

WEIRD TIMES

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Images selected by Yuri Pattison



“I think the reason that we’ve become so much more interested in the moon in recent years is because the planet reached a tipping point four or five years ago when we’re now in a situation where more than 50% of the planet live in cities. Which means that generally they don’t see the stars as well as they would have done in generations past. So I think that’s why the moon has taken on this special significance. It can be seen from a bright lit city.”

– Leo Enright, Space journalist¹

“Perhaps it is the menstrual sound of the ocean or the occult influence of the moon, but every time she returns to her native land, she immediately has her period.”

– Jean Baudrillard²

What did Baudrillard know about this?

¹ @BBCNewshour (BBC Newshour). “Why are we so fascinated by the moon? Space journalist Leo Enright on tonight’s #supermoon 🌕 <http://bbc.in/2gajJNV>.” Twitter, 14 November, 2016, 11:57PM. <https://twitter.com/BBCNewshour/status/798193237504602113>.

² Baudrillard, Jean. *Cool Memories II: 1987-1990*. Translated by Chris Turner, Duke University Press, 1996. 24.



Time has historically been written and mediated by powerful infrastructures, which they in turn enable. Remarking on the Chip Scale Atomic Clock, the most accurate and current technology for time-telling developed by the military, Chief for Positioning, Navigation and Timing Branch of The CERDEC,³ John del Colliano explains, “The goal is to provide complete atomic clock capabilities for weapons, weapon systems and the dismounted Soldier.” Weapons hinge on exact time-telling. The Chip Scale Atomic Clock was built to “support efforts to provide highly accurate location and battlefield situational awareness for the dismounted soldier, even in the temporary absence of GPS capability.”⁴ While there are limited civilian applications, the Chip Scale Atomic Clock also supports television broadcasting and high frequency finance trading, each industrial application necessitating the most exact, atomised measurements of time. Today, GPS time originates from a master clock within the US Naval Observatory in DC.⁵

War power has rested upon time-telling as an accelerant and lubricant. Invented in 1761 by a Yorkshire carpenter by the name of John Harrison, the marine chronometer was a time-keeping device by observation of celestial bodies that became essential for the global expansion of European Empires and the colonial mercantile trade.⁶ Before the invention of the marine chronometer, captains struggled to tell time on ships using sundials, and to be without such critical orientation prevented the accurate measurement of

3 Otherwise known as the United States Army Combat Capabilities Development Command

4 “Miniaturized Atomic Clock to Support Soldiers in Absence of GPS.” *www.army.mil*, www.army.mil/article/88361/miniaturized_atomic_clock_to_support_soldiers_in_absence_of_gps.

5 “GPS Timing Products.” *GPS Timing Products - Naval Oceanography Portal*, www.usno.navy.mil/USNO/time/gps.

6 “Insight: Barraud’s Weight and the Marine Chronometer: SJX Watches.” *SJX*, watchesbysjx.com/2020/08/marine-chronometer-barraud-weight-middle-temperature-error.html.



the time it took to travel from point A (always in reference to Greenwich Mean Time) to point B, a set of variables and constants essential to the calculus of navigation and ascertaining longitudinal positions. As a system, Greenwich Mean Time maps this orbital geopolitical influence around the metropole, describing a global time zone and geography that pivots from Great Britain as 00:00, the central standard. The Royal Navy was Great Britain's critical arm in taking "command of oceans and maritime routes," and thereby the violent establishment of colonies, "the new zones of influence with riches to conquer and untold opportunities for trade."⁷ In 1884, the International Meridian Conference in Washington DC set the meridian line at Greenwich. Ten years later, there was an attempt to bomb the Royal Observatory, the symbol of Greenwich Mean Time, hatched by a 26-year-old Frenchman and anarchist who arrived in Greenwich at the Observatory, and although the details are unknown, there was a "miscalculation or some clumsy bungling," which led to the man detonating the bomb while still holding it. He later died of his injuries.⁸

The marine chronometer and itinerant time-keeping innovations came to powerfully shape the order and tempo that colonies abided by in relation to the metropole. "Indolent time-mindless Orientals"⁹ was the phrase the British used to describe Egyptians, a logic that British railway engineers believed they must counter by building efficiency and punctuality in the form of scheduling, policy guidelines and protocols in the construction of Egyptian trains. Foreign supervision and fines were used to pressure Egyptian drivers

⁷ "The Marine Chronometer, Invention and Rivalry on the High Seas – FHH Journal." *FHH Journal The Marine Chronometer Invention and Rivalry on the High Seas Comments*, 13 Sept. 2018, journal.hautehorlogerie.org/en/the-marine-chronometer-invention-and-rivalry-on-the-high-seas/.

