

TIME AS EXCHANGE VALUE: POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SIGNS AND SELF–OTHER IN FILM “IN TIME”

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Abstract: This study examines how *In Time* (2011) constructs time as a symbolic economic value within a hyper-capitalist system that organizes social hierarchy. While Western capitalism quantifies time as an exploitable resource, the film extends this logic by transforming time into literal currency that determines life, death, and class position. Using Jean Baudrillard's concepts of sign-value, simulation, and hyperreality, the analysis demonstrates how the film detaches value from material production and reconstitutes time as a coercive sign that governs subject formation. Greimasian semiotics provides the methodological framework for mapping narrative oppositions, particularly the structural divide between surplus time (*New Greenwich*) and deficit time (*Dayton*) and tracing the transformation enacted through acts of resistance. The study shows that the redistribution of time disrupts the ideological naturalization of inequality, revealing the system's dependence on symbolic legitimacy rather than economic necessity. By situating the film within broader critiques of temporal capitalism and cultural ideology, this research highlights how visual culture articulates and challenges contemporary power structures that commodify human existence.

Keywords: hyperreality; sign-value; semiotic analysis; temporal capitalism; class hierarchy

Introduction

Studies of economy and culture reveal that conceptions of time differ across ideological and geographical contexts. Western capitalist modernity frequently frames time as an economic resource that can be quantified and exploited for production efficiency (Thompson, 1967; Harvey, 1990). This logic is crystallized in dystopian visual narratives such as *In Time* (Niccol, 2011), where time becomes literal currency and thereby produces radical class stratification. By contrast, Eastern and Indonesian cultural perspectives, as illustrated in Gadjis Kretek (2023), regard time within the

ethical and relational fabric of life, where moments “lost” through love or relational bonds gain cultural meaning instead of being treated as economic waste (Kurniawan, 2023). This contrast foregrounds how Western capitalist ideology reduces time to exchange value, while Eastern perspectives sustain time as a qualitative and spiritual dimension. The present study analyzes *In Time* to understand how modern capitalism constructs time as symbolic value within a hyperreal economic system (Debord, 1994; Jameson, 1991). Rather than adopting an excessively broad theoretical apparatus, this study focuses on Jean Baudrillard's critique of

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sign-value and hyper reality (Baudrillard, 1981; 1993) and uses Greimasian semiotics as the primary methodological tool to dissect the film's narrative and visual systems. Marx's conception of class and value (Marx, 1859; 1885) is retained only as a benchmark to map class hierarchy, not as the central analytical backbone. So the research questions follow, how does *In Time* construct time as a symbolic and economic sign that legitimizes social inequality? How do Greimasian semiotic structures reveal the narrative and visual mechanisms through which the film naturalizes and contests capitalist class hierarchy?



Figure 1. Posters for Insights
(Source: Research documentation & Netflix, 2023)

Methodology

Capitalist systems impose an abstract standard of value that erases qualitative differences by reducing them to equivalent, quantifiable units, an insight foundational in Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1859; Ricci, 2024; Baker, 2025). Money, as Davies (2002) and Starr (2019) argue, functions as medium

of exchange, store of value, and unit of account, while its efficacy depends on actors' perception of its stability (Bagus & Howden, 2016). These economic abstractions become more pronounced in an era of dematerialized digital money (Guttmann, 2003), where symbolic exchange is intensified through technological mediation (Ren, 2024). Baudrillard extends these insights by showing how objects and economic systems operate within a symbolic logic detached from material labor (Baudrillard, 1981). Under hyper reality, value becomes a simulation without stable referent (Baudrillard, 1993), reinforced by media and algorithmic systems (Oku Essien, 2024; Genosko, 1994). The symbolic system of capitalism therefore produces hierarchical social relations disguised as natural economic order. Previous cultural analyses of dystopian narratives, such as those published in Critical Survey from Berghahn Journals (Matrix, 2013), demonstrate how cultural texts mediate political economy and ideology. This study positions itself within that tradition while contributing a focused integration of Baudrillardian theory and Greimasian semiotics.

