

## Introduction

‘I’ve been on calendars, but I have never been on time’

Marilyn Monroe

In my view, there is no artwork that captures the modern sense of time as profoundly as Christian Marklay’s installation, *The Clock* – first produced in 2010, and, since its opening, repeatedly staged in galleries around the world, to amazed reviews. It is, as Zadie Smith declared, ‘sublime’.<sup>1</sup> *The Clock* is made up of around 12,000 short film and television clips that run on a 24-hour loop. In every single clip, you can see a watch or clock which shows the exact time at which you are watching *The Clock*. The synchronization is both funny and uncanny. If you start watching at 2.10, each of the short extracts contains a timepiece showing 2.10 – often several clips for the same minute. At 2.11, it is all 2.11 – and so on for twenty-four hours. At 6.00, a string of hatted men suggests a cocktail; tea is taken repeatedly between 4.00 and 4.30, tea-time; high noon looms and awaits its gunshots. The joy or frustration of interruption is replayed again and again with an extraordinary fascination. It is so easy to be hooked by the briefest narrative of suspense, to be caught by the excitement of a flash of racing, to imagine for whom the cute guy is getting dressed in his favourite shirt, to wonder if the gun to the head will be escaped.

Through these brief fragments of an infrastructure of time, the spectator becomes acutely aware of how often the affordances of time in cinema are themselves a structuring device of visual narrative. *The Clock* shows again and again cinema’s love of the establishing shot – a man looks at his watch and then ahead expectantly; or the desperate race against time (‘We only have twenty minutes, Jim’); or the build-up of stressful suspense (how long can he hang on to the rock?). What the theatre calls ‘business’ embodies and displays a sense of existing in time: the cigarette lit under a lamp-post;

<sup>1</sup> Smith (2011). Short clips are temporarily available on the internet.

the stamping feet of the waiting watchman; the stifled yawn of the bored beauty. Part of *The Clock's* wit comes from unveiling the clichés of the cinematic enactment of time in and through the repetition of embodied gestures. You find yourself sharing Marklay's obsessiveness – watching for the time on the clock on the wall of the saloon rather than the fight in front of it, smashing the tables and spilling the drinks.

Yet, as you watch over a period of time, you may also become aware of the extraordinary skill of the editing of this installation – and not just by wondering at the sheer work of collecting so many clips with just that view of the time on a clock (it must have taken so much *time*). The soundtrack of one film drifts over the start of the next clip, linking them with a half-heard echo of overlapping themes; a door opens in one clip, only to lead into the set of another film; a running criminal from one film is chased by a policeman from another film, but at the same minute, precisely, in the narrative time of both films. This *Clock* certainly evidences its clock-maker. *The Clock* is a work of intricate beauty.

The spectator is made acutely aware of time in another sense too. You know at exactly what time you enter the installation and take your seat. You know what the time is, to the minute, as long as you stay. Watching the clock in a film is usually a sign of boredom. You are meant to lose yourself in the narrative, not glance at the time. Here you are riveted by watching the clock. Attentive to time. Of course at some point in the twenty-four hours you need to go – to go to the bathroom or leave. But when? Every minute counts: how much time in *The Clock* is the right time? When will you give up your seat to another? You see yourself in time, feel yourself embodied in time – we all have our body-clocks – and come face to face – through the face of the clock – with your own investment in the temporal calibration of your experience. You feel time passing, minute by minute.

This installation speaks to a uniquely modern sense of time, dependent on the social pervasiveness and accuracy of the clock. Consider, for a moment, as an equally modern but contrastive mirror for *The Clock*, the Superbowl as it appears on American television – another filmic display of clock-time. The programme is stretched out so that one hour (precisely) of game-time lasts for four hours; its final thirty seconds can last ten minutes. The game is fragmented into a series of plays, each repeated in slow motion and in real speed from different angles. The capitalist world of advertising invades the tension of the game – feeds vicariously off it – with commercial delays, where, with a different sense of counting, every minute also has a well-advertised price. (The cost per minute of an advertising slot

is leaked avidly to the press). A fan always knows how much time there is on the game-clock, however long the show lasts. The referee could even announce a resetting of the game-clock, although the time of the show always just goes on, as it must. The Superbowl programme is the culmination of a long but specific history of the commercialization of time, its measured commodification. It is hard to think of parallels for such aggressive manipulation and regulation of time, minute by minute, in the spectacular shows of the past. Time was not always money. It was not always possible to watch time tick by like this.

