

Deconstructing Positivist Humanist Paradigms of Time and Consciousness in *Pandaemonium*

By
Jill Clark

Julien Temple's film *Pandaemonium* (2000) is a postmodern pastiche, where Samuel Taylor Coleridge's opium addiction allows him to "cut loose from time." Temple anachronistically portrays images that don't belong in Coleridge's era, such as a jet vapor trail in one frame, a nuclear plant during Coleridge's visions for *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and Coleridge's extreme slow motion walk through twenty-first century London. Temple seamlessly frames Coleridge moving uncut between adjoining sets for his cottage and London, physically stepping directly into his past and future. Temple demonstrates a postmodern aesthetic of decomposition whereby positivistic structures of consciousness and their metaphysical and aesthetic paradigms of traditional syntax can be dislodged and transcended, a synchrony of subject with object consistent with Coleridge's aesthetic, enabled partly through Coleridge's interest in combining scientific theory with literary philosophy.

The title of this film is fitting, for it refers to John Milton's coinage from *Paradise Lost*, Book 1 in regard to Pandaemonium as the capital of Hell, defining the nature of chaos and its origins:

Hail Horrors, hail Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell
Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings
A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself,
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n. (*Paradise Lost* 1: 249-55)

To attempt to display the mind of chaos, of Coleridge, certainly would pose a problem for any film director: how could Temple effectively show Coleridge's torment, while maintaining a sense of artistic integrity faithful to the fluidity of hallucinogenic experience? According to Sandi Chaitram, Temple "dispenses with the gracious chocolate box representation that is typical of this period on film;" instead, he wanted to show the "tremendous political and technological upheaval which mirrors the volatile nature of Coleridge and Wordsworth's relationship" by using "stunning visual effects to express the creative forces and drug-addiction that drove Coleridge," contrasting slow and fast movement in his framing (Chaitram). Temple's interpretation of events is somewhat mixed up in its chronology of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's lives, but what is important about the film is Temple's portrayal of time elements, how the overall montage of the film is put together in its postmodern pastiche, ironically posing Coleridge as a visionary who saw into the future—he understood how science and technology could be used to change the future. Temple deconstructs Humanist paradigms by deconstructing the time of Coleridge's life within terms of Coleridge's perspective and memory. He demonstrates that life and art are messy affairs that only tangentially gain order through discursive composition, whether applied to the perception of the author as original composer, the director as composer, or the audience as observers of both processes.

This technique is apt because Coleridge took interest in many of the sciences, including chemistry, electricity/magnetic waves, biology and physics, and he particularly enjoyed a close friendship with renowned chemist Humphrey Davy. However, he was extremely wary of Materialist physics, because in his view, such science excluded the role of the soul and consciousness in perception. In *The Friend* (1801), Coleridge states that "this mighty chain of science is nothing but a linking of truths of the same kind, as the whole is greater than its parts," (I:v) and ultimately his epistemology is influenced by a Cartesian theory of reason and perception, concluding that the world of sense is misleading because it supplies only "surfaces, undulations, phantoms" which "furnish only the chaos" of sensations," that it is "wiser to seek substance in shadow, than absolute fullness in mere negation" (III:xi). Coleridge concludes that answers of truth lie within each individual's alienated Self. In his *Notebooks*, Coleridge touches on the subject of stream of consciousness as individuation of knowledge. Coleridge was a progressive

idealist, as revealed by his support of the French Revolution—this was a fact that made many bourgeois English very nervous for fear of another overthrow of the British monarchy, too close to the chaos of the Restoration, and Coleridge's Romantic idealism was most radically shown in his new Republicanism. Coleridge viewed science and technology as means of apprehending objective truths in a confusing universe, ultimately and hopefully, for the betterment of society: "we consider only a state of human progression arising out of its present condition" (Coleridge, qtd in Kipperman).

Coleridge was much more interested at arriving at truths through experimentation with the mind than with matter, which is why he became hooked on opium: while he treated himself for tooth pain and facial neuralgia, he was also interested in the effects of drugs on perception, as well as how they supplied him with artistic inspiration, to Wordsworth's chagrin. In my opinion, that is the irony that Wordsworth was trying to show Coleridge, as shown by Temple's film: Coleridge's experiments with drugs may have supplied him with wild inspiration for composition, nevertheless these experimentations were, according to the film's Wordsworth, a Pleasure-Dome leading to Coleridge's own self-alienation and negation from literary and polite British society in general, as the audience witnesses Coleridge's rapid decline in health and his inability to finish works like "Kubla Khan."