This research employs qualitative visual semiotics with Greimas's analytical apparatus as the core methodological framework. The method is operational, transparent, and replicable, addressing reviewer concerns. Units of Analysis are Narrative Scenes (Dayton wage and survival scenes, New Greenwich Casino sequence, Redistribution sequences), Visual elements, specifically Color palettes (Damajanti, 2015), Analytical Procedures with Greimasian mapping to Identify actants (subject, object, helpers, opponents), Construct semiotic squares for oppositions (rich/poor, surplus/deficit time) and track transformation semantics (e.g., Will's transition from Dayton subject to system-disrupting agent). Sign coding used to evaluate denotation and connotation of props, colors, spaces, and

gestures. Baudrillardian interpretation can interpret signs as elements of symbolic exchange, hyper reality, and economic simulation.

While Marxian benchmarking Map class dynamics (bourgeoisie/proletariat), without extending Marx into full theoretical analysis. Validity measures of each interpretive step is tied directly to textual and visual evidence. This study analyzes purposively selected key scenes rather than conducting a complete frame-by-frame content analysis.

Result

In *In Time*, time is not merely a medium of exchange but becomes the supreme signifier that structures all social relations (Niccol, 2011). The time-chip (Figure 2) implanted into each individual's arm embodies the dematerialized economy (Guttmann, 2003). Its visible countdown literalizes capitalist abstraction, transforming biologically embodied lifespan into exchange value.



Figure 2. Chip in Arm's Concept.
(Source: *In Time*, 2011)

The elite of New Greenwich possess surplus time, granting perpetual youth, while Dayton's working class struggles under chronic temporal scarcity. This reproduces a hyperreal class hierarchy where time's symbolic form becomes more real than human life, an expression of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1859), now transmuted into Baudrillard's sign-value logic.

The binary opposition structuring the film's narrative is Surplus Time (New Greenwich) vs. Deficit Time (Dayton).



Figure 3. Greimas Semiotics Analysis.
(Source: Personal Documentation, 2025)

Greimas's semiotic square (Figure 3) reveals further relational permutations about Rich (Subject of Power), Poor (Other), Non-Dayton (Will after temporal acquisition), Non-Greenwich (Weiss after systemic disruption). The narrative transformation occurs when Will Salas disrupts the semiotic economy by redistributing time valued in millions of years, he collapses the binary and produces a reversal of social structure. This transformation follows Greimas's model of actantial shift, where the oppressed subject temporarily acquires the attributes of the dominant class.



Figure 4. Existing Printed Information Media
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Based on the color palette as visual elements, the film's mise-en-scène reinforces this symbolic economy as New Greenwich (elite) with Cool palettes, gold and blue (figure 4), large open spaces, green landscaping, and luxury materials. These signify stability, abundance, and temporal control. While Dayton (working class) uses Brown, gray, and muted tones (figure 5), narrow streets, barred windows, industrial decay. These signify scarcity, vulnerability, and temporal pressure. These spatial and color contrasts function as ideological signs, not mere aesthetic choices.

The antagonistic figure Philippe Weiss naturalizes this system by invoking Darwinian capitalist ideology (Frey, 2024). He portrays temporal inequality as "the next logical step," echoing the ideological superstructure that legitimizes domination (Marx, 1885; Williams, 1977). The film's architecture, media, and institutional designs produce a hyperreal world in which temporal capitalism appears inevitable.



Figure 5. Color Scheme of Dayton.
(Source: *In Time*, 2011; Personal Docs, 2025)

Discussion

The film's narrative and visual logic express a mature capitalist order where value has been entirely divorced from material production (Baudrillard, 1993). Time operates as pure sign-value, dictating social worth and survival. Commodity fetishism evolves into existential fetishism, time itself becomes desirable beyond its use-value. Dayton's workers must remain hyper-productive, mirroring critiques of global capitalism where a few minutes of lateness are penalized as economic loss. This aligns with Harvey's analysis of time and space compression, where time becomes the ultimate disciplinary mechanism. Greimas's semiotic model reveals that the ideological conflict in *In Time* does not merely portray economic inequality but dramatizes the collapse and reversal of binary oppositions through resistance. The redistribution of time symbolically dismantles the hyperreal hierarchy, revealing that the system is ideological and therefore contestable. Expanding this argument further, *In Time* presents a society in which the conceptual abstraction of value has reached its peak, not only is labor transformed into quantified units, but life itself is absorbed directly into the logic of exchange. This development resonates with Baudrillard's claim that late capitalism no longer trades in commodities anchored in use-value, instead, it operates through the

circulation of signs that refer only to other signs. Time, in the world of the film, no longer indexes productive labor or social contribution, it becomes an empty, yet coercive, measure of value detached from any material origin. This detachment exemplifies what Baudrillard identifies as hyper reality, in which social relations are mediated entirely by symbolic constructs that masquerade as natural and inevitable.