It is a cliché of modernity's self-awareness that everything is getting faster, attention span getting shorter. *The Clock* performs this increasing fragmentation of time's flow, minute by minute. For a generation increasingly raised on the digital media, with the flash of pop-up ads or the apparently instantaneous communication of e-mail or Twitter, Warhol's promise of five minutes of fame may seem too long. This changing sense of time becomes especially salient when we reflect on how hard it is to imagine a life lived without an idea of minutes or seconds, as is the case throughout antiquity, for whom even the half-hour is a precariously utilized precision. How we measure out our lives – with coffee spoons or digital certainty – is integral to how we inhabit the world.

Indeed, I have started with Marklay's *The Clock* because it is a contemporary artwork that embodies in the most sophisticated and engaging way how a representation of time depends on a set of specifically modern ideas about time, practices of time, and aesthetics of time. Such a big claim could open into a book-length study in itself. But let me try to summarize very briefly what I mean.

In terms of modern aesthetics, first of all, we should note the classic modernist gesture of changing perspective so that what is usually in the background is brought to the fore: Marklay directs us towards the devices of *timing* by which a narrative is organized. *The Clock* shows how time is showed. *The Clock* epitomizes thus the formal self-reflexivity typical of modernist aesthetics. It achieves this display of time through a narrative of fragments. Since T. S. Eliot iconically declared 'These fragments I have shored against my ruin', modernist art has privileged not just the fragment but also the collocation of fragments in collage or – most recently – the remix or mash up.<sup>2</sup> Marklay's *The Clock* recuts and juxtaposes momentary, discrete extracts from films – but leaves the films on the cutting floor. This fragmentation changes how each extract can be appreciated. Because each

<sup>2</sup> 'The Wasteland' in Eliot (1920), with Varley-Winter (2018) for further bibliography.

moment is decontextualized, it is hard not to view them generically – through stereotypes, expectation, clichés – as I did above when I described ‘the cute guy getting dressed in his favourite shirt’ or ‘the fight in the saloon’ (I don’t know what films the scenes come from: allusiveness is not the mode). Modernist aesthetics is obsessed with understanding modernity through repetition and its role in structuring social life: the most famous scene of Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* is the tramp desperately trying to stay in time with the production line’s demands for repetition. The repetition of material modernity in its images of celebrity and commercial products are integral to the art of Andy Warhol (from Campbell’s soup cans to the face of Marilyn Monroe); the repetitive scripts of social interaction are central to the language of the dramas of Harold Pinter or Samuel Beckett. The role of stereotypic filmic imagery in identity formation is brilliantly articulated in the art of Cindy Sherman. And we could add many other such examples. The repetition of clock-watching in watching *The Clock*, with its constant reframing of its scenes into less than a minute of anonymous celebrity, is deeply engaged with these aesthetic obsessions of modernity.

Film itself is a modern technology, with its 1,440 frames a minute, and its now digital capacities. Film changes the narration of time, how we see time. The technology of time, however, also alters the experience of time. There is a large-scale politics to this, of course.<sup>3</sup> The technical advances of clock-making are crucial for the history of seafaring, and hence trade and imperialism, for which western film, and Hollywood in particular, has played its role: how the West was won . . . and keeps winning the battle of culture.<sup>4</sup> Organizing time, synchronizing time locally, nationally and internationally, is no straightforward business, even when the technology should allow it. It is surprisingly recent – late nineteenth century – when an agreed national time, thanks to the railway system, was instituted in Britain and elsewhere; even later when international time was stabilized, Greece, proudly going alone, was still producing maps with Athens rather than Greenwich as the mean into the 1920s; the international date line was (re-) fixed only after the Second World War, changing the date, in a moment, on several islands.<sup>5</sup> *The Clock*, however, speaks more to how Western social life has been altered by the possibility of accurate time-keeping – which modern scholars agree is distinctive of modernity, though when and where

<sup>3</sup> See Clark (2019); Hartog (2011); Wilcox (1987). The bibliography of this introduction is indicative only: fuller bibliographies are in the following chapters.

