *The Limey* that takes these points of resistance not as 'negative space', but as potential sources of meaning? Put differently, can we offer a description of the temporal

experience that the film produces that preserves (and cherishes) the unique quality of its cadence?

### ***The Limey*, Time and History**

A possibility of this kind is opened up by Martin Heidegger's thinking, and specifically, by his analysis of the temporal character of existence in *Being and Time*. In that context, Heidegger's term *Dasein*, or literally, 'there-being', is used to designate the entity, or being, that each of us is.<sup>15</sup> Of special relevance for this discussion, *Dasein* has its being in all three temporalities of past, present and future. Time, therefore, is not experienced as a linear measure, but rather as a phenomenon that is more complex: it involves 'thrownness', (our negotiation of what comes down from the past), 'fallenness' (our concern with particular 'nows') as well as 'projections' onto future possibility.<sup>16</sup> By this I do not mean to impose a Heideggerian reading squarely upon the film's machinations, but rather to suggest that each text acknowledges a comparable situation. Expressed simply, *The Limey* asks us to consider time as a thing experienced 'all at once', as a consequence of its formal fragmentation and its thematic interests. As Heidegger writes:

Temporality does not signify. . . a 'succession'.  
The future is *not later* than having been, and having been is *not earlier* than the Present. Temporality temporalises itself as a future which makes present in the process of having been.<sup>17</sup>

Within these terms, it's possible to think of *The Limey* as presenting a gathering of time that stresses our immersion in time as a whole. This notion is persuasive in two respects: first, with reference to the film's narrative loop, which presents an *ending* (Wilson's journey home) as a possible *beginning* (these images appear early in the film, as though depicting Wilson's arrival), and second, in regard to the film's conclusion, which answers Wilson's query ("Tell me about Jenny") with recourse to Wilson's past.

In fact, the film's refusal of purely linear time is manifest at nearly every level: even the matter of Wilson's 'otherness' as a character – as a 'foreigner' on American soil, just released from

London's Parkhurst prison – is cast as a specifically temporal issue, and one that emphasises simultaneity over sequential ordering. For example, when asked how he learned of his daughter's death, Wilson describes this circumstance in terms of an uncanny foreknowledge that shatters his regimented prison routine:

Oh, no – I knew. I knew *beforehand*. What time was it supposed to have happened? Eddie said, two in the morning. Well that's like, eight hours difference between here and London. . . that would have made it about, like, ten o'clock, my time. I was just going out in the yard. I was in the habit of saving my newspaper until then. You know – stretch me legs, breath of fresh air, bit of a read – stretch out the good part of the day, as it were. And I couldn't open the newspaper: it was like the pages was *glued* together, me hands were that weak. I thought I was having a heart attack! Course, I know I wasn't. Guy I knew, come up, "Here, Wilson", he said, "you're as white as sheet!" I said, "well fuck me, I've been in prison half my life, haven't I?" But he was dead on, because I'd felt all the blood drain out of my head. And I knew. . . I knew something must've happened to Jen.

Characteristically for *The Limey*, Wilson's recounting of this story is presented as a continuous recitation, but is dislocated by the accompanying images. The minute-long speech, as offered here, is impossibly stretched across three discrete settings: Wilson speaks from a chair in Elaine's apartment, from his seat at a restaurant table, and as the pair walks along the oceanfront. Thus the anecdote extends beyond the details that the film presents, inviting us to read it as a forceful condensation: it is the course of an evening distilled to its memorable and affective content.

The story itself bears consideration, as well, for its explicit insistence upon the simultaneity of experience across time zones. Though doubly removed from his daughter's life in Los Angeles (because incarcerated, and across the ocean), Wilson knows the fact of Jenny's death intuitively; what's more, he knows it as something *felt*, as an authentically embodied experience. Not coincidentally, within Wilson's

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account, the more usual and objective source of knowledge – the daily newspaper – is quite useless to him, testifying only to his body's weakness. Thus the film's overarching pun – that Wilson has *done time* – is not to be taken lightly: the film suggests that this experience places Wilson in a privileged position that is unusually sensitive to lived temporality, in its multiple and encompassing orientations (Figure 4). Put another way, *doing* time is closer, and more basic to us, than all our rational ways of measuring it.

