

“Narratime”: Postmodern Temporality and Narrative

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Abstract: The “default mode” for too many historians is a discredited view of time. Uncomfortable with disciplinary uncertainty and distrustful of disorder, historians resort to linear chronology and a conception of a neutral temporal framework whose origin is Newtonian. The author first draws on a variety of postmodern theorists to argue for the legitimacy of “multiple temporality” and a plurality of non-hegemonic cultural narratives. He then surveys developments in photography, the Western novel, Third World literature, sculpture, and recorded music. These aesthetic contexts display an extraordinary richness of temporal representation, a richness that historians would do well to attend to. Our technological environment, he concludes, has “refigured” both time and space in very Einsteinian ways. Thus, as post-modern culture multiplies temporal and narrative possibilities, it will become untenable to embrace conventional senses of linear chronology. Theorists discussed include Raymond Williams, Walter Benjamin, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth and Roland Barthes. Analysis is of such artists as Faith Ringgold, Jenny Holzer, Ann Hamilton and Barbara Kruger.

The medium of historical time is a construct and itself a representation of the first magnitude. This “history” may be one of the most specifically modern achievements. Without the production of history by modern culture, that is, without the production of a neutral time analogous to the neutral space evident in realistic painting, we would be without that temporal medium that makes possible an activity unknown in classical times... It is demonstrable that “history” belongs to the same descriptive conventions that made possible the painting and architecture of the Renaissance and the empirical science of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

— Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (1992)

Vladimir: What was I saying? We could go on from there.

Estragon: What were you saying when?

Vladimir: At the very beginning,

Estragon: The very beginning of WHAT?

Vladimir: This evening... I was saying... I was saying ...

Estragon: I’m not a historian.

—Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: Tragicomedy in 2 Acts* (1954)

Time and Historical Narrative

“Narrative” is one of the most problematic terms bobbing along in the swift currents of postmodern cultural debate. It is particularly a buzzword of this theoretical moment. In what follows, discussion of “narrative” will also imply “time” (lived historical time as well as temporal dimensions of various kinds of narratives). Collapsing the two terms together, let us consider a new coinage: “narratime.” “Narratime” in fact yokes together three concepts central to history: knowledge (the Latin *narrare*, meaning to know), time, and story.

The passage quoted above from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* further illustrates cultural assumptions about the historian’s role and abilities. The two famous tramps are characteristically confused about their whereabouts and the sequence of their evening’s few events and frequent conversational exchanges. Vladimir insists on recapitulating all that has transpired. When Estragon protests that he is “not a historian,” he expresses the view that the historian is one who remembers thoroughly, who can reproduce accurately what took place and what was spoken. Most importantly, one relies on the historian to place all

events and episodes in the correct order. Or, as John Cleese put it in a Monty Python skit about a Shakespearean actor, “Not only do you have to remember all the words, but it’s just as important to get them all in the right order.”

Samuel Beckett *and* Monty Python? Take your pick: either way we enter the realm of postmodern culture. Reasserting the importance of space as a cultural category, while pointing to alternative temporalities, postmodern aesthetics and cultural practices can be viewed as applications of Einsteinian temporal relativity to broad categories of contemporary cultural experience. Thus they pose a challenge to fields in the human sciences that have relied on unproblematically sequential, linear notions of time. History is the discipline most obviously challenged to rejustify its disciplinary status as well as its epistemological claims in response to postmodernism’s multiple temporalities.

Whether or not they need postmodern theory to realize it, historians should be well equipped to understand that people experience multiple aspects of time in their lives. There is the lived time of one’s daily existence, the time of memory (our own personal memories and the memories recounted to us by the persons around us), and there is the time, often at odds with conscious, lived time, of our unconscious mind, a time of dreaming, involuntary memory, and repressed drives. At any given moment in our lives, we operate at the intersection of these multiple temporal modes. Any one moment in cultural history provides, in terms of memory, influence, and orientation toward both past and future, multiple experiences of time and therefore complex modes of representing and recounting experience. Multiple narratives, from oral culture to archival record, are therefore generated.

