

After Hours : Art,
Imagination and the Residue
of the Working Day

Raqs Media Collective

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The Clock

Take a clock, and name each hour, each of the one thousand and four hundred and forty minutes in a day, and the even more seconds and the infinity of fractions between them, and soon you have your own quotidian eternity. Your private province of extra time.

But what has time go to do with emancipation and aesthetics? Plato knew the answer to the question of what time had to do with subjugation and anaesthesia. So did Aristotile, and the battle that aesthetics has fought to stay on the side of emancipation and not be a mercenary of power begins with a quarrel with Plato and Aristotile.

Artisans and Time

For Aristotile, a citizen is someone who has a part in governing and being

governed. To take a part in governing means to rise above one's immediate circumstances and think of society as a whole, to imaginatively put one's self in the position and life of others.

In the Republic, Plato's view on being an Artisan is clear. An artisan, who is constantly, 'making' things, cannot be doing anything else, because his work can never wait for him. In other words, the life of practice, of making, is a life bereft of time and of the imaginative plenitude that allows the artisan the ability to transcend his immediate business. And one requires time to rise above one's immediate predicament, to think of the wants and needs of the community, to think of virtue, of justice and the good life. In other words, to be consumed with labour is to forego the privilege of being a citizen, of being sensible. It is to be anaesthetized to the demands of a sensate human life.

Jacques Ranciere in 'The Politics of Aesthetics' says -

"the distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do, and the time and place in which this activity is performed. Having a particular occupation thereby determines the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community. It defines what is visible or not in the common space, endowed with a common language. There is thus an 'aesthetic' at the core of politics.

He goes on to distinguish this notion from the more familiar sense we have from Walter Benjamin of the 'aestheticization of politics' (which refers to something quite different) by saying - - *this aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, or by a consideration of the people qua work of art. Aesthetics can be understood he says, as a system of 'a priori forms' of determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise."*

This position places aesthetics at the heart of politics, of class struggle, of any struggle, or desire for emancipation if you like, because, when dealing with questions of a social or a political nature, we are ultimately dealing with questions of how we come to understand the value and form of something as basic as time for different human beings, and different classes. What makes

five seconds of the time of one person's life more valuable, socially, than five minutes of another person's life.

Georg Simmel, whose 'Philosophy of Money' is really a treatise on Aesthetics in disguise, speaks eloquently of our new experience of time in modernity, but his sentiments are already prefigured in his earlier writing - this is from the Sorbonne Manuscript of the fragment titled - Philosophie der Kunst - which prefigures a great deal of his mediations in Philosophy of Money

"The flow of time can only be established in something that itself does not flow. In contrast, a time that merely flows away (and here he is talking of our experience of time, now) that is, as it were, devoid of memory - for a memory already certainly signifies a completed element is no time (Zeit) at all, but rather an unidimensional now (Jetzt)."

In a prescient essay on Rodin, Simmel says - in Philosophische Kulture -

"The increased motion of real life reveals itself not merely in its counterpart in art, but rather both the style of life and the style of its art have their source in the same root. Art not merely reflects a mobile world, but rather its reflection itself has become more mobile"

Coming to terms with this requires us to enter into the realm of the qualitative judgement of different experiences of mobility and animation, of living, of duration bodily inhabited, of the endurance of life and the world. When we are born, the first thing that is sensible to us is time, when we die, the last thing that is extinguished is our desire that now be followed by 'and then' . When you die, there is no longer a now, there can no longer be a desire for what follows after now.

On Time

Time girds the earth tight. Day after day, the hours, astride minutes and seconds, ride as they must, relentlessly. In the struggle to keep pace with clocks we are now everywhere and always in a state of jet lag, with flights delayed by storms and journeys made possible by their abating, always catching up with ourselves and with others, slightly short of breath, slightly

short of time.

The soft insidious ticking away of panic in our heads is syncopated by accelerated heartbeats and the speedening of everyday lives. Circadian rhythms (times to rise and times to sleep, times for work and leisure, times for sunlight and times for stars), get muddled as millions of faces find themselves lit by timeless fluorescence that trades night for day. Sleep gets besieged by wakefulness, hunger is fed by stimulation and moments of dreaming and lucid alertness are eroded with the knowledge of intimate terrors and distant wars.

Escape, when possible, is up a hatch and down a corridor between, and occasionally beyond longitudes, to places where the hours chime epiphanies. Escape is a resonant word in the vocabulary of clock-making. It gives us another word – Escapement.

Escapement

Escapement is a horological or clockmaking term. It denotes the mechanism in mechanical watches and clocks that governs the regular motion of the hands through a 'catch and release' device that both releases and restrains the levers that move the hands for hours, minutes and seconds. Like the catch and release of the valves of the heart allowing for the flow of blood between the chambers of the heart - which sets up the basic rhythm of life - the escapement of a watch regulates our sense of the flow of time. The continued pulsation of our hearts, and the ticking of a clock, denotes our liberty from an eternal present. With each heartbeat, with each passing second, they mark here and now, promise the future and remember the resonance of heartbeat that just ended. It is our heart that tells us that we live in time.