⁸ "Astronomers and The Anarchist Bomber." *Royal Museums Greenwich*, www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/astronomers-anarchist-bomber.

⁹ Barak, On. *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt*. University of California Press, 2013. 9.



towards conforming to efficiency. *Drive faster*. Adhering to exact time affected not only the experience of passengers on these trains but also emanated a whole culture of labour and class relations across the building of the infrastructure at large. Even as speed brought other risks in street traffic, its dangers were “unevenly” felt across cities. Cultural historian On Barak explains, “Drivers tended to stop or decelerate near stations only for European passengers and for women, while local Egyptian men were forced to jump on and off moving trams.” Described as a “political hazard in Egyptian periodicals,” the bureaucratic momentum towards efficiency on trains “[fueled] an already intense unease with what were seen as European standards of dehumanising swiftness and efficiency.”¹⁰ This came to infiltrate all realms of Egyptian work and life.

This temporal severance embodied the paradigmatic shift of the “Egyptian state from the Ottoman Empire,” bringing it “in tandem with the country’s synchronisation with and incorporation into the global market of cotton, finance, news, transport, and increasingly direct yet never full-fledged forms of European imperialism.”¹¹ Temporal hegemony crept into labour in the colonies as a coercive tool, and helped furnish the project of empire. “‘Telling time’ involved the emergence of a centralised state equipped with modern legal, military, educational, commercial, administrative, and material technologies,”¹² Barak argues. So it is only logical that where time was most valuable, labour became the critical frontline site of anti-colonial resistance. During the 1910 railway workers’ insurrection, “workers everywhere deployed work stoppages and slowdowns as a means of labour militancy, in early twentieth-century Egypt slowness and tardiness could also become embodied modes of anticolonial resistance,” subverting “railway, tramway and telegraph

10 Barak. *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt*. 10.

11 Barak. 147.

12 Ibid.



networks,”¹³ and inducing lags and suspension of the system—in turn, thwarting infrastructures of the empire. Wasting time became a counter-hegemonic and anti-colonial strategy in colonial Egypt: “The 1910 railway workers’ insurrection was one of several small-scale rehearsals for a widespread uprising at the end of the decade. Egypt’s 1919 anticolonial revolution was mainly waged along the railway, tramway, and telegraph networks. Indeed, the “‘networked’ nature of the colonial project in Egypt opened it up for contestation and disruption along technological lines.”¹⁴

In contrast, rising at the fault lines of advancing globalisation, the Jura Federation, mainly watchmakers from the eponymous canton in western Switzerland formed in the late 1860s, became the geographic center of the First International Anarchist Coalition under Mikhail Bakunin. The Jura Federation established the early guiding principles of anarchism, articulating a political position that was anti-authoritarian and socialist, but in contrast to Karl Marx, was interested in the “total abolition of the state.”¹⁵ This represents what historian Wolfgang Eckhart argues is the “first schism of socialism,” formed between Bakunin and Marx.¹⁶ These highly skilled craftsmen from Jura made timepieces and “standardised products for the mass market in Europe and America.” As an export-oriented part of the industry, these watchmakers were “by and large free of state or industry regulations,” which made them simultaneously more vulnerable to the valleys of the international consumer economy. These workers out of necessity “had to become

13 Barak. 14.

14 Ibid.

15 M. Bakounine and W. Mroczkowski, ‘Discours de Bakounine et de Mroczkowski au deuxième Congrès de la Paix, à Berne’, *Kolokol*, 1 December 1868. 213–14.

16 Eckhardt, Wolfgang. *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Working Men’s Association*. PM Press, 2016.



active themselves,”¹⁷ where the local government failed to give material assistance or make political impact, and hence organised and operated politically outside of the state through “unionised resistance, boycotts, industrial action and the establishment of strike funds.”¹⁸ The very nature of their work tethered the Jura watchmakers to global economies, allowing them distance from their own state to mount a political position and see the liberation of the worker as uniquely anti-authoritarian and in opposition to the state.