Introducing Heidegger's formulation of time into this context allows us to talk about *The Limey*'s temporal structure as a kind of holistic design in which the modalities of past, present and future are closely imbricated. But more provocatively, the correspondence may move in the other direction, as well, to signal a further valence of Soderbergh's film: the thought occurs that *The Limey* may also be concerned with time in a *deep sense*, appealing to the continuous contact of memory and daydream, regret and aspiration, within a tangled net of lived experience. In this sense, too, *The Limey*'s time can be called reflective and historical, because the film's telling of the present is not sufficient unto itself, but must always answer to the past and the future.

### Borrowed Time: Appropriating Loach's *Poor Cow*

This raises the issue of *The Limey*'s own devising of film history, as evidenced by its use of footage from Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* (1967). From the outset, Soderbergh and screenwriter Lem Dobbs had hoped, in casting Terence Stamp, to include



• Fig. 4: Doing time

material from one of the actor's prior films. Conceived as a narrative experiment, the inclusion of Loach's material was designed to exploit film-specific potentialities: by bringing together two discrete moments in Stamp's career within a single, motivated narrative context, *The Limey* would animate both past and present, allowing the viewer to obtain, via editing, a sense of the character's life experience as something accumulated, over time.<sup>18</sup> Obtaining legal permission for such an experiment was a lengthy process, involving not only Loach's film but also its source material – Nell Dunn's novel of the same title. Further, the scenes that Soderbergh most wished to use from *Poor Cow* featured the actress Carol White, who had died eight years earlier. Negotiations ensued for months and were not fully resolved until *The Limey* was in the editing stage. A final issue was the matter of obtaining Loach's permission, personally; though the inquiry had been settled legally, Soderbergh wished to have the director's creative consent. Fortunately, Loach approved the use of the material in its newly conceived context.<sup>19</sup>

Loach's first theatrical feature was an ideal choice for use within *The Limey*, with several clear affinities in cast and characterisation: *Poor Cow* presents a young Terence Stamp as a thief who becomes romantically involved with a working class woman in London while her husband is in prison (Figure 5). Soderbergh lifts material from the earlier production and weaves it into his own, so that the extracts serve as a rich background that illustrates certain of Wilson's memories. Contextualised in *The Limey*, the grainy footage presents Wilson in happier times, among old friends, or with Jenny's mother before her death. Soderbergh has made certain adjustments to Loach's material, sometimes re-ordering or cropping the images to accommodate their new context. Otherwise, *The Limey* emphasises the discrepancy between old and new, insofar as the borrowed footage is presented as nearly monochromatic and often silent, effacing the more varied hues and sounds of Loach's original.

While this appropriation can be understood as a self-reflexive move, in keeping with *The Limey*'s



• Fig. 5: A young Terence Stamp, from Ken Loach's *Poor Cow*

reconfiguration of 1960s style and iconography, this explanation does not adequately address the resonance of the images themselves; not only is Wilson's character given range and depth through these details, but they contribute a powerful *affective* dimension, as well. In this respect, Soderbergh's indebtedness to Alain Resnais is relevant, when we consider that director's complex use of film-historical materials. For example, the invocation of French film history in *Mon Oncle D'Amerique* (France, 1980) presents a series of black and white images – of Jean Gabin, Danielle Darrieux and Jean Marais, respectively – breaking in upon an otherwise colour film, punctuating moments of acute emotional crisis. Thus, the images of the past are set in stark contrast to the activity of the present; at the same time, they are linked to this activity by a common movement or gesture, and correspond to each of Resnais' three protagonists. Most fundamentally, the images support and partially constitute the film's larger argument for the force of past as an indelible and formative influence.

