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# Christian Marclay's *The Clock* as Relational Environment

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6 AM. A series of wake-up calls pull me halfway out of an uncomfortable sleep: digital alarm clocks, wristwatches, radio alarms, and moms walking into the room. The only alarm clock I shall remember afterwards is the one I expect to see: *Groundhog Day*. I doze off.

7 AM. More alarm clocks. I wake up this time. I sit up on the couch. At this point I have been in a darkened room of Ottawa's National Gallery for about nine hours. I just spent a night at the museum.

I'm bodying myself through *The Clock*, probably the most ambitious project that the remix artist Christian Marclay has developed to this day. *The Clock* is a 24-hour film that shows, at each minute of the day, scenes from film history that contain a timepiece indicating that very time of day. At 10:22 PM, *The Clock* gives you five or six scenes of couples going to bed at 10:22 PM. I wake up at 7 AM because a plethora of alarm clocks set to 7 AM go off in *The Clock*. And because 7 is a good time for me. 6 AM is not "my hour."

Marclay's piece conspicuously synchronizes the time of fictitious movie worlds and my own watch. And yet I look at the time over and over again to verify synchronicity. At first, that is to make sure the piece actually delivers on [the promise made on the Gallery's website](#): it is as if I can't believe the way the timepieces on the screen obey what the curators refer to as "real time." But,

eventually, *The Clock*'s proposition is much less about the crafting of coinciding temporalities than the *experience* of time this synchronicity enables. It is, as I shall explain, an experience of the differential between "real time" and really-felt time. This differential is not immediately activated. Not for a few hours. Cinema has disciplined my body to sustain an adequate level of attention for at least two hours. I don't fall asleep, I don't get hungry, no need to use the washroom. Discipline has separated my body out from the experience of watching a movie. [1] So I step in time with *The Clock* for a while. Scene after scene, Marclay's piece makes its way around the clockface. Movie snippets unfold in precise and orderly fashion, at the same time repeating the portrayed moment, actualizing the quoted film, and re-inscribing the ruthless logic of the chronometer. It is a marvelous collection of stand-alone miniatures of timed moments, each lighting up film history in a flash, each straightjacketed to the circular grid of the clockface. *The Clock* is an archive of times folding into times.

A kind of hypnotic effect kicks in after two hours or so. The more I watch, the more the shreds of fictional, historical, and "real" time seem to dance before my senses. For *The Clock* does not simply give you one scene after the other; this archive remixes cinema through all kinds of continuity editing, from matches-on-action to sound overlaps, thereby mixing all senses of time. Claudette Colbert flirts with Patrick Swayze, at 11:27, which is *now*. Juliette Binoche is neighbors with Doris Day. Cary Grant calls Daryl Hannah. The editing techniques of filmmaking have rarely been so conspicuously flaunted and, yet, so enjoyable, so magical. What comes into sensation in excess of *The Clock*'s measured, linear chronology is time felt as a nonlinear folding. The sensation of magic arises from the way in which contingent shots are joined together to create a heterogeneous but functional whole. For it works. It makes sense – if sense is not reduced to meaning. Marclay's piece backgrounds signification, for instance in that it doesn't care to tell a coherent story, for the sake of expression as the creative dimension of sense. *The Clock* does not so much highlight the fact that "cinematic time" consists of contingent images and shots as it instills an appreciation for the wondrous ways in which film *creates* coherent times and spaces through the contiguity of discontinuous elements. [2] When Marclay uses basic cinematic editing techniques, such as the 180° rule, to *convincingly* (albeit amusingly) make