In the history of clock-making there is a definite turn when devices for understanding time moved away from the fluid principles that underpinned ancient Chinese water and incense clocks - which saw time as a continuum, and thus made it more difficult to surgically separate then and now, past and present - to clocks where the ticking of seconds made it more possible to think of a conceptual barricade between each ticking second, its predecessor and its follower. This is what makes now seem so alien to then. Paradoxically,

it opens out another zone of discomfort. Different places share the same time because of the accident of longitude. Thus clocks in London and Lagos (with adjustments made for daylight saving) show the same time. And yet, the sense of what it is to be 'now' in London and Lagos may not feel the same at all.

An escape from (or one might say a full on willingness to confront) this vexation might lie in the taking on of a stance where one is comfortable with the fact that we exist at the intersection of different latitudes and longitudes, and that being located on this grid, we are in some sense phatically, constantly in touch with other times, other places. We are 'contemporaneous', in a syncopated sort of way, with other times and spaces.

*"It is not desirable that the future be captive to the present,
just as it is unthinkable that the present be held hostage by the future.
Neither the arrow, nor the boomerang of time!"*

*We will wait for the time when socially necessary labour time
to make something can be debated socially.
Until then, restlessness will remain the best antidote to exhaustion.*

*The spectre of abundance haunts the empire of scarcity like a shadow.
Who can own or ration, breath, laughter, thought, desire or madness?"*

(Fragments from a Prospective Communist Latento*
Raqs Media Collective)

All aesthetics, and fundamentally, all politics, all ethics is ultimately a question of thinking about whether or not it is worth our while, to fight for things that are fragile, like human life, like freedom, leisure, beauty, justice and the petals of flowers, like the myriad details of ordinary life that make up our days. That is why in a rare lucid moment Lenin perhaps said, '*Ethics is the Aesthetics of the Future*'.

Let us assume, that we are in that future today, because Lenin's desires for the future are less dangerous than his prescriptions for the present. We need to think about what is to be undone. Emancipation is not something we are prepared any longer to defer to a forever postponed tomorrow, or reduce to a mere echo of yesterday. We accept neither the arrow, nor the boomerang of time. What we desire instead, is to act in the present, to experience emancipation in all its fullness, in all its joy, here and now. We wish to redistribute the sensible, to give time back to the artisan, to name every second, to value every worker's tea break.

Ist Extract from 'The Capital of Accumulation' by Raqs Media Collective : On the Working Day

"In a sudden clearing in a corner of the slow incremental forest of Dharavi in Mumbai stands a volcanic crater, its ash fertilising and baking countless clay mugs. The mugs make their way into teashops. The tea, a sweet, hot, 'cutting' of chai, injects a shot of caffeine and calories into a multitude of bodies. A spark of energy jolts the body out of the fog of fatigue. The spark sets off a flame of concentrated labour, work continues till the next tea break. Calories burn like forest fires on the second shift of the working day.

And the working day is full of working bodies. I lift, I carry, I enter a multitude of keystrokes, I watch the clock, I drive, I strip, I skin, I shear, I turn lathes, I join, I screw, I fuck, I smelt, I stir, I pick, I choose, I count, I hold, I throw, I heave, I weld, I go from door to door to door with things to sell, I fly, I turn the pages of a million files, I clean mountains of dust, I gather kilotons of garbage, I cover up after. Sometimes I just wait, sometimes I run on empty.

Every tea break is a battle, a campaign in the long history of class antagonism. How often, how long, when, where shall we drink tea? Every second and every calorie is fought for on the shop floor.

Each fraction of time saved is put away in trying to understand the ghost in the machine. Workers write, read, collect figures and statistics, haunt libraries and printing presses, publish, converse, argue, drink tea and class-struggle deep into the night.

Solidarity is inhaled with every shared cigarette. Gdansk and Warsaw are translated into Hindi and Marathi but the longest strike in the history of the world turns into the biggest lock out. Textile mill after textile mill closes its gate. The outside flows into the megacity, the land is absorbed, the body is spat out. Bombay becomes a city with a hole in its heart.

Elsewhere, at another edge of the forest of Mumbai, a mall and a back office complex have parachuted onto a garbage dump. People who work here speak of their computers malingering. The untreated garbage under the foundations is releasing fumes that interfere with electrical signals. Perhaps these fumes make workers uneasy, which in turn makes for an accumulation of errors. The undergrowth haunts my working day.

The city, compliant to the demands of expansion, Capital's highest image of itself, grows at astonishing speed with the money spun out of the debris of the working day. Records are set for endurance. A stadium grows out of the rubble of post second world war Warsaw. Construction workers are asked to set records, to hit targets, just like sprinters and sharp shooters. Some even get medals.