Raymond Williams provided a very useful way of thinking about cultural experience in terms of a three part scheme he designated by the terms “dominant, residual, and emergent.” At any one point we have the given dominant culture, and historians are in the habit of using dominant tendencies to characterize periods of history. “Periodization” is but a convenience and a disciplinary convention through which we make chronology manageable and intelligible to ourselves and others. We all comfortably assume that we know what we are talking about when we use a period label like “Middle Ages” or “Early Modern.” But history is far from reducible to mere chronology, any more than it is reducible (or should be reduced) to dominant traits. For as Williams showed in book after book, within the so-called dominant culture there are always residual elements of previous cultural stages, as well as emergent elements of a future culture. Divisions according to class, ideology, or aesthetics may all refer to these same distinctions.

Many of the writers we like to call “postmodern” are most adept at dramatizing the residual or emergent subcultures within the dominant one, perhaps creating the literary equivalent of postmodern architecture, which strikes the casual observer as futuristic while nevertheless subsuming within itself numerous references to earlier architectural eras. John Berger’s novels about peasant life in southern France provide vivid and moving portrayals of people attempting to carry out their lives in ways similar to generations before them, despite the dislocation of the late twentieth century. The genius of Berger’s art is his affirmation of the inherent dignity and worth of the residual culture within the dominant one, with more than a suggestion that an emergent culture might, through dialectic sublation, recuperate those residual elements in a more utopian manner.

Why, then, do many historians persist in presenting historical time as a linear continuum? After all, any period the historian chooses to study will prove to be replete with the myriad orientations toward past, present, and future time that greatly complicate its temporal character through the multiple narratives competing within it. The dominant, residual, and emergent groups all tell themselves different stories about themselves—produce competing myths—from the narrative imposed by the daily newspaper’s headlines to the lively exchanges heard at the corner bar. Faced with the task of communicating historical knowledge effectively, historians feel the powerful lure of linear chronology in order to produce a single narrative. The impulse derives from the impossible task of teaching, as well as from the desperate need to embrace a shared disciplinary paradigm.

What else unites us as historians? Some might answer that it is the shared obligation to teach introductory history courses. Developmental psychologists inform us that the typical first-year college student has only just begun to acquire the ability to fathom the complexities of time, i.e., to appreciate the amount of time that has actually elapsed and to calculate the ratio between one’s own life span and that vast chronology. We have but to overhear students’ conversation (“No he’s a *lot* older. He must be 25 or 26.”) to realize how fragile is their grip on a sophisticated sense of temporality. So we fall into the least common denominator of linear chronology, and in the process, we produce a fictional narrative: “First this happened, then this happened. Later a lot more happened” etc., etc. We create these fictions to reduce the complexity of our task *and* because it comforts us and reassures us that we really know just what we’re talking about.

In distinct but complementary ways, psychoanalysis and advanced theoretical physics offer complex temporal models that speak to dimensions of the human experience of time that historians ought to consider. It may seem surprising to cite Freud in this regard, for his ideas are often treated as if they provide some kind of map of the unconscious—a static taxonomy of the psyche. But Jacques Lacan, Freud’s most creative “misreader,” called attention to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, one of Freud’s most challenging books, in which, Lacan claimed, Freud “temporalized” the unconscious (Lacan, 1977: 3-4). Freud does this in terms of the drives (*Trieben*) that not only affect mental life, but infuse all organic matter. By way of explaining how the mutually conflicting drive toward the preservation of life and the so-called “death drive” alternate within the same organism, Freud describes a “vacillating rhythm” that could easily be understood as a temporal dialectic.