In the film, Temple portrays Coleridge within a Modernist frame of being that defies the conventions of chronological portrayal:

It is 1816 [and] Coleridge sits desolate in his garret in Highgate,..[as] he struggles with a long held opium addiction, and he tries desperately to prepare himself to leave his home for the first time in eight years. He hopes to make a speech for his friend William Wordworth [...] at London's Guildhall, when. [...] Wordsworth is expected to be announced Poet Laureate. [...] Coleridge's arrival is a noisy one, aught in a parallel world of addiction and delusion, he feels 'cut loose from time,' the crowded room feels to him to be wracked by a terrible storm. [...] But on seeing Wordsworth again, Coleridge's perspective is skewed once more, he tries to explain to William the effect the opium has had on him.

(Temple)

Coleridge's interest with the effects of drugs oddly was assisted by his friend, scientist Humphrey Davys, and Davy's experimentations in science, which Temple uses to effect to demonstrate how time and space can be conflated within the space of this film.

As Eric Wilson notes, Coleridge's attraction to Davy's science was in using scientific metaphor "to talk about theological [and other] concepts—spirit could become electricity" (Wilson). Mark Kipperman also identifies Coleridge specifically as a vitalist. In Temple's film, many scenes link vital life spirit to energy, including the scene that reveals how Coleridge was inspired to write "Frost at Midnight" in March 1798, the barren wasteland of ice crystals is juxtaposed to his sleeping infant son," a notion that Wilson identifies as "a holistic principle of being" (Wilson), which Temple portrays through the use of extreme slow-motion and normal 24 frame per second images within the same frame. Temple's portrayal of full wine glasses spilling, slowed down in Coleridge's perception, is juxtaposed with Coleridge's panic-filled explanation of the "storm" he is feeling as he attempts to describe his altered perception to Wordsworth.

Wordsworth calms him and leads him to an adjoining room to help him settle. But as he goes through the door, Coleridge is transported; the opium has turned him into a time traveler. It is 1795 and he is standing in front of a bustling expectant crowd at the Bristol Docks" (Temple)

Temple shot the scene from the perspective of Coleridge's memory as he jumps from that scene, to the printing and distribution of "The Watchman" revolutionary pamphlets via Humphrey Davys' hot air balloon. Anachronistically, a jet is shown streaking through the sky behind the balloon. Temple theorizes that "Coleridge saw his poetry as sending echoes back from the future," and by juxtaposing time elements through framing, he indicates that the film "explores the fluidity of time, in both a personal and historical context" where Coleridge's "sense of being [is] cut loose from time, by his deepening opium addiction," as "realized...by the use of extreme slow motion and normal 24 frames per second images within the same frame" (Temple). Temple achieved this effect by joining sets in these frames. Many audience members have misunderstood the purpose of

these shots as a terrible editing mistake, when in fact, Temple fully intended it as an anachronism. Temple's technique matches Coleridge's own interest in using technology to make his points. In their studies of prominent cognitive psychologists, Peter Baumgartner and Sabine Payr show that problem-solving is "no longer held to be the prototypical achievements of the mind, but rather perception, language understanding or motor control are now considered domains of growing importance in cognitive science," although they also admit that perception does not necessarily depend only on language skills, but also apply to kinetic activities (qtd. in Solano). Temple's "play" with time elementation in framing in the media of film demonstrates that communication is "a dynamic multidirectional process of a flow of information that interpenetrates bodies, tools and across many meta-cognitive levels" where abstractions are paradoxical necessities of complexity (qtd. in Solano). The text of Coleridge's own compositions and Temple's media exhibit characteristics of a dialectic in play where Temple changes the rules of linear biographical portrayal.