Tippi Hedren talk to Christian Bale, he insists that an edited moving-image narrative is a fundamentally nonlinear process that *invents* spacetimes as it folds one shot into another. (Every amateur filmmaker understands this *creative* aspect of making cinematic spacetime: get the 180° rule wrong and space falls apart, time seems to fragment.) The notion of the fold is central because it emphasizes that the co-creation of space and time happens at the cut, through the cut. The sensed spacetime of a film scene comes into existence as the sequence folds past and future spaces into one another at the cut. Only when a shot becomes the past, its content can be located “over there” or “right here” in relation to the outfolding shot. In any case, spatial orientation is only in time. In this way, *The Clock* enables an intuitive understanding of the disparity between “cinematic time,” in which contingent instants/images succeed each other indifferently, and the *sensations* of spacetime that cinema continuously invents. Cinematic spacetime is a topological fold. [3]

It is worth noting at this point that *The Clock*'s topology does not restrain itself to ‘cinema proper.’ Marclay’s timepiece, though most often described as a revisitation of *film* history, grants an interesting, if not peculiar place to television. It is true that, as a resource for the archival remix, television occupies a marginal place. Few television programs make it into the mix; the ones that come to mind are *Emergency Room* and *Extras*. Significantly, though, television is one of *The Clock*'s most recurrent bit players. The importance of the small screen’s small part comes into focus when we consider that television figures most prominently *within* the shots, as when Dustin Hoffman watches TV in *Tootsie* or Juliette Binoche irons her laundry in front of the small screen in *Code inconnu*. What *The Clock* refers to in these and many other clips is nothing less than television’s very own temporal economy. In fact, it is perhaps the concept of televisual time that can help us grasp *The Clock*'s strange hypnotic effect. For, not unlike Marclay’s 24-hour film, traditional broadcast television used to obey a strict timetable (of airing slots) to such a degree that “televisual time is programmed and scheduled [...] down to the last second” (Doane 1990: 237). Yet, and *because* of these strict temporal conditions, broadcast TV folds programs, commercial breaks, and trailers into that infamous “flow” by which television is said to anaesthetize and immobilize the masses (Williams 2003: 77-120). It seems

to me that *The Clock* draws on this temporal economy *and* its effects when it meticulously fills the minutes of the day to lure its viewer's into a trance-like state. To this, we can add the fact that the audience of *The Clock*, at least at the National Gallery in Ottawa, is not installed in cinema seats but on couches, the TV set's counterpoint *par excellence* in the classic setting of the living room. In many ways, then, the viewing experience that *The Clock* creates is just as indebted to television's media ecology as to that of the movie theater. I shall say more about the interesting challenge that such a movie-theater-living-room hybrid poses to the institution of the museum. For now, I would like to address another strong resonance between *The Clock* and television, which consists in their shared capacity to lull the viewer into sleep.

For, after trance, there's fatigue. After deliriously dancing with the archive for five hours, I fall out of step. I trail off along the slowing rhythm of my own time as the *The Clock* stubbornly follows the staccato of the clock. Memories from the twilight zone between sleep and waking include phones. Romantic late-night calls and worried callers reporting a relative missing. Frantic calls from the 30s, passionately answered in the 80s, half-witnessed in the now. [4] More *heard* than seen as my eyes drift shut. If *The Clock* is an archive, then it is one that knows you're going to leave or fall asleep. As it slowly exhausts my energy and waking capacity, Marclay's piece prepares its own disarticulation. The somnolent viewer inevitably fragments the archive in experience. "Archive fever" is certainly involved, both on Marclay's part and mine. But the archive's unremitting force of reinscription is bound to outrun the most avid cinephile. I cannot help but miss large parts of *The Clock* during sleep, food and toilet breaks. The piece is as much about remembering and actualizing film history as it is about letting go and forgetting. It can be said then that Marclay has 'completed' the archive insofar as he has actually filled the 1,440 minutes of the day with thousands of film snippets. [5] However, for physiological and cognitive reasons, the viewer can't possibly sift through, let alone remember all the available data. What Jacques Derrida calls *archi-violence* consists partly in this imbalance between the overwhelming mass of information and the viewer's limited energies, waking time, and attention span (Derrida 1996).