The concept of time moving in simultaneously conflicting directions is familiar to students of theoretical physics, particularly

those bent on that synthesis of quantum physics and cosmology known as “grand unified theory.” In his book *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, Stephen Hawking discusses what he calls the “arrows of time” unleashed by the “big bang” and continuing in their multiple directions throughout our expanding universe (Hawking, 1988: 143-53). For everyday purposes, and for obvious convenience, what we choose to call “time” is but one of these “arrows.”

Similarly, historians tend to select but one type of historical time—linear chronology—out of a range of possibilities available to them. Historians have been unusually resistant to the concept of the relativity of time, and only a few have been willing to consider psychoanalytic theory as a source of ideas that may be very relevant to the way we envision history and historical knowledge. Dialectical models of historical process, while adhering largely to a linear chronology, have introduced many refinements in conceptualizing the uneven, seemingly contradictory rate or pace of historical change. The Frankfurt School theorists even introduced a “negative” dialectics that could account for the “retrograde motion” historical process often seems to follow.

Associated for a time with this school, one of the most brilliant and creative writers within the modern historical materialist tradition was Walter Benjamin. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin wrote in often poetic terms of the nature of history and historical change. While eager to embrace the utopianism his own politics encouraged, he was nevertheless quite skeptical of the “progressivism” assumed by many historians. From Benjamin’s point of view, most historians rendered both past and present static (“reified”) by conferring an overly orderly character on a steadily marching chronology, always culminating somehow in the present—the “everything leads up to us” syndrome. For Benjamin there was nothing orderly or automatic to be assumed about historical process. From a Paul Klee painting he borrowed his most compelling image: that of the “angel of history” facing the past but propelled steadily toward the future by a storm (“progress”) blowing “from paradise”; thus the angel is prevented from tending to the human wreckage mounting up at his feet.

For Benjamin, historical knowledge was the most forceful way to combat bourgeois ideology, which depends so heavily on reification and an ahistorically “mythic” cast of thought. This ideology fosters a sense of inevitability about the present social formation, to which historians contribute as well when they present history in a conventionally linear pattern. Historians are by no means immune to the logic of reification that prefers the “natural” to the historical. For Benjamin, history refers to the turbulent, open-ended processes of social or political life that resist distillation into myth or essence, and indeed few historians are willing to risk their precious certainties by surrendering to the maelstrom Benjamin believed actual history to be.

In other words, historians may well be threatened by the real turmoil of their object of study, participating in an elaborate “taming” process through which, in the name of orderly understanding and transmission of historical knowledge, they domesticate and make routine the potentially explosive and contradictory character of historical study. Alternate concepts of historical time are among the casualties of this process, like limbs that must be lopped off in order to fit the Procrustean bed of the historical profession. The way most historians practice “business as usual” discourages consideration of multiple temporalities and multiple narratives.

Historians’ participation in the ongoing debate over curriculum demonstrates one particular aspect of this “taming” process. Whenever curriculum is discussed and assertions about students’ learning abilities or needs are being made, historians in particular tend to express the view that their subject should be learned in a careful order, proceeding from broad survey courses to progressively more specialized ones. The assertion of the desirability of an ordered sequence of courses seems almost unassailable, and I find that regrettable. Many historians seem very defensive on this point, which may be related to an uneasy sense of what the common features of the discipline are. Is there in fact a “canon,” for example? Perhaps conventional periodization and kinds of courses are the only shared items historians can collectively, and almost desperately, defend.

Historians and others who debate curriculum and canon issues love to frame their arguments in terms of students’ needs and the common cultural good, but why not turn that argument back on them? Are people any happier as the result of pursuing an orderly education? Is there any real evidence that one learns more effectively this way? If we were intellectually honest with ourselves, would we characterize our own education as orderly? It seems to be that one of the joys of learning is its often haphazard process, as one learns gradually where to fit certain things or how unexpectedly one may articulate knowledge from diverse areas.