Returning to *The Limey*, the silence and deliberately faded appearance of the older images in Soderbergh's film asserts such a 'difference' – of time, location, and tone – as to seem almost of a different medium; their relative stillness and otherness evokes, in Roland Barthes' terms, the pastness of the photograph. As Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*:

The name of photography's noeme will therefore be: "That-has-been", or again: the Intractable. In Latin. . . this would doubtless be said: *interfuit*:

what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator* or *spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred.<sup>20</sup>

It may seem odd to call these borrowed images 'photographic', when they are neither a succession of stills, as in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) nor actual photographs produced as such within the diegesis, as in Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966). But this sense of their difference and *distance* as images is nonetheless palpable to us, as viewers. Rather than rendering this distinction as a hard contrast from black and white to color, Soderbergh's film presents the past as more contiguous with the present, but not identical with it. In other words, the past persists for us now, but registers as something wordless and somewhat harder to see.

Therefore, just as *The Limey* describes an experience of temporality that is of time 'all at once', it also points to the discreteness of temporal spheres: while we swallow up the past, bring it into our daily concerns and project it onto future possibility, the past also remains at one remove, in certain ways inaccessible and alien. Though we may wish to, we cannot own the past, as Valentine discovers, or stand over it objectively; in the last instance, it owns us, as Wilson's quest demonstrates. So, if Soderbergh's film is preoccupied with what has gone before, as its referentiality attests, it does not borrow images because they are familiar to us, or perfectly congruent with our present situation. By inserting pieces of the already complete, already contained narrative of *Poor Cow* within *The Limey*'s workings, Soderbergh creates a dialogue between old and new that brings the past into focus without fully overcoming its estrangement from the present. Notably, *The Limey* also extends this concern outward, configuring original footage as though it belonged to a nebulous 'elsewhere': Soderbergh's image of Jenny as a young girl emulates the colour and grain of Loach's material, and yet as a 'new' image, remains distinct.<sup>21</sup>

### Time and Time Again: Reframing Richard Lester's *Petulia*

Another key point of reference for *The Limey* concerns the work of filmmaker Richard Lester. Beginning in British television in the 1950s, Lester is best known for the Beatles films *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965). Also remarkable is the extent to which Lester's work tends, in the context of mainstream filmmaking, toward striking formal experimentation, as in his quintessential 'swinging' comedy, *The Knack. . . and How to Get It* (1965).<sup>22</sup> An evident admirer of Lester's work, Soderbergh co-wrote a book with the filmmaker in 1995. A hybrid and personal text, it transcribes a series of interviews with Lester, interspersed with Soderbergh's own journal entries over a year-long period.<sup>23</sup>

Of special interest here is Lester's 1968 film, a relentlessly bleak reading of the late-60s San Francisco scene, called *Petulia* (1968). The film depicts a recently divorced doctor who becomes involved with a young woman trapped in a desperately unhappy marriage. Though altogether different in its narrative premises, *Petulia* is an important background text for *The Limey* for its innovative construction of multiple and conflicting temporalities.<sup>24</sup> From the outset, the film features dramatic leaps in space and time, resulting in a narrative framework that is loosely articulated and elliptical. Strong contrasts in image and sound impart an array of disorienting effects: the opening images, for example, present a wide view of a colourless, industrial kitchen space, through which hotel staff push three older, formally dressed figures in successive wheelchairs. The compositions are cold, clinical and nearly silent: the only audible sound is the clacking of wheels as the chairs pass. Though scarcely established narratively, the scene suddenly cuts away to a more intimate framing, in an entirely different location: here, brightly clad musicians (indeed, Janis Joplin herself) offer a raucous performance at a charity benefit. After several such juxtapositions, the two worlds are brought together: the procession of wheelchairs eventually arrives at the performance space and is awkwardly conducted through it.

Crucially, this completes the scene's wry, unfolding 'joke': the benefit, and live music for dancing – themed on a prominent sign as, 'Shake for Road Safety!' – is actually for these accident victims, yet cruelly excludes them, as well. Class distinctions and an irreconcilable rift between youth and establishment culture are sharply delineated here; elsewhere, the film keenly observes divisions of gender, and the more diffuse oppositions of surface/depth, nature /technology and feeling/indifference.