This is not to turn *The Clock* into an unattainable, monumental art object. The point is not to say that the slept-through parts of the archive remain dead to me. On the contrary, I am interested in how the archive comes to life, how it acts as a force in the world. It partly comes to life in retrospective conversation. Visitors who have sat through the night hours tell me that, in fact, the archive is *not* complete in the above-mentioned sense. At around three 3 AM, I'm told, clock hands wildly whirl around their dials. Timepieces break or go mad. Apparently, someone speculates, Marclay has run out of material for that time of day. Nothing much seems to be happening in the in-between hours of the morning, not even in cinema. Resistance to the archi-violent principle of the chronometer. And, *of course*, I've slept through it. Because my experience is incomplete, I must settle for hearsay about *The Clock's* very own incompleteness. The archive is determined to make you lose bits of it but, through that very gesture, it integrates the unseen-unheard as a collective experience of storytelling. As viewers actively participate in reconstructing the archive for one another, narrative retrospection is added as another layer of the temporal experience of *The Clock*.

As if this incompleteness weren't enough, cinema doubly resists *The Clock's* archival principle based on metric time. On the one hand, as I have just pointed out, the archive must remain incomplete because certain times of day do not seem to be significant enough to have been recorded often enough. On the other hand, there are moments in the day that are so important for film that they flood the archive's neat chronological units. I am sure, for instance, that 12:00 AM lasted longer than sixty seconds. The blast of fairy-tale departures, witching hours, ultimatum deadlines and New Year's celebrations lasted for what felt like a good three minutes at least. Midnight - or the way in which cinema imagines it - overflows the measures of the ticking archive. What this means is that really-felt time exceeds Chronos, that is, the purely quantitative divisions of so-called real-time. In experience, time is elastic, made up of a confluence of various speeds and slownesses. What coalesces around midnight is a series of beginnings, endings, thresholds and crises folding into an intensity that is irreducible to the homogeneous extension of the ticking clock. I remember seeing an exploding bell tower at one point during my thirteen hours at *The Clock*. This

scene may not have shown at midnight but memory nonetheless places it there for it pictures the fragility of the metric grid we tend to associate with time.

One might discard these considerations by objecting that the archive quite simply cheats. But that would be to accept chronometrics as the only rule of time. Or one might argue that my fragmentary experience of *The Clock* (due to daydreaming, sleep, and metabolism) is less than the actual artwork. But that would be to turn *The Clock* into an autonomous art object when it clearly foregrounds its relational qualities. It would be to ignore that all of these aspects feed into the experience in excess of the archive's mere unfolding on the screen. The archive comes to life as it is attentively experienced, drowsed through, remembered, forgotten, ignored and reported. In other words, it is by virtue of their lacks and lags that the felt times of *The Clock* are more than just an archive in real-time. This felt moreness of time, this excess over Chronos, coincides with an emergent environment relationally co-created by the flickering playful screen, the mesmerized human spectators (and their company if applicable) as well as the few uncomfortable couches of an improvised movie-theater-living-room in a museum.

The relational coming-together of these elements makes it possible to grasp *The Clock* not merely as an archive but as what Gilles Deleuze calls a diagram. [6] A diagram is "a topological transformation of an existing social field, engaging both with possibility and also with virtual potential, a reserve of newness and difference" (Thain 2010: 53). It is the dynamic distribution of heterogeneous, co-composing elements, in which both the whole and its components change by virtue of the relations between them. In the case of *The Clock* (and in the mainly durational terms used here), these components appear as a plurality of qualitatively differing temporalities, including history, story time, cinematic time, viewing time, metric time, the circadian rhythm, and retrospection, to name only those evoked earlier. Each of these acts as a relational force *co-creating* the viewer's lived experience of time. For the diagram "never functions in order to represent a persisting world but produces a new kind of reality, a new model of truth" (Deleuze 2006: 30). In other words, the diagram is a concept for thinking the production of novelty in a world of becoming. With respect to the problem of

time, this means that the present, each present is more adequately thought in terms of a “presence as remix or open-ended synthesis” than in terms of the current instant merely adding up to so many others (Murphie 2007: 123). From this viewpoint, “[w]e can” and perhaps *should* “say of duration itself or of time, that it is the whole of relations” (Deleuze 1986: 10).