Better the labyrinth than the perfectly proportioned pyramid of learning: if our postmodern culture helps us to realize the multiple narratives and myriad temporalities at work in history, then we should be able to realize as well that there is more than one path to the acquisition of historical knowledge and understanding. Experiencing history is an inherently disorderly process. Much of mental life, often its most creative aspects, is disorderly. The demand for more order and the demand for a master narrative go hand in hand. The sense of play and joyous affirmation that can animate the learning process can best be encouraged by an openness to alternate narratives and histories (including acceptance of the collapse of the distinction between “fiction” and “history”). New art and new ideas are nurtured by disorder. The full embrace of this creative disorder would truly constitute a “new world order.”

Postmodern Narratives and Historical Time

Does “postmodernism” designate a new cultural phase, or does it merely label tendencies long latent within Western culture? The emergence of such a question—in no way first phrased here—suggests the power of postmodern culture to raise major questions for history and related human sciences. I will consider, briefly, three general areas of contemporary cultural production that complicate or, as it were, “relativize,” the strictly linear chronological framework that has served for so long as “given” for the historical outlook. Put another way, chronology as an ordering, organizing principle for historical study has functioned as ideology in the most potent sense of that term: that which eludes questioning, seeming as it does to conform to common sense. The first is postmodern fiction, the second is art and performance, and the third concerns recent technological advances in recorded music.

Familiar concepts of historical time function much like aesthetic conventions. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, in her quite original and challenging book *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (1992), compares the “convention” or “humanist construction” of historical time to the “neutral” space of oil painting that emerges as an artistic convention during the Italian Renaissance. Historians familiar with recent debates concerning “objectivity” might observe that the unquestioned existence of this ether-like neutral historical time functions in an ideological sense similar to the elusive “objectivity.”

“History” itself Ermarth treats as the creation of modernism, sharing with an outmoded literary realism an insistence on tidy, uncomplicated chronology. She arrives at this conclusion by combining the insights of theoretical physics with her close readings of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Julio Cortazar, and Vladimir Nabokov, all of whom she considers postmodern writers. What particularly interests her are the narrative strategies through which they disrupt and call into question the (for her, ideological, constructed) convention of linear chronology in both historical narrative and realist fiction.

Robbe-Grillet’s *nouveau roman* disorients the reader in both time and space, as his fictions obsessively replay scenes and dispense with traditional plot lines and structures. Julio Cortazar’s *Hopscotch*, a postmodern novel par excellence, includes its author’s suggestions for reading the chapters out of sequence, or in an altered sequence, in order to produce quite different effects—a counter-narrative. Nabokov’s *Ada* features a paradoxical relationship between the amount of prose allotted its episodes and the amount of chronology expended in each of them. Much like the altered time of the dreaming unconscious, the shorter the chapter, the greater the lapse of time.

In her provisional, speculative manner, Ermarth begins to map out the baffling new terrain of a postmodern space-time manifest in what she calls the “paratactic” narrative strategies of recent experimental fiction. In place of customary uses of syntax in a (shall we say) Euclidean fiction that conveys the reader in straight lines from one fixed point to another, parataxis shifts the reader around among simultaneously unfolding spheres of experience. Spaces open up (something like the sense of social space explored by such postmodern theorists as Foucault or Deleuze & Guattari), become available for brief habitation, and then recede according to no absolute sense of chronology. Since the reader is invited to subvert the traditional sequence of the act of reading (especially true of Cortazar), the situation of the reader in the text is that of an object in the gravitational field of Einstein’s space-time, where the space is curved as a result of that intervention.

Ermarth’s insights concerning postmodern fiction’s challenge to historical time could work with quite a number of examples. Beyond Cortazar, Garcia Marquez and a number of other Latin American exemplars of so-called “Magic Realism” alter conventional senses of time through their improbable, logic-defying episodes. Closer to home, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) interweaves history, autobiography, dreams, fantasies, and hallucinations in a “magic realist” way. Recent postcolonial fictional narratives have explored non-linear temporalities through such effects as repetition and negation. Western literature is not without examples of this, as in the work of the aforementioned Samuel Beckett. Think of Molloy’s nearly incessant rituals with his “sucking stones,” or of the disorienting effect of the novel’s (*Molloy*) closing lines (Beckett, 1965: 176):

Then I went back into the house and wrote. It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining.