Like *The Limey*, *Petulia* proceeds via flashbacks and occasional flashforwards in time. Most often, the past arises out of visual associations, motivated by elements briefly glimpsed in the diegesis: reflected light on a car recalls an earlier car accident; a lover's tender gesture evokes the prior movement of a surgeon's hand, tending to a wound. These are subjective linkages, forged within a single character's consciousness, although often the precise source of these recollections registers ambiguously.

Despite these stylistic affinities with *The Limey*, Lester's film finally proposes an essential difference from it: for *Petulia*, the formal fragmentation and scattered subjectivities endeavor to describe an experience of interiority, a deep-seated, psychic disturbance that responds to a situation that is broken and unlivable. In a world scarred by war and cruelly divided by class, where power is unevenly distributed along gender lines and its abuse is institutionalised, and where, in the name of 'progress', the conditions of modernity have served only to evacuate human affect, the film's stylistic play inscribes and reiterates permanent effects of dispersal and disconnection. This is both a formal method and a worldview, and one that speaks strongly to the exigencies of the Vietnam era.

Conversely, *The Limey* deploys something of these strategies, but seeks a revised application: by its formal rigour, Soderbergh's film sustains the possibility of a profound *connectedness* among its fragments – uncovering, in its circling movements, a continual mediation of past, present and future not usually available to our perception. It is not so much that *The Limey's*

world is perfectly coherent, but that it understands its situation differently; rather than mourning some prior time that is lost to us now – a history blown to pieces, or otherwise over and done with – Soderbergh's film outlines a need in the present for renewed ways of seeing that history in terms of our place within it.

### **Toward a Conclusion, or What *The Limey* Really Teaches Us**

These considerations return us to our original query about defamiliarisation and familiarity. *The Limey's* concluding movements once again evince a blurring of categories: although Wilson's quest has been to pierce the unknown (the circumstances of Jenny's death), he receives an explanation that is known to him, after all (Jenny's argument with Valentine restates her relationship with Wilson). By this, the film forwards two related propositions: that the past is inseparable from our present concerns, and more complexly, that the wisdom of hindsight is perhaps just the cold recognition that, despite our investment in the 'here' and 'now', we are also fundamentally engaged in a dialogue with 'what has been'. In this light, the film's play of defamiliarisation / familiarisation is not only an aesthetic end, but constitutes a wider, thematic project: the film suggests that we may not recognise what is most familiar to us, and by consequence, that what is most familiar may also be the most troubling.

This is an insight that *The Limey* possesses, and an important part of its persuasiveness lies in the film's decision to make our perceptual experience count toward this understanding. In our efforts to cope with *The Limey's* refractory narrative system, we are able to glimpse the past as it informs an unfolding present, opening up to the future, but also as something that is never quite transparent to us, or fully exhaustible. By this, the film asks us to receive the idea that we may be indebted to the past in ways we do not realise; or, expressed another way, that our relation to the past is not one of mastery, where it is easily laid bare for present use. Rather, the

film casts what has gone before as something that occurs *through* us, and perhaps without our consent; for *The Limey*, the past is that aspect of the present we so often fail to see.

If the significance of the past for the present is what Soderbergh's film aims to make explicit – and there are reasons to think this is the case – then we should note that its tasks of retrieval and re-assessment are also basic ones for film history, though we may not at first perceive this resemblance. Contending with the various parts of *The Limey*, in acknowledgement of its inheritance of the old and its production of the new, its ambiguities and its commanding forms, and its primary insistence that the usual way of seeing things may not be enough to disclose what we are seeking, puts us in an excellent position to contemplate our own activity, as viewers and critics. Because at a tangible level, *The Limey* reaches *back* into the past so as to give us certain pieces of it *now*, where such pieces – the fragments of *Poor Cow*, or the iconic presence of actors Stamp and Fonda – already bear significance and entail their own histories. In exchange, the film asks us to recognise the rapport of old and new, and to actively mediate the distance between them.