Max Weber, pondering the protestant capitalist influence over time-keeping, remarked, “Remember, that ‘time is money.’... That it is the spirit of capitalism which here speaks in characteristic fashion, no one will doubt.”¹⁹ When Great Britain adopted a standardised time in the 1880s, based on Greenwich Mean Time, it was out of a need to make uniform railway timetables, as well as more broadly, a desire to ensure “meetings and communication worked better and more efficiently,”²⁰ historian Chris McKay argues. Contemporary and everyday time-keepers such as analogue clocks render time material, describing them visually or audibly. Mounted on a wall or wrapped around a wrist, a dial with its second hands ticking, climbing incrementally around a dial, defines the dominant trope of time. We perceive time’s passing by the sound of plastic or metal moving by mechanised or motorised control, this very design is part of a lineage of systems and conventions of time-keepers, built and serviced by craftsmen, seamen and statesmen. A more commercially available time-keeping counterpart to the Chip Scale Atomic Clock, the Real-Time Clock, or RTC for short, is built as an integrated circuit and measures the passage of time, requiring

17 Eckhardt. 13.

18 Ibid.

19 Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2003. 49–51.

20 McKay, Chris. *Big Ben: The Great Clock and The Bells at the Palace of Westminster*. Oxford University Press, 2010. 263.



only an extremely low power source. The tiny device operates without the need for a signal, it simply counts time. The system is installed in most personal computers and servers—and of course, our phones. When connected to a signal, our electronic devices are currently calibrated to UTC or Coordinated Universal Time, but that itself, as anthropologist Kevin K. Birth argues, is a “duplicitous” construct. “UTC is a weighted average of times indicated by over 300 atomic clocks,” Birth explains. “This means that the UTC which the time services of these laboratories distribute is not authentic UTC, but an estimation of UTC.”²¹ And although these differences in the calculation are “too small to matter,”²² UTC as a calculus of time-keeping regulates the majority of our electronic devices that have made watches obsolete.

Empires seem intent on counting. Lisa Baraitser, scholar and author of *Enduring Time*, describes the temporal shift over the last century with regards to the “temporality of a factory line” that came to define modernity, and made up the “certainties of empire”²³ in the post-Enlightenment West. The transition she writes, “from the strict linear time of the Fordist production line governed by the factory clock, to the post-Fordist obsession with productivity, creativity and above all a flexible work-force, giving rise to a present in which all time – work, social, leisure, family, ‘quality’, or unemployed time – is penetrated or ‘qualified by the logic of work.’”²⁴ This is what Ivor Southwood describes as the globalised economy, networked across time zones, as “non-stop inertia,”²⁵ that must constantly update itself, resulting in a population that Baraitser interprets as a “population revving up with nowhere

21 Birth, Kevin K. *Time Blind Problems in Perceiving Other Temporalities*. Springer International Publishing, 2018. 6.

22 Ibid.

23 Baraitser, Lisa. *Enduring Time*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 143.

24 Baraitser. 9.

25 Southwood, Ivor. *Non-stop Inertia*. Zero Books. 2011.



to go.”²⁶ Measuring and regulating productivity, the clock is a mechanism of anxiety, tracing its ephemeral contours as moments that relentlessly march forward.

Like a common cooking timer, a countdown clock works backwards in measures of anticipation. Examples such as Dublin’s “ill-fated Millennium Clock,”²⁷ which was later “removed due to technical difficulties just 5 months” after its construction. Weighing both “hopes and fears at the close of the 20th century,”²⁸ the Millennium Clock in Dublin willed time-telling as a material and collective public ritual in Dublin’s city center on the west side of O’Connell Bridge, where it counted the number of seconds to the year 2000, partly submerged in the River Liffey. Such a clock bestows a kind of optimism, a promise of renewal at the centennial shift, but after being turned on in March 1996, the clock was ruined and faced several technical problems, including being obscured by mud from the river. Even though it cost £250,000 to construct, Dublin’s Millennium Clock was then dismantled that same August.²⁹ Modern European time holds this kind of “suspension between what is rendered as a dead past, and a progressive future that holds all the promise of betterment in a generation always beyond our own,” Baraitser remarks. Yet, “modern time itself contains within it obdurate strands of anachronistic; of slowed, stilled or stuck time.”³⁰ The Millennium Clock, becoming entangled with the flows of the river bed, stuck and ruined in the mud, rings as divine poetics.