How do we reconsider artistic form on the backdrop of such considerations? What does this mean for the study of time in film and moving images? It means that the *temporal experience* of moving images is not so much a matter of succession and structure as of a dynamic and variable ecology. If we begin from the sensed dynamism of folding times, scholarly focus shifts from form to formation or what Erin Manning calls “form-taking” (Manning 2009 *passim*). As it brings various enfolding temporalities into felt awareness, *The Clock* intimates that the moving image is not merely *in* the present, as a lot of “narratological” approaches to film would have it. [7] For none of Marclay’s entertainingly anachronistic encounters between times, movies, and actors exists as such in any single shot before their coming-together in *The Clock*. If these encounters are the present, then only because they have relationally co-created *this* present in the first place:

It is not quite right to say that the cinematographic image is in the present. What is in the present is what the image ‘represents’, but not the image itself, which in cinema as in painting, is never to be confused with what it represents. The image itself is the system of the relationships between its elements, that is, *a set of relationships of time* from which the variable present only flows. [...] What is specific to the image, as soon as it is creative, is *to make perceptible, to make visible, relationships of time* which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present. (Deleuze 1989: xi-xii, my emphasis)

If, as I argue, *The Clock* brings this understanding of the present as a node of temporal relations into felt awareness, it does so on at least three different accounts. Let me briefly sum up the first two that have already been addressed: first, the piece itself remixes clock-time, story time, historic time, etc. Second, as it successfully invites a sustained engagement of the viewer, it creates a heightened awareness of one’s own viewing habits, attention span, circadian rhythm, etc.

The third level of *The Clock*'s relational potential concerns the institution of the museum, which I would now like to address through the prism of Alanna Thain's concept of the *anarchive*.

We have seen that, as *The Clock* diagrams time into existence, it stays within the regular beat of the clock and at the same time goes beyond it. If this is a paradox, then it is for all intents and purposes a productive one. Simply put, the proposition is that *The Clock* affirms the co-existence (and co-creativity) of *multiple* durations. It also means that what churns above and below *The Clock*'s metric archival practice is the anarchive. In the anarchive, information is not stacked away in orderly, chronological succession. Rather, the anarchive must be thought as the ongoing activity of eventfully reactivating incommensurable pasts for the creation of novelty in the present, as the present. The anarchive is an ongoing remix of heterogeneous temporalities. In the case of *The Clock*, this is easily recognizable as an editorial practice of sampling and remixing: while it respects the steady measure of metric time, *The Clock* disobeys all other temporal orders. Thain states that "Marclay's work functions both as display of archive that plays off of the pleasures of recognition, while simultaneously making felt the emergence of newness, as the clips generate an audio-visual entity of the installation in fluctuating tension with the discrete clips" (Thain 2010: 66). In other words, the dynamic anarchive simultaneously "doubles and disrupts" the stable archive as it reactivates the stacked-away past (ibid.). But if, as I have suggested with reference to Murphie, time is *always* a matter of pasts creatively enfolding and out-folding a present, then even the regular beat of our everyday life, including the steady cycles of the institution, is subtended by an archival chaos of remixing times.