Much of postmodern art puts into practice often perplexing strategies of repetition, including repetitions that contain very slight variations. The visual art of Robert Longo or Cindy Sherman comes to mind, as does the “minimalist” music of Steve Reich or Philip Glass. But extremes of repetition, oddly numbing or mildly disturbing, are not the exclusive preserve of postmodern art. The social or political chaos of much of the contemporary world accounts for these same tendencies.

Elias Khoury’s *Little Mountain*, a novel published in a leading American university press’s “Emergent Literatures” series, is set in war-torn (as the cliché goes) Beirut. Like the chairs that proliferate in Ionesco’s absurdist comedy, one loses count of the number of times soldiers barge into the protagonist’s home and question his mother concerning his whereabouts. The scene replays like a videotape after constant rewinds, but the reader is haunted by the suspicion that the tape has been edited ever so slightly. Arguably, the temporal confusion produced through Khoury’s narrative is actually “realistic” given the setting of Beirut during its recent war, with its frequent coups, hostage crises, evacuations, battles, and, most significantly, layer upon layer of media “coverage.” As Wallace Stevens wrote, “in the presence of extraordinary actuality, consciousness takes the place of imagination.”

Those who have studied the narratives of emergent literatures (by which we usually mean rich but long-suppressed literary traditions re-emerging in postcolonial cultures) within their cultural contexts are struck by the close link between writers and their fellow citizens in third-world societies, and by the role literature plays in collective historical memory. I am completely convinced that one finds far less historical amnesia and much keener political awareness linked to memory and to what John Berger has called “ways of telling” among the people of these “developing” societies than one finds in contemporary American culture. To lament, therefore, the abandonment of “narrative” by postmodern culture is to express a sense of loss that is by no means globally applicable. The writings of Fredric Jameson, focusing primarily on modern Western texts, have most convincingly explained the role of narrative as a repressed “political unconscious” lurking beneath the surface of a late capitalist culture that thrives on the erasure of politically inconvenient historical memory. Not surprisingly, he finds what is repressed in Western texts alive and thriving in postcolonial writing throughout the so-called Third World.

Writing and the Aesthetics of Postmodern Space-Time

Postmodern aesthetic domains beyond the literary feature tendencies that serve as well to multiply forms of narrative and, by extension, of temporality. An examination of postmodern visual culture must of course include the pervasive electronic media that go a long way toward defining the postmodern. Although the narrative strategies of film derive in part from the written word, we know full well that the cinema has introduced a wide range of compelling narrative possibilities appropriate to itself. And television fosters a distinctive narrative logic, one theorists are prone to describe as “serialized flow” further expanding the definition of what may qualify as narrative.

Of the many tendencies within the contemporary visual arts that might be cited, I would like to concentrate on a new kind of intervention into the space of the gallery, the museum, and even urban public spaces; such intervention is practiced by visual artists who remove the boundaries that previously separated painting or photography from literature, from technology, and from urban landscapes generally. The artists I use as examples incorporate written communication in visual media of one kind or another, commonly in ways that subvert our customary expectations about how and where we will encounter such communication.

A preoccupation with writing has been central to the work of several postmodern theorists. Jacques Derrida’s grammatical explorations provide the most obvious example. Roland Barthes, in his later work on photography and other subjects, tended to use “writing” to designate a wide range of practices, including sculpture, dance, cooking, architecture, and film. His earlier (1970) meditation on Japanese culture, *The Empire of Signs*, located nearly all of that culture’s visible activities in the generalized domain of “writing.” In Barthes’s work “writing” becomes a way of referring to all interventions, temporary or not, that can transform the spaces within which or the surfaces along which they appear. Thus, the stylized gestures of the tea ceremony qualify as “writing.”