26 Baraitser. 9.

27 “Yuri Pattison.” The Douglas Hyde Gallery, www.douglashydegallery.com/yuri-pattison.

28 Nolan, Brendan. *Dublin Urban Legends*. History Press. 13–16.

29 The Irish Times. “Lottery Examines Clock Options.” *The Irish Times*, The Irish Times, 25 Feb. 2013, www.irishtimes.com/news/lottery-examines-clock-options-1.97304.

30 Baraitser. 6.



Operating from 19 December 1994 to 30 June 1997, the Hong Kong Countdown Clock was erected in Beijing to count down the handover of sovereignty between Great Britain and the People's Republic of China. Wu Hung observes that “‘Counting down’ is thus a powerful symbol of (and an effective means for) termination and revolution: the old Hong Kong will die and a new Hong Kong will be born at point zero.”³¹ A historical milestone typically exists in the past, but a countdown clock’s very motion of time-telling wills a historical milestone into the future. But durations of great change, or crisis, defy this. “Slow death prospers not in traumatic events, as discrete time-framed phenomena like military encounters and genocides appear to do, but in temporally labile environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself...”³² explains Lauren Berlant, but such durations of entropy are endured over extended, ambiguous durations. Such a public display as the Hong Kong Countdown Clock was erected as a political statement and consequence of mounting political tension between geopolitical powers. The Hong Kong countdown clock as a monument made time-telling into a “warning,” as if through counting towards a date, the clock summoned a historical change; it displayed the exact moment with certainty whereby such a wholly paradigmatic shift would be realised. That as a monument among others in Tiananmen Square, the clock gestured that Hong Kong’s changeover of sovereignty would be certain and eternal. Indeed, death is at the core of temporal anxiety; none such symbolic face exudes this doom and dread more than a timer, displaying by the seconds the present moving towards the future as a relentless expiring duration.

We seem so certain we know what time it is. We have various

31 Hung, Wu. *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and The Creation of a Political Space*. Reaktion Books, 2005. 353.

32 Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2012. 100.



technologies that help us orient ourselves, but in surrendering to these dominant modes of time, may we have also released our perception and abilities to see other modes and durations? That we have surrendered certain times: How may we have become blind to other forms of time as the *longue duree*? Lived time counters numeric order. It challenges sense-making. Historical change in this sense is a largely unintelligible event in an everyday sense. Not only the historian's task to bear, how may we all see the vision of history as lived? That this ephemeral present is the very perceivable and critical challenge against such obdurate notions of time, suspended, invented and sanitised in static categories and by horological convention. "When time is caught in the fold, it is in danger of becoming hidden."³³ Baraitser warns. But what exactly is being obscured?

Before the marine chronometer, did daydreams, like sirens, visit sailors in the open sea, interrupting and warping their abilities to tell exactly the duration of passing time? Maybe a conversation drifts between two seamen and they've lost count, and before long, they are many nautical miles off route. Other than celestial bodies, the sun, the stars and planets that situate us, how may we ask ourselves what time it is now through other earthly means? How do bodies tell time? After long haul travel, our bodies spend days catching up to the velocity of our movement, and its fatigue makes evident our recalibration. Our bodies keep many things, full of memory, yearning and entanglements, a body is an obstinate keeper of trauma. "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting," scholar Cathy Caruth remarks on memory, "but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of [the traumatic historical experience]."³⁴ Such terms as "body