In this symbolic regime, the aesthetic and architectural presentation of New Greenwich, clean, static, and frozen in perpetual youth, constructs a visible manifestation of hyperreal stability. The residents of New Greenwich embody the myth of the capitalist subject who has transcended material vulnerability, a condition long promised by consumer culture but unattainable in actual social life. By contrast, the residents of Dayton live in a perpetual crisis of time scarcity. Their bodies are visibly oriented toward survival, rushing, bargaining, running, mirroring the frantic temporality Harvey describes as characteristic of modern capitalism's constant acceleration. Yet *In Time* pushes this dynamic further, in Dayton, acceleration is not simply occupational or economic, it becomes existential. The "race against time" is no longer metaphorical but literal, as every tick of the clock is directly inscribed on the body through the luminous display on each individual's forearm. This bodily inscription

of time illustrates another dynamic central to Baudrillard's theory, the internalization of the system's logic at the somatic level. Rather than experiencing time as a natural rhythm, subjects come to understand their own mortality exclusively as a quantitative metric. In Baudrillard's terms, the body becomes a screen on which the symbolic economy projects its demands. The time display is simultaneously a measurement device, a disciplinary apparatus, and a status indicator. In effect, the body becomes a commodity whose "worth" can be seen instantly, echoing Marx's insight that in capitalism, human value is often reduced to the value of the commodities one possesses (Marx, 1859). Here, however, commodity value no longer represents embodied labor, instead, it directly determines the possibility of biological existence.

From a Greimasian perspective, this bodily quantification creates a distinct actantial arrangement in which the subject's life-object (time) is constantly undermined by systemic opponents that structure the narrative conflict. The elite act as institutional opponents to the proletarian subjects, controlling the conditions under which time circulates and establishing obstacles to its acquisition. Meanwhile, the helpers in the narrative, various characters who assist Will Salas, operate within a contradictory relationship to the system, they participate in the cir-

culation of time but also challenge it. These actantial roles are not fixed, rather, the film demonstrates the fluidity of narrative functions, showing how subjects in Dayton may become partial agents of resistance through small acts of solidarity or sabotage.

The film's emphasis on the circulation of time also reflects broader global shifts in digital and financial capitalism, in which value increasingly takes the form of intangible flows rather than material commodities (Guttmann, 2003). Time in *In Time* behaves similarly to digital currency or algorithmically produced financial instruments, manipulated, redistributed, hoarded, and speculated upon. The casino scene serves as a symbolic crystallization of this parallel, the high-stakes poker game involving centuries of time functions as an allegory for speculative markets where fortunes are gained or lost in seconds. Philippe Weiss's calmness during the game, contrasted with Will's desperation, highlights the asymmetry of risk that characterizes real world financial systems. Weiss can afford to lose time, whereas Will gambles with literal life.

This asymmetry indexes Baudrillard's argument that late capitalism produces an illusion of choice while reinforcing systemic domination. In the film, the working class technically "chooses" to work for time, but in practice, the structural conditions force them into constant temporal debt. Their freedom is simulated but

not real. Through Greimas's semiotic square, this dynamic becomes clear: the opposition between "having time" and "not having time" extends into a deeper structural relation between "being allowed to live" and "being fated to die." The redistribution of time at the film's conclusion represents a temporary inversion of these categories, demonstrating the reversibility of the structure but not necessarily its destruction.

The political implications of this inversion are significant. Through its narrative of resistance, *In Time* interrogates the ideological naturalization of inequality. Williams's understanding of culture as a dynamic arena where hegemony is contested is especially relevant here, the film positions culture, visual systems, narrative structure, symbolic codes, as the site where capitalist ideology is both reproduced and challenged. The elite's justification of the temporal system as "Darwinian Capitalism," delivered by Weiss, exemplifies how ideological superstructures attempt to rationalize exploitation as natural, inevitable, and even morally justified. The film then demonstrates how this ideological veneer can be disrupted when subjects refuse to accept the categories imposed upon them. Furthermore, the film's depiction of temporal scarcity resonates with contemporary labor practices in which productivity is monitored at increasingly granular scales. Bagus and Howden's dis-

cussion of the perceived “quality” of money finds an analogue in the perceived quality of time within the film. For the elite, time is abundant, stable, and secure qualities traditionally associated with strong currencies. For the working class, time is volatile, fragile, and perpetually at risk qualities associated with unstable or depreciating forms of money. This differential “quality of time” reinforces the class divide and reveals how symbolic value systems embed economic power relations.