Use of the written word by visual artists is one of our most noticeable contemporary affectations. Gallery and museum visitors can sometimes be heard to complain about this practice, perhaps resenting the time it can take to read the texts included in “paintings” or other media in what we think of as the plastic arts. Messages can be experienced as menacing, particularly when they appear to address the viewer aggressively. Barbara Kruger’s superimposition of written messages on clichéd photographic images seems to address an oppressor who should be blamed for the social ills the work examines. More often than not, this oppressor is a patriarchal one, as in the Kruger work that features a man, face shadowed by the brim of a fedora pulled down low on his brow, holding a finger before his lips. The caption reads “My silence is your pleasure.” The possessive “my” is that of a single woman, while “your” refers to men in the aggregate, implying the dominating voyeuristic pleasure that depends upon silent, objectified women. Or perhaps Kruger represents the message conformist society sends political dissidents.

Barbara Kruger’s work is a means of struggling against the mythic power of photographic images, which so often deny history and distill complex social realities into easily available slivers of frozen time. Jim Goldberg, who produced a fascinating 1985 study in photojournalism called *Rich and Poor*, combats the reifying tendency of photographs by encouraging his subjects to write lengthy captions to fill the large white borders he leaves beneath each print. Through this strategy, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, he “blasts open the continuum of history,” thawing these photographs out from their frozen position in time. In doing so, Goldberg diachronically redirects the “rhetoric of the image,” to use Barthes’s formulation.

Faith Ringgold, a contemporary African-American artist, not only places writing where it “doesn’t belong” in the sense of gallery space, but also includes it in a traditionally “folk” medium long assumed to be an expression of illiteracy: quilts. Ringgold’s “story quilts” are crowded equally with figures and texts. One needs a considerable investment of time to stand and read the stories. Perhaps in recognition of this constraint, Ringgold sees to it that printed flyers are available, so that viewers may read the complete texts at their convenience. The temporal significance of this practice seems twofold: the belated reading unfolds according to a temporal experience not normally duplicated in the gallery or museum. The time of the viewer’s reception of the work thus differs in the two settings, one of which is fully under the viewer’s control. Ringgold’s story quilts also make us aware of the “narratime” of folk culture’s oral traditions and of our present culture’s greatly diminished attention

spans. Placed within the confines of a contemporary gallery exhibition, the anachronistic text threatens to break the narrative frame within which it is presented.

Jenny Holzer's electronic signboard messages provide perhaps the most dramatic and most technologically "postmodern" example of the transformation of the space of an exhibition through the intervention of writing. Her art consists solely of words: printed texts affixed to walls, carved in stone benches or sarcophagi, and, especially, appearing in the dazzling sequences she alternates with "cool" subdued tones on the LED, or "light emitting diode" boards she programs masterfully. The messages consist often of simple maxims (she called her earliest body of work "Truisms") or inflammatory statements, such as "Raise boys and girls the same way" or "Private properly created crime," or the somewhat more complicated "Protect me from what I want." Sometimes Holzer offers longer texts, suggesting autobiographical narrative or accounts of disturbing dreams.

In a gallery or museum, Holzer's messages can alter dramatically a familiar space, as in her spectacular 1989-90 show at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. She "wrapped" her signboards in a pattern that coiled around the central gallery's famous spiral, and placed her carved stone benches around the perimeter of the main floor. The atmosphere thus created was at once funereal and vibrantly alive with the power of Holzer's constantly spiraling, pulsating messages. Concentration on reading subdued museum-goers and significantly reduced the normal noise level within the great hall.