Soderbergh's playful, postmodern pastiche seems a surprising setting for these reflections, yet they provide a credible background for both the film's formal arrangements and its own acts of appropriation. My initial assessment of *The Limey* was as a film of only apparent difficulty, which should, upon closer investigation, open up as self-explicating text. But although the film does, in large part, explain its own functioning, it also presents details that are more recalcitrant in nature; indeed, these stray elements problematise any narrow view of the film's machinations.

In this respect, *The Limey* might serve as a useful exemplar for film studies, as it resists the certainties of method in crucial ways. By continually unsettling our sense of what is 'familiar' and what is 'unfamiliar', Soderbergh's text underscores the terms of a shared film history, where appropriation is not merely repetition, but renewal, and the familiar is made

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strange once more by the force it gains from a new context.

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### Notes

- 1 *Full Frontal's* concern with the past of cinema is part of its parodic observation of Hollywood filmmaking: the film's thoroughgoing reflexivity extends to numerous citations of other films and of the European art cinema, in particular. Conversely, *Eros* comprises three short films about erotic love: Soderbergh wrote, directed, photographed and edited his contribution, called 'Equilibrium'. Though not a 'remake' of the past in the way certain of Soderbergh's other films are, 'Equilibrium' features black and white cinematography and an anxious 1950s setting. In resuscitating the form of the omnibus film – one associated with 1960s art cinema – it is clear that one of *Eros'* ambitions is to merge the legendary figure of Antonioni with more contemporary film practice.
- 2 As will become clear, I take Soderbergh's concern with the past to be *forward-looking*, as well. In this regard, his most recent film, *Bubble* (2006), is part of a six-film project to be shot on high-definition video and released simultaneously in theatres, on DVD and cable television.
- 3 On the comparison to Boorman's film, Janet Maslin's review in *The New York Times*: (October 8, 1999, E15) is representative, as is J. Hoberman's in *The Village Voice* (October 12, 1999, Volume 44, Issue 40, page 139). In interviews, Soderbergh foregrounds this link to cinema history, but locates *The Limey's* influences elsewhere; most provocatively, he suggests that his film was conceived as a hybrid text, merging elements of the stylised British thriller with the diffuse narration of European art cinema – or, in his words, as 'Get Carter as made by Alain Resnais'. See *Steven Soderbergh Interviews*, edited by Anthony Kaufman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), p. 115.
- 4 Stamp's career spans British, Italian, French and American cinemas from the 1960s to the present. His role as the eponymous hero in Peter Ustinov's

adaptation of Melville's *Billy Budd* (1962) earned him immediate critical acclaim; soon after, he was named Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival for his part in William Wyler's *The Collector* (1965). Throughout the decade, Stamp worked with a range of international directors, from Joseph Losey (*Modesty Blaise*, 1966), John Schlesinger (*Far From the Madding Crowd*, 1967) and Ken Loach (*Poor Cow*, 1968) to Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Teorema*, 1968) and Federico Fellini (*Tre Passi nel Delirio or, Spirits of the Dead*, 1968). Subsequently, Stamp withdrew from the public eye for a time to live in India, resurfacing eventually in British films in the 1970s and Hollywood films in the 1980s.

- 5 Like Fonda, Barry Newman appeared in another countercultural text of the period, Richard C. Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* (1971); Joe Dallesandro, star of numerous Andy Warhol films, such as *Trash* (1970) and *Heat* (1972) plays a bodyguard in *The Limey*. A piece of iconic casting intended for the film merits attention, as well: a scene with Ann Margaret, in which she delivers an eight-minute monologue written for her exclusively, was ultimately dropped from the final cut, but would have contributed yet another citation of 1960s cinema. See Elif Cercel's interview, "Soderbergh Brings Past, Present Together in *The Limey*", in *Directors World*, November 15, 1999, <http://www.stevensoderbergh.net/articles/1999/directorsworld.htm>.
- 6 Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (eds) *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 11.
- 7 These relations are lucidly developed by Kristin Thompson in *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neo-formalist Film Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). While Thompson's account offers a clear application to cinema, I have elected here to engage directly with Shklovsky's writings.
- 8 Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 13. Most clearly, *The Limey* increases the length of perception by the occasional use of stylized, slow-motion effects.
- 9 Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 13.
- 10 On this question of the formal self-consciousness of opening sequences, see David Bordwell's essay, 'Authorship and Narration in Art Cinema', collected in Virginia Wright Wexman (ed.) *Film and Authorship* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers U.P., 2003), pp. 42–9.
- 11 Wilson's recitation is rendered through a range of medium-to-close framings of him as he speaks. These images are splintered by jump-cuts in a manner that recalls the French New Wave, and Godard, in particular.
- 12 Though originating earlier, Cockney rhyming slang is most often associated with the criminal gangs active in London's East End during the 1950s and '60s. In his research on language games, David