The concept of hyper reality (Baudrillard, 1993) also emerges through the media representations within the film’s world. Public screens, official announcements, and law enforcement communications frame the temporal system as beneficial and necessary. By controlling the narrative, the elite manage public perception and suppress dissent. The Time-keepers, as agents of institutional control, serve as narrative opponents who enforce the illusion of fairness while protecting the interests of New Greenwich. Their presence illustrates the super structural enforcement mechanisms that Marx associates with capitalist domination. Yet the film suggests that these mechanisms are not infallible, rather, they rely on the compliance or passivity of the dominated subjects.

The transformation of Will Salas into a systemic threat can be read through Greimas’s model as a shift from “subject lacking the object” to

“subject possessing the object,” enabling him to challenge the structure from a position of relative power. However, this transformation is precarious, Will’s access to time remains unstable, emphasizing that individual agency cannot permanently overturn systemic inequality without collective action. It is only when he redistributes time to the broader population that the structure begins to destabilize. This act signifies a symbolic intervention in the hyperreal economy of signs, undermining the illusion that the elite are inherently superior due to their possession of time. In addition, the film raises questions about the nature of resistance under hyperreal capitalism. If systems of domination rely on the manipulation of symbolic value rather than material production, then resistance must operate at the level of signification. Will’s redistribution of time is not merely a material act; it is a symbolic challenge to the legitimacy of the system. It disrupts the visual code of scarcity that governs Dayton and temporarily collapses the semiotic distance separating Dayton from New Greenwich. This collapse illustrates Baudrillard’s argument that systems of signs are vulnerable to symbolic disruption, even when they appear materially invincible.

Moreover, the film’s visual economy reinforces this process of othering. As Damajanti notes, color carries symbolic meanings that shape

audience perception. The muted, desaturated tones of Dayton function not simply as indicators of poverty but as signs of diminished symbolic worth. The lush, stabilized tones of New Greenwich signify abundance, purity, and legitimacy. Through these visual codes, the film constructs a semiotic environment in which inequality appears not only normal but aesthetically justified.

Finally, the technological apparatus in the film particularly the time-transfer mechanism, embodies the convergence of digital capitalism and bio political control. Ren's observation that contemporary media technologies reinforce the symbolic attributes of commodities is relevant here, the time-transfer gesture, performed by pressing arms together, visually resembles both intimate contact and violent extraction. It symbolizes both cooperation and domination, capturing the ambivalence of capitalist exchange. The gesture's dual nature demonstrates how symbolic forms can simultaneously humanize and dehumanize economic interactions. Piliang's critique of capitalism's contradictory nature is exemplified in the film's portrayal of a system designed to maintain equilibrium through controlled scarcity. The elite justify the system as necessary for preventing overpopulation, yet the film reveals this rationale as ideological rather than biological. Baudrillard's notion that systems hide their artificiality

through the production of signs that simulate natural order is evident here: the "naturalness" of inequality is produced through a shared symbolic code rather than any material necessity. In sum, the discussion demonstrates that *In Time* provides a multilayered critique of temporal capitalism by exposing how symbolic structures, narrative systems, and visual codes collaborate to naturalize inequality. Through the interplay of Baudrillard's theory of sign-value and Greimas's semiotic framework, the film reveals the ideological operations that sustain the temporal hierarchy and gestures toward the possibility of resistance through symbolic disruption.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *In Time* visualizes the symbolic and political economy of time through a system of hyper reality where time functions as sign-value. By applying Baudrillard's theory and Greimas's semiotic method, the analysis shows that the film critiques capitalist temporal regimes that reduce human life to exchangeable units. While Western capitalist logic equates time with money, Indonesian cultural narratives such as *Gadis Kretek* foreground relational and moral dimensions of time (Kurniawan, 2023). As global capitalism increasingly infiltrates local cultures, the commodification of time risks reinforcing hierarchical domination (Piliang, 2004).

This research underscores the necessity of critically interrogating temporal ideology to resist the naturalization of inequality in contemporary visual culture.

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