Holzer's is an art meant for places far more public than privileged exhibition sites, and she has not hesitated to exploit its possibilities. Her messages have appeared on billboards, on New York City telephone booths, on railway cars in Hamburg, Germany, wreathed in Las Vegas neon outside Caesar's Palace, and in a memorable display on the huge "Spectacolor" signboard in Times Square, where, in 1982, the message "Private property created crime" could be seen, among others. "Raise boys and girls the same way" made an appearance on the electronic screen during a baseball game at San Francisco's Candlestick Park in 1987. Holzer's narratives intrude into and at least briefly transform the urban spaces within which one encounters them. Assuming one heeds them, the accelerated pace of one's daily rounds must be slowed, and a new temporal rhythm experienced. Even more than with Ringgold's story quilts, the time experienced is the time of reading.

I wish to describe one final example of what, for me, was a breathtaking use of written communication in a gallery space. In the fall of 1989, New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art featured a show called "Strange Attractors: Signs of Chaos," borrowing the phrase "strange attractors" from the new science of chaos, whose insights were to be illustrated by the art commissioned for the show. Ann Hamilton is an Ohio artist who contributed "Palimpsest," perhaps the most hauntingly enigmatic installation, one bearing a title rife with implications for recent literary theory, "Palimpsest" was a room whose surfaces were coated entirely in beeswax, a feature which necessitated the removal of all footwear by those curious to enter. The walls were papered over with loosely attached sheets of what might have been an everyday note pad. Each sheet was filled with cramped but neat handwriting. When one took the time to read a number of these, they appeared to be fragments of an autobiographical account of someone's experience of the Holocaust. Near the end of the little cubicle stood a large glass aquarium filled with giant snails or slugs dining on two large cabbages. Perhaps the cabbages invoke a staple of Central and East European cuisines, whose cultures consumed Jews and other minorities as surely as a mess of sauerkraut made with good cabbages.

This is one of the most extreme examples yet of the intrusion of the space (and the time) of reading into the space of gallery-going to observe ... what? Not exactly sculpture, and not painting. "Installation," catchall term of today's art world, will have to suffice. It is not only the textual space of reading that intrudes. Depending on the viewer's inclinations, one could spend hours reading the tiny notes affixed to Hamilton's beeswax surfaces. Why beeswax? Perhaps to suggest that twentieth-century civilization has worked as methodically at its elaborate orchestrations of slaughter as bees in their intricate hives. The association of the hive with death is underscored for me by a chilling quote from Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus*, in which Heurtebise, speaking to Orpheus before a mirror, remarks:

Besides, spend your life looking at yourself in a mirror, and you'll see Death at work like a swarm of bees storing up honey in a hive of glass. {Cocteau, 1963: 128}

Hamilton's strange installation furthermore brings about the intersection of several temporalities. There is the time that plays out in the handwritten memoirs, which we may choose to read in varying amounts. There is the time spent examining the installation, taking it all in. There is the time that elapses while the slugs feast on their cabbages, gnawing at them the way time erodes memory, represented by the yellowing bits of paper bearing witness to the Holocaust. In addition, there is the time in the daily rounds of the visitor to the New Museum, who encounters Hamilton's work amidst the day's appointments, rendezvous, or missed opportunities.

Postmodern Temporalities and Recorded Music: From Vinyl to Disc

My daily rounds for many years have included immersion in the electronic messages of recorded music in a variety of formats, most recently in the information stored digitally on compact discs. I believe that pop music, whether one considers music videos

or not, provides its listeners with a variety of narrative and temporal experiences. As an avid collector, fan, and part-time music magazine writer, I am aware (as are the members of my family) that I have lived my life against a nearly constant soundtrack, often measuring the amount of time available for routine domestic activities in terms of increments of recorded song length. For most of the time I have lived this way, the medium in question has been the vinyl LP.

A typical scenario for me has been something like this: I'm washing dishes while a favorite LP plays on my stereo. Since I use a manual turntable, I must be ready to lift the tone arm at the end of the record. The last song on the LP is playing, and I'm covered in dishwasher and suds. One of the last times I was in this situation and considered these things, the record playing was *The Real Ramona* (1991) by Throwing Muses, the only band I know of with a consciously Heideggerian name. The last song on the record, "Two-Step," is underway. I love the song. As it nears the end, I have to think carefully about the time remaining, during which I must wash the last dirty pan, rinse my hands and dry them before racing into the next room to take care of the turntable.