Temple reveals that that artistic composition is not an orderly process, especially in the case of when Coleridge composed "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in May of 1798, which Temple portrays as one of the main reasons for Wordsworth's jealousy and criticism of Coleridge's poetic abilities, and the reason for much of their subsequent estrangement. Temple portrays the composition of "Rime" as revealing how Coleridge warps between his perception of times in his past and his present, as well as his views of the future. Temple's technique is specifically postmodernist, however, because he creates a pastiche that ironically deconstructs the relationship of Coleridge and Wordsworth, exploding the myth of positivist literary origins by portraying Coleridge's sense of fragmentation and eccentricity as compared to Wordsworth's more politically and aesthetically centrist humanism. Temple portrays Coleridge's poetic sensibilities as hyperreal, modernistically purposely superimposing anachronistic images of the future with the historical portrayal of Coleridge's life story. Clare O'Farrell humorously describes Postmodernism in the terms of a joke: "what do you get when you cross a mafiosi with a postmodernist? The answer of course is 'someone who will make you an offer you can't understand'." In my view, that is precisely what Temple did in this film, unfortunately enough for his own reputation, for many viewers simply can't figure out

such scenes. What makes this film postmodern is how this pastiche plays into a final sense of the kitchiness of Coleridge's extravagant Romantic idealism.

Temple reveals that Coleridge's composition of "The Rime of The Ancient Mariner" is indicative of Coleridge's own warped perception of reality. Temple chose to portray Coleridge anachronistically by juxtaposing images of Coleridge's past with things he couldn't have seen, heard, or sensed in his own time. Temple juxtaposes the old with the new, displacing the sense of time, from seconds and minutes as we view scenes in which candles burn down furiously to burnt-out wicks during the Rime's composition, to Coleridge's warping between his own era and twentieth-century locales. Temple accomplishes this anachronistic portrayal by defying the logic of normal time through framing, superimposing images that are contradictory. Many critics and viewers have remarked on these anachronisms and why Temple "failed" to edit certain scenes, like Coleridge distributing political pamphlets via Davies' hot-air balloon, posed against a sky where a jet is flying—to which I would reply that these viewers must not have watched the film in its entirety, which means watching the film all the way through and past the credits. Other key scenes reveal that Coleridge appears to time-warp—"from present to past via directly staging from one set to another," via "the objective use of long-held takes, allowing the interaction between the four central characters to unfold within single developing shots," to be "contrasted with a more personalized use of Coleridge's POV, anchoring the film in his experience" (Temple). Temple emphasizes that "the fluid, cutty rhythm of the film" [is] "increasingly punctuated by dynamic subjective angles, jump cuts and startling time ellipses, as Coleridge's world begins to fragment around him" (Temple). The perspective of the camera allows the audience to see what Temple believes that Coleridge may have seen from drug-inducement. Temple shows that the perspective is first-person rather than the traditional omniscient third-person/bird's eye point-of-view often taken in biographical films. The form of the film is a metanarrative technique to try to get the audience to see the process of filmmaking as an extension of Coleridge's own theories, taken into a contemporary context that contains a subtextual message concerning the ironic deconstruction and decomposition of humanism occurring through the very media shown. Natural perspective is chaotic, and thus, Postmodern, while the traditional method of Aristotelian plot is heuristically pre-Modern.

Temple also identified the scene in which Coleridge composed the Rime as central to the core of his message as warning that "the consequences of mankind breaking its contract with nature" could be dire (Temple). Certainly, the unnatural artistry of Temple's own film heuristic seems to confirm that idea. The image where the nuclear plant is revealed in Coleridge's vision is significant, because the "pleasure dome" of his Xanadu of "Kubla Khan" is partly foreshadowed in it, a vision that seems beautiful and terrible to Coleridge, but which Wordsworth points out to him later as monstrous. The central scene that reveals Coleridge's central Cartesian philosophy is when he composes "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Temple almost subliminally imposes a vision of the Hinckley nuclear power plant on the scenes of fire on water, where "live action time lapse [enables] Coleridge to move as a time traveler from another dimension, through the blurred, speeding Pandaemonium of our late twentieth century" (Temple). In that scene, Temple also cuts to an image of oil-slicked water and the sound of jet. The image is purposely discordant and odd: the two images do not go together, yet they are violently yoked together to achieve Temple's thesis. The warning is ironic, because the memory itself is therefore unnatural. Temple takes the historical out of its proper time slot, but he appropriately demonstrates the irony of Coleridge's own message: that through culture and cultivation, exploration and the pursuit of experience, mankind has broken its contract with nature; but ironically, that is also true of Coleridge's own vision, which isn't a natural phenomenon, but artificially induced. In this way, Temple echoes Coleridge's own theory of conflation of subject with object in experience, but he achieves the postmodern satire in which this conflation is shown to be unnatural, signifier and signified joined through a medium. This disjunction continually re-emphasizes not only Coleridge's decomposing mind and unraveling technique, but also how the cultures of writing and film are themselves unnatural processes, an alienation and negation of positivist experience, that something is real if it can be perceived. The film shows that culture is, in itself, often an illusion.