Crystal characterizes rhyming slang as 'a form of "speech disguise" – a way of systematically hiding what the real meaning of a message is. The expressions make sense to the insider, but are nonsense to the outsider'. Significantly, the author also notes that while Cockney rhyming slang likely originated as a thieves' jargon, 'it soon came to be supplemented by a great deal of invention whose motivation was no more than innocent fun'. Evidently, this latter emphasis on inventiveness brings things rather closer to the terms of Shklovsky's riddle. See *Language Play* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 50.

Additionally, there are two further instances of rhyming slang in *The Limey* that deserve mention here: Wilson says 'tea leaves', meaning 'thieves', and 'butcher's', short for 'butcher's hook', meaning 'look'. Finally, rhyming slang resurfaces briefly in *Ocean's Eleven* ('Barney', for 'Barney Rubble', meaning 'trouble') to comic effect.

- 13 Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 20. The author here refers more specifically to the case of the erotic riddle; within this discussion, I deploy his formulation in general terms.
- 14 Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', p. 17.
- 15 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Bloomsbury Street, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962), pp. 24–28.
- 16 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 264.
- 17 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 401.
- 18 This experiment is not entirely without precedent: John Wayne's last film, *The Shootist* (Don Siegal, 1976) begins with a brief montage from *Red River*, *Hondo*, *Rio Bravo* and *El Dorado*. This material serves as a background for Wayne's character before the narrative opens.
- 19 For a more detailed account of this process, see Kaufman, *Steven Soderbergh Interviews*, p. 117.
- 20 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 77. Barthes' text sets out an essential difference

between photography and cinema that differs somewhat from my use of his thinking here; my point is simply that Loach's footage seems qualitatively different than the material that surrounds it, and is in this way set apart slightly from the ongoing movement of *The Limey*'s narrative. This tension between fragment and flow might remind us, in a certain sense, of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*: though touched off by direct questions rather than by sensations, as in Proust's novel, the borrowed images are also memory fragments – brief enough to seem *outside* of time, yet finally meaningful within it.

- 21 *The Limey* even concludes 'outside of itself', with an image and song lifted from Loach's film. Thus, the notions of 'separation' and 'deferral' that Barthes identifies are doubly figured: not only does Soderbergh's film end 'elsewhere', but with a reference that gestures even further. In *The Limey*'s final moments, Wilson sings: "Freedom is a word I rarely use / without thinking / of the time / when I was loved".
- 22 We should note the extent to which the French New Wave was an influence upon Lester's methods. In interviews, Lester specifically cites Truffaut in this capacity, but also suggests that Jacques Tati shaped his sense of *mise-en-scène* and comic staging. See 'Richard Lester interviewed by Steven Soderbergh', *Guardian Unlimited*, digital edition, November 8, 1999, [http://film.guardian.co.uk/Guardian\\_NFT/interview/0,,110592,00.html](http://film.guardian.co.uk/Guardian_NFT/interview/0,,110592,00.html).
- 23 See Steven Soderbergh and Richard Lester, *Getting Away With It, Or: The Further Adventures of the Luckiest Bastard You Ever Saw* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999).
- 24 That Nicolas Roeg served as Lester's cinematographer on the film is not insignificant: in key respects, *Petulia*'s disorienting formal structures anticipate Roeg's directorial début, *Performance* (1970).

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