At the city centre grows the shiny new MDM development, personally supervised by the President of the People's Republic. New houses for new bodies. An old facility is renamed the Rosa Luxemburg Electric Light Bulb Factory, to honour a heroine of the working classes. Millions of lightbulbs glow, turning night into day, stretching the hours of work time, filling the after-hours city with adventure, with pleasures freely sought and given.

And now, when the lights have dimmed and the records tapered,

the athletic excesses of the plan are abandoned. The Rosa Luxemburg Electric Light Bulb factory grows derelict, awaiting redevelopment. The building acquires a new ecology. The market's invisible hand is a fractured limb. The factory turns into a suitable venue for undertaking new readings of the Accumulation of Capital. (Raqs walking, reading shooting)

The undergrowth haunts my memory of production. “

2nd Extract from the ‘Capital of Accumulation’ : Revoltage

In the equation between what the world is and what we want it to be, why is it that the question of limits generally weighs in on the side of the questioned, rarely, if ever, on the side of the obeyed?

As if to hear - “What exists, exists. The reality of Capital is also its eternity” were also at the same time to be told - “Be realistic what you ask for. There are limits to how much can be altered”.

When Lenin said Communism = Workers' power + Electricity, did he know that the equation could also be written as -

Communism - Workers' Power = Electricity.

Can the relations that we desire be written in terms of addition and subtraction?

Unravel a productivity index and you get plenty of detail. Eyestrain, repetitive stress injury, the toxicity of mercury, the shortening of breaks and the intrusion of the supervisor...

You also get daydreams, chitchat, gossip, rumours, the

thousandfold daily mutinies and routine skirmishes between desire and order.

A little more voltage in the soul to combat the exhaustion of the body, and then again some more.

Who has ever measured revoltage?"

The intersection of art and life which has occurred in our times renders all of life, in all its ordinariness, subject to the desire for transformation. They can ignite strange sources of light. If art is about the transformation of the commonplace into some special zone of attention, then the artist's job today is the comprehensive transformation of life itself. This reverses Plato's banishment of the 'maker', the practitioner, the teller of fictions from the realm of citizenship. The artist is the one who stands on the grounds of the commons, not the one who lurks in a private domain of chores and business.

Today, it may not be necessary to be a citizen in order to be an artist, and we are all familiar with the phenomenon of the genius artist who removes himself or herself from society in order to concentrate on the purity of their calling, but it could be said that it is urgently necessary to be an artist in order to be a citizen, if we are to understand citizenship in any fulsome way.

Ranciere says -

"the ordinary becomes beautiful as a trace of the true. And the ordinary becomes a trace of the true if it is torn from its obviousness in order to become a hieroglyph, a mythological or phantasmagoric figure. This phantasmagoric dimension of the true, which belongs to the aesthetic regime of the arts, also played an essential role in the formation of the critical paradigm of the human and social sciences. The Marxist theory of Fetishism is the most striking testimony of this fact. Commodities must be torn out of their trivial appearances, made into phantasmagoric objects in order to be interpreted as the expression of society's contradictions." (The Politics of Aesthetics)

The Transformation of the Commonplace

This is a different, more creative understanding of the phantasmagoric in comparison to Adorno's dour definition of the phantasmagoric as the "*occlusion of the production by the appearance of the product*". The point is not that the product is concealed by the fetish, or that use value is subsumed under the mask of exchange value. The point is, that for the table, (and here we remember Marx's table dancing definition of commodity in Capital Volume I) to enter the world as an object to be exchanged it must be haunted by its commodity form. The phantom, or spectre, of the table qua commodity must be projected, like a spectre in a phantasmagoric play on to the physical form of the table. It must possess the table as spirits possess mediums. It must speak through it in the language of abstract generalized exchange. Considered this way, Adorno is wrong. The spectre of the commodity does not conceal the real, its appearance manifests the reality of capital. The spirit that possesses the medium's body is capable of prophecies and divinations.

In essence, this spectre, this ghost of desiccated life and dead labour, is a product of a certain calculation of time. Each day drops half dead at the altar of Capital and Empire, giving up its ghost. What remains is recycled for the next day. Each day is framed. Every calendrical marking is an index of endurance. Days are shaved, sharpened and divided in labour. The score of the working week is inscribed and erased - between time given over and time taken away, between the time that gets counted and the time that runs out. Over-time gets longer over time.

What happens when we begin to pay attention to the seconds and the hours? We remember them, tell stories about them, make poems out of tea breaks and songs out of time stolen from labouring. It is the gossip and idle chatter of seconds and hours that makes for society. We know what we know about each other because we tell each other the public secrets of capital. Stretched end to end, this chatter turns into history. This is not a matter of parcelling out epochs to be marshalled into the chronicle of nations. It is rather the matter of constructing the memory of society through stories and testimonies, through the magic lantern show of the archive of the everyday.