Like most collectors, I've begun accumulating compact discs, but I notice that I have yet to establish equivalent time blocks for household activities accompanied by CDs. The greater storage capacity of a disc expands the amount of time available, especially for extended activities (like writing!). Although I am not ready to speculate how, I assume that years of exposure to digital sound recordings will bring about new kinds of temporal experience.

One very specific aspect of digital recording technology affords an example of my general claim about the multiple temporalities generated by postmodern culture. Digital "sampling," the process through which any recorded sound can be reinserted and quoted, so to speak, endlessly within a new recording, has created a new kind of sound collage—one might even say "palimpsest" of sound—that is also, it becomes clear, a legal conundrum. But what of sampling's temporal effects? When the band "A Tribe Called Quest" (1990) repeats the sampled riff from Lou Reed's 1972 hit song "Walk on the Wild Side," or when the decidedly underground mixmasters "'The Jackofficers" (also 1990) incorporate sampled bits from the second LP by The Jimi Hendrix Experience (1968), time moves, so to speak, in two opposite directions at once. The quoted "sample" takes the listener back to "golden oldie" land, but its constant repetition unfolds in a future direction, that of the song's forward movement, perhaps even the future of pop music, where, as in jazz, "new" developments nearly always involve rediscovery of previous influences. In any case, the so-called "present" during which we listen while busy with other activities is temporally far more complicated than we might wish to realize.

Whether we consider music or visual aspects of contemporary media culture, we often fail to realize how the technologies themselves are shaping our perceptions of our own lived time. Offbeat comedian Steven Wright has a stock line about placing instant coffee in a microwave oven, the result being that he "went back in time." We routinely videotape television programs intending to watch them later, and record telephone messages that can affect us strangely when we play them back days later. Imagine experiencing the death of a friend or relative, then discovering a few days later that you still have a recorded message from that person on your answering machine tape. This would be but a more intimate and powerful version of the routine experience of listening to recordings of vocals by Howlin' Wolf, Billie Holiday, John Lennon, or Bob Marley. All dead, and all still electronically alive for us. No, we don't go back in time, but our relationship with our present time is complicated, just as the historian's orientation toward the present is complex.

We continue to adapt to living in a present time while surrounded by devices that transport us into parallel realities simultaneously unfolding for us (as our remote channel changers indicate), or rewinding and fast forwarding for us, so that the present moment is filled with rapid simulated movement in multiple directions. Our viewing of a basketball game is interrupted repeatedly in order to feature yet another replay of a contested official's call. Are we not increasingly like Einstein's imagined observers stationed in varying positions relative to a tram car traveling at the speed of light—i.e., time speeding up or slowing down depending upon one's relative vantage point? In a memorable scene from Milos Forman's film version of Jerzy Kosinski's novel *Being There*, the character Chance makes his virginal foray into the world outside his mansion. Confronted by a mugger, he tries to make the danger disappear by using his TV remote control channel changer, the only weapon he has ever held. Imagine an update for the 1990s: perhaps he would attempt to rewind or fast forward himself out of danger.

As historians and as observers of contemporary culture, we are a long way from figuring out the refiguring of both time and space being enacted by our technological environment. As postmodern culture multiplies temporal possibilities, and as long-overdue attention comes to groups denied their place in standard historical narratives, it will become impossible and undesirable to cling to a conventional sense of linear chronology. Just as attention to women or to minority cultures calls conventional historical periodization into question, previously marginalized groups or topics cannot simply be inserted into a chronology that made sense only through universalizing the experience of a narrow range of humanity. Taking other cultures (including pop culture) seriously will mean taking seriously the sometimes radically different notions and experiences of time their cultures have to offer, expanding and revising in the process the taken-for-granted sense nearly all historians have had of time.

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