We can begin to grasp the political importance of the anarchive if we consider that, in the case of *The Clock*, the moviegoer is also a museum visitor. For, incidentally, Marclay's remix also produces a clash of differently timed institutions: the museum as historical archive with day-time opening hours meets the movie-theatre as the site of fleeting night-time entertainment. As museal archiving and cinema converge - museums widen their scope of archivable artifacts to newer media at the same time as film becomes an 'old

medium' -, the question of *how* to museumize cinema is increasingly important. And indeed, the task of curating a 24-hour film screening challenges the National Gallery's formal setup and unmoors it from its temporal territory. Besides obvious spatial contrasts between, for instance, the museum's "white box" and the movie theater's "black box," the tensions between the two environments concern various aspects of their respective media ecologies. How to, for instance, negotiate the stark divide in food policies? While movie-theaters allow and invite (surely for economic reasons) the consumption of food, the National Gallery insisted on its "No Food and Drink" policy. [8] So unless you have incidentally been fasting anyway, you are bound to notice that museums and movie theaters relate to human bodies in quite different ways. Now take into account the available seating options (or lack thereof) and you're tempted to conclude that museums are quite simply uncomfortable spaces. When asked about the curatorial concept for *The Clock's* space, an employee of the museum informs me that, as a stand-alone video piece, *The Clock* does not require a curatorial process. The body begs to differ. What *The Clock's* concurrent remix of institutional forms foregrounds is in fact the form-taking of institutions themselves. Marclay's piece brings into visceral sensation that institutions are not static organizational frameworks (despite their claim to the contrary) and that media cannot be reduced to mediating content (not even popular narrative film). In *The Clock*, so-called "new media" do not supplant or appropriate 'film'; they reactivate it by remixing films, performing the qualitative change in what cinema can be when it is inclusive of varying material supports. [9] In the case of *The Clock*, a museum cannot incorporate new media forms without experimenting with what a museum is or *how* it does what it does.

What all this leads to is the fact that the mix is first of all an *immediate* event. Before *The Clock* represents cinematic spaces and times, it creates them. Before the worlding remix is caught up in grids of intelligibility (embodied by, for instance, institutions), it stands the chance of remixing the grid itself. Before *The Clock* has become just another temporary exhibit in a museum space, it has expressively changed what a museum can be. The anarchic gives us a sense of institutions' immediate - that is, collective and singular - emergence *with* artistic forms (media, materials, genres, etc.). [10] The expendability of curatorial

attention declared by the museum betrays its interest in conserving its institutional form. The reservation towards carefully implicating cinematic artworks is also the museum's resistance to the shifts within its own media ecology, resistance to respond to change, that is, to time. In return, the visitor-viewer's discomfort with such self-declared stability in the face of change betrays the intuition that even institutional environments are meta-stable at best. [11] And meta-stable environments, or ecologies, come with requirements for their sustainability, *immanent* criteria that change as soon as the ecology's configuration changes. *The Clock* calls for such adjustments in a media ecology that henceforth spans across the walls of the museum into numerous other art forms and institutions. Conversely, to understand the museum as a neutral mediator of art or knowledge is to disregard its immediate involvement in the eventful production of art and knowledge.

*The Clock* invites us to acknowledge the immediacy of relational form-taking as an experience of really-felt time *in the making*: "Immediacy is the realization of the potentialities of the past, and is the storehouse of the potentialities of the future" (Whitehead 1968, 99-100). In a time where the idea of the future instills mostly bleak visions of doom [12], such a concept of time, based on our participatory implication in the creative becoming of a singular present, can open towards an ethos of experimentation. "Interesting things might happen," as William Connolly says [13], if we ready ourselves to anarchivally diagram a world into existence. To remix time - with clocks, in excess over them, and inspired by *The Clock*.

## Notes

[1] Fold in here if you will: the memory of [movie posters](#) for *Psycho* that show Alfred Hitchcock pointing to his wristwatch, insisting that viewers be punctual and sit through his film from beginning to end. Hitchcock struggles with an undisciplined practice of movie-going that we can hardly still imagine, that of walking into a movie halfway through, hanging out for a while and leaving

before the ending. Since *The Clock* has no real beginning or ending, it *forces* its viewer to live this experience of casual spectatorship.

[2] For an exhaustive exposition of this argument see Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*.