33 Baraitser. 47.

34 Caruth, Cathy. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of

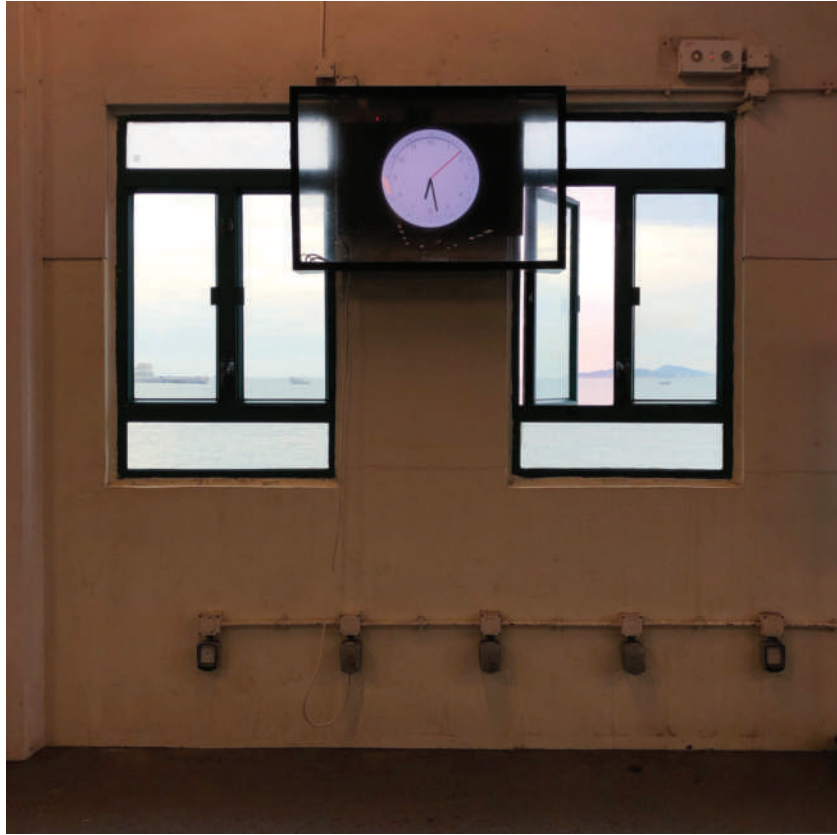


memory” are theories that attempt to explain how the body is able to store memory, and yet, that trauma can be inscribed into DNA and get passed down is inconclusive.³⁵ How may we calibrate our perception towards these hidden, counter tempos? These connections between the body keeping time and memory are difficult to trace—trauma emerges unexpectedly and we may return again and again to these scenes in our minds, or they may creep in more obtusely in more visceral responses—but at best, these durations are as opaque and troubling as a haunting. In a different sense of time in the body through trauma, we are confronted by the simultaneities and multiplicities in scales of time between inherited, past and present. How our bodies keep time or history is unknowable.

History.” *Yale French Studies*, No. 79, *Literature and the Ethical Question*, 1991. 187.

35 Carey, Benedict. “Can We Really Inherit Trauma?” *The New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/health/mind-epigenetics-genes.html.

I wrote this at work, wrestling and editing this text at my desk between e-mails at my day job at a company that happens to produce watches. The office sits in a high-rise with a panoramic view of a neighborhood in Hong Kong's New Territories, and on a sunny day, the building, the tallest in the neighborhood, casts shadows that move slowly across the valley upon buildings and intersections below. Can reading be a form of time-keeping? A second or two passes and you get to the next sentence. How much time has passed since you began this? There is another sense of time that exists in the immersion of a text, meandering through a duration from A to B. When you look up from this, how much time has passed?



Images

1. Yuri Pattison, Tiffany Sia. WhatsApp conversation screenshot, images of clock on Lamma Island. 2021.
2. Yuri Pattison. Research footage of the United States Naval Observatory Master Clock Display, Washington D.C. March 2020.
3. Microsemi Corporation. Chip Scale Atomic Clock promotional video.
4. Yuri Pattison. Westminster 2018.
5. Microsemi Corporation. Chip Scale Atomic Clock promotional video.
6. National Museum of American History. Frequency & Time Systems Inc. Cesium-Beam Frequency Standard (atomic clock) used aboard NTS-2, the second of the Navigation Technology Satellites (NTS) launched to validate the key concepts and hardware for the Global Positioning System (GPS).
7. Unknown Photographer. Millennium Clock, River Liffey, Dublin. 1996.
8. Independent News and Media. Millenium clock is restored in the River Liffey in Dublin after repair circa April 1996, Part of the Independent Newspapers Ireland/NLI Collection.
9. AP Archive. "China - Hong Kong countdown," Hong Kong handover countdown clock in Tiananmen Square. 23 March 1997.
10. Microsemi Corporation. Chip Scale Atomic Clock promotional video.
11. Microsemi Corporation. Chip Scale Atomic Clock promotional video.
12. Yuri Pattison. Lamma Island Ferry Pier, Hong Kong, 3 August, 2019.
13. Tiffany Sia. Lamma Island Ferry Pier, Hong Kong, 14 June, 2020.