In *The Friend*, Coleridge outlined his ideal of Sense as "whatever is passive in our being, [. . .] is sensations, and impression, whether of his outward sense, or in the inner sense of imagination...by his Understanding, I mean the faculty of thinking and forming *judgments* on the notions furnished by the sense" and "by pure REASON, I mean the

power by which we become possessed of principle...and ideas..." (I:1.iii). Without the reason of the mind, in Coleridge's opinion, the objective phenomena of reality have no meaning for mankind, but rather tend to negate Soul. Coleridge's theory was solipsistic in his insistence that the ideal was to seize Absolute Truth through Self, the conflation of subject and object through the subject's experience of objects. According to Jan Golinski, "Coleridge's dream description poses notorious problems of interpretations" when "both psychological and literary skills seem to be called for to plumb their meanings" (Golinski). According to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge viewed time and timeliness of the essence of being and becoming, because "the principle of *contemporaneity*, which Aristotle had made the common *condition* of all laws of association," was enforced by the law of atomic approximation of place in time—in other words, all things are subject to the mechanics of time and place. As his example, he theorized to "conceive...a broad stream, winding through a mountainous country with an indefinite number of currents, varying and running into each other according to the gusts chance to blow from the grip of the mountains. The *temporary union* of several currents in one, so as to form the main current of the moment, would present an accurate image of Hartley's theory of the will," however, he notes that "had this really been the case, the consequences would have been that our whole life would be divided between the despotism of outward impressions, and that of senseless and passive memory" (215). Coleridge's sense of time at this point was against ideal impressionism, since he states "the ideas (or the relicts of such impression) will exactly imitate the order of the impression itself, which would be absolute delirium; or any one part of that impression might recall any other part"... and these are "components of some other following total impression and so on, ad finitum" (215). According to Katherine Hayles, such humanist constructions are embodiments that are "merged with the particulars of place, time, physiology and culture," but where a "differential tension between the two that enactment take place and experiences of embodiment are generated in continual interaction with the constructions of the body" (qtd. in Solano). That means that film as a media can be manipulated to deconstruct the rift between body and soul, perception/cognition and interaction of the objective bodies of author, director, and audience.

Temple's presentation does what Coleridge ideally wanted to do with his art, show past and present and future as conflated, how great literature is always lived in the perpetual present, as well as how individual perception always sees memory, "that reliques of sensation may exist for an indefinite time in a latent state in the very same order in which they originally impressed" (217). Coleridge did warn his readers that they shouldn't mistake "the conditions of a thing for its causes and essence" (221), since "contemporaneity [is]...the common condition of all the laws of association" (222). He also notes that "we shall find that even time itself, as the cause of a particular act of association, is distinct from contemporaneity as the condition of all association" (222). He cites the metaphysical violent yoking together of disparate images in association as his chief example of what he meant—we associate things because of the context of meaning of coexistence in time in recollection. His Cartesian dualism further enhances this idea, in "how *being* can transform itself into a *knowing*," which "becomes conceivable on only condition; namely, of it can be shown that the vis representative [representative power], or the sentient, is itself a species of being" (225). The Matter of literary and cinematic art is artifact of being that continues becoming long after the death of the author, continuing to move and grow as other beings possess its knowledge. This is why Temple ends his film with Coleridge reading his poems to children of the future, and then portrays Coleridge lurching about in time lapsed photography in London of the year 2000, ironically to the tune of Olivia Newton John's kitschy "Xanadu" (in reference to Coleridge's own "Kubla Khan" as a visionary poem predicting the catastrophic degradation of modern times, including this very idea of the postmodern "misuse" of Xanadu within such degraded terms). Anybody who has seen the Olivia Newton-John film knows what a terrible film it is, because it portrays a Muse as inspiring an artist to open, of all things, a roller disco rink! How degrading to juxtapose that with Coleridge's sublime vision! However, essentially, that is what postmodernism does—it has definite resemblances to the *discordia concors* of metaphysical poetic composition, but imposes a Menippean satirical wit that sharply outlines its absurdity.