[3] If one wanted to create some (productive) terminological confusion, one could say that Marclay's technique consists of "false continuities" (*faux raccords*). The term conventionally refers to seeming *incoherencies* in editing, *discontinuities* in montage between images that seem to belong together. What Marclay does is the exact opposite: His editing creates an apparent (false) continuity between images that do *not* belong together. Based on my argument in the text, however, conventional *faux raccords* and Marclay's false continuities have the same function: From false continuity, "there results an effect of hiatus which underlines the disjunctive nature of change of shot, which elaboration of the rules of montage had always concealed" (Burch cited in Deleuze 1989: 326, n. 47). This is not to say that disjunction is destructive. To the contrary, false continuity underlines that continuity and discontinuity cannot be separated out from one another. (It should be mentioned that the quoted note from the *Time-Image* wrongly translates "faux raccord" as "film continuity," which may add another level of confusion.)

[4] Marclay had already remixed telephone scenes in earlier works. See, for instance, his 1995 piece [Telephones](#).

[5] He has not completed it insofar as he has not included every single scene from film history containing a timepiece. This could warrant the discussion of another aspect of the archive: the archival content is always determined and limited by the archival process itself.

[6] I draw on Deleuze's *Foucault*, in which he develops the complimentary but distinct concepts of the *archive* and the *diagram*, to propose a reading of *The Clock* as diagram (or anarchival) rather than archive.

[7] These considerations arise in part from a struggle with my own background, which is partly in traditional and so-called “post-classical narratology,” which tacitly assumes that film narrates in the present. While many narrative studies now distance themselves from their structuralist roots, this assumption and the underlying question of film’s tense of narration still originate in the inadequate comparison of film to literature, i.e. language. This question leads to a false problem insofar as, on the one hand, the determination of narrative tense in language is largely a matter of morphology and, on the other hand, moving images lack a comparable morphological marker of tense. The “solution” to this false problem oftentimes consists in concluding that the temporal unmarkedness of moving images must mean they narrate in the present. This is a *semiological* answer, which considers form and codified sense, when what is needed is a *semiotic* approach with a focus on form-taking and making sense (Deleuze 1989: 25-43). In a way, then, the present paper is an attempt to avoid this false problem and consider the temporality of cinema from a different – experiential – angle.

[8] It should be said, in all fairness, that museums’ strict food policies are a justified measure to reduce the risk of expensive artworks being damaged by food bacteria and humidity.

[9] Interestingly, this remix of times and media also manifests itself *thematically* in many landmarks of CGI filmmaking: *Jurassic Park* (Stephen Spielberg, 1993) dives into the deep past of the Earth and shows a strong interest in reading (dinosaur’s) footprints, the stock example of indexicality. *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), a showcase at the time of what digital media can do, also purports a profound distrust of human technology and a longing for a re-enchanting, animistic mode of being in the world. With a focus on cinema itself, Martin Scorsese’s 3D-spectacle *Hugo* (2011) returns to film’s beginnings in homage to Georges Méliès.

[10] Brian Massumi emphasizes the duplicitous immediacy of process in *Semblance and Event* (2011: 1-28). What I refer to here as *collective* and *singular* co-emergence is conceptualized by Massumi in terms of the “relational and qualitative dimensions [...] of an event’s occurring” (3-4 *passim*).

[11] William Connolly's film-inspired micropolitics resonates with this when he says that, over time, the "objective institutions that preexist us become infused to variable degrees into dispositions, perceptions, beliefs, and resistances we share and contest with others" (2002: 20). Micropolitical investment is a matter of experimentation by means of "relational techniques of the self," which are "mixtures" of perceptual, intellectual and semiotic practices. In resonance with my overall argument on *The Clock*, Connolly holds that "[i]nteresting things might happen if you place film technique into contact with your own perceptual experience" and rethink your ethics and politics from there (16).

[12] See Berardi 2011: 58-68.

[13] Connolly 2002: 16 (see also note 11 above).

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