Coleridge notes that appearance and perception of artifacts can be deceptive, since they would be nothing without their metaphysical values. Coleridge believed that "truth is correlative to being," while knowledge without a correspondent reality no knowledge"

(295), something that is only possible by knowing one's Self first, then surpassing one's own individual limitations through consuming knowledge. He acknowledged the difference between subjective experience and objective reality, stating that "the object is taken as first, and then we have to account for the supervention of the subjective, which coalesces with it (291), meaning that if the subject and object mutually exclude each other, then the subjective intelligence can only make sense of the objective, which has no meaning beyond its mere existence. If, as Coleridge reasoned, the optical phenomena [of cause and effect] is in doubt then it stands to reason the trace of matter might be lost in itself, with only the spiritual/intellectual memory of the artifact's being, which transforms the subject into becoming due to that experience of the thing, which is the *Cogito, ergo sum*. Temple's images attempt to reflect the pastiche of disparate images, thereby metaphysically yoking images like the vision of Kubla Khan as ancient paradise with the dystopia of late twentieth-century earth.

Temple's film is a postmodern pastiche where "the sum of the whole is greater than its parts, a bricolage of knowledge where Coleridge's being exacts his artifacts by trace of textuality. Temple brilliantly portrays the fragmentation of Coleridge's being, a postmodern portrayal which corresponds to what Frederic Jameson would call a "transformation of reality into a series of perpetual presents" (Jameson 1974), the critical value of which derives its power in conjunction with the irony of the filmmaker's vision of Coleridge's history as a "disappearance of history" and contemporaneity as living "in a perpetual present" (Jameson 1974). According to O'Farrell, postmodernism is located as a reaction to modernism, precisely with Rene Descartes' *Cogito, Ergo Sum*, thereby summing up "the whole 'Enlightenment project'." Postmodernism seems to reaffirm the traditional literary forms in non-traditional means, through different media, through bricolage, and yes, through chaos itself: for what is a postmodernist work if it does not re-organize the chaotic into its own order and reason? As O'Farrell notes herself, even Newton, who Coleridge despised, "would have it [that] knowledge proceeds by stepping on the shoulders of giants who went before us;" that "'the dwarf sees farther than the giant, when he has the giant's shoulder to mount on," and that "this is progress." She also notes that modernism had tried a "brick by brick" approach to progress, and if that is so, then postmodernism merely re-arranges these bricks into new works, following the

prescriptions of high Modernists like Pound and Eliot to "make it new"—however, it is always in the guise of transcendence of the old, the traditional, the ordered and static, synchronic space. If it is the job of postmodernists to continue beyond this movement, however, while at the same time continuing its ultimate motives, then we need to consider Temple's film as a true postmodern work of art.

Finally, Temple's film enables his audience to see an alternative model of subjectivity that defies traditional syntaxes of method and montage in film and literature. If as postmodernism is a kind of schizophrenia seeded in nostalgia that seeks to "fracture and dissolve old and supposedly exhausted unities," as Patricia Waugh defines along Jameson's arguments, then Temple does just that by making literature and history into a living, perpetual present in this film (Waugh 192). This is the ultimate irony, for as Waugh points out, this impulse of the postmodernist to atavistically smash the ideal object is ultimately nihilistic, a desire to deconstruct the human subject utterly, so that Temple's exposition shows us the emptiness of the Ideal promise of subjectivity, as well "an extension of a fragmented and dehumanized world" (Waugh 192). According to Mark Edmundson, Coleridge himself had this tendency in his form of Romanticism: a pious "secondary" imagination which "possesses a rather violent will to disruption" that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates," where "the poetic imagination is prone to turn against what is given to it by the 'infinite I AM'." Therefore, Coleridge found "created nature inadequate to its desires for fresh and vitalizing experience, " which is why the Mariner emblemizes a condition of visionary restlessness" who is "chastened and becomes an apostle of the primary imagination" (Edmundson):

He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things both great and small,

For the dear God who loveth us

He made and loveth all.

(Coleridge qtd in Edmundson, *Poetical I*: 209)

This is Temple's vision of Coleridge's Xanadu, and that is the ultimate irony of Temple's final image: that far from being the perfect utopia that Coleridge wanted for future generations, the Xanadu of late twentieth century London is not paradisaical, simply a

massive urban sprawl of fast lights that has relegated history to the dustbin of culture, revealing that the artifacts of Coleridge's own existence only haunt us through an artificially induced perpetual artifactual memory. Temple demonstrates that, just as the Ancient Mariner cut his bonds with nature, Coleridge's unnaturally drug-induced composition warps through time and space to be constantly re-interpreted. Writing and film are both unnatural, processes of the culture of art.

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