<sup>4</sup> Sobel (1996) was trend-setting; see also the exceptional Galison (2003); also Ishibashi (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Rosenberg and Grafton (2010); Galison (2003); Schivelbusch (1986); Gay (2003), Ogle (2015) 20–46.

this modernity starts is debated and re-debated.<sup>6</sup> It has become a commonplace of the historiography of time that industrialization changes people's experience of time, demanding that time is measured and commodified in work, that work is thus defined by time (nine to five), or by units of production (the production line: time and efficiency studies), rather than by the necessary tasks of the agricultural year; and by increasingly small divisions of time.<sup>7</sup> An obsession with punctuality as a sign of good manners – a virtue even – is a modern politesse.<sup>8</sup> *The Clock* displays the degree to which modern social life – as represented in film – is regulated by the constant turn to the time. To be in the installation overlaps your own experience of the time of watching – minute by minute – a leisure time activity, with the representation of the pervasive need to watch the time. The installation – being in *The Clock* – is a necessarily reflexive experience of modern, clock-bound social time.

Ideas of time also alter as modernity progresses. The nineteenth century is the first era to recognize itself as a century.<sup>9</sup> Life expectancy in the twentieth century allows us to lament a young death at 65, something unimaginable in antiquity. Boredom as an expected element of work or childhood comes with industrialization. Only in modernity is human progress through technology or science an anticipation, an anticipation that seeds science fiction as well as social hopes.<sup>10</sup> Above all, since geology's scientific advances in the early nineteenth century and biology's theories of the mid-nineteenth century, time's abyss stretches back millions and millions of years and forward indefinitely – though the anthropocene may herald a more limited presence of humans within time.<sup>11</sup> Deep time is dizzying – and is explicitly set against Christian insistence on the beginning of time in creation and the end of time at the end of days, which postulates therefore a finite historical time span. Equally dizzying, however, are the smallest measurable units. To measure  $10^{-21}$  of a second is an almost incomprehensible achievement.<sup>12</sup> Einstein is science's

<sup>6</sup> Sherman (1996); Dohrn-van Rossum (1996); Bartky (2000); Galison (2003); Glennie and Thrift (2009); Ishibashi (2014); Ogle (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Thompson (1967) is seminal; Le Goff (1980). See Nowotny (1989); Kern (2003) and (the equally seminal) Latour (1993).

<sup>8</sup> See Wolkenhauer (2019); Ker (2019): the Roman moral discourse of time did not include punctuality.

<sup>9</sup> Buckley (1966).

<sup>10</sup> Hartog (2020) 221 describes progress nicely as a secularization of perfection and perfectability (what Origen in *De principiis* calls 'our journey towards perfection').

<sup>11</sup> Gamble (2021); Buckland (2013); Rudwick (2005), (2008); Secord (1986) for the geology; Rees (2003) for the apocalyptic. Hartog (2011); Assmann (2013) (especially 131–208); Jordheim (2014) for the 'new regime of time'.

<sup>12</sup> On short time in antiquity see Miller and Symons eds. (2019).

most recognizable face because of his contribution to a new understanding of time, even if relativity is an understanding baffling to most, despite the massive sales of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. How humans see themselves in time depends on such grounding concepts, which change over time.

There are dozens of eye-opening books on this modern construction of time – which does not run at the same pace in all regions of the world or across all institutions or communities in any country.<sup>13</sup> Or, as Frederic Jameson puts it from his Marxist perspective, 'Each mode of production has its own temporalities.'<sup>14</sup> I have offered here no more than the briefest headlines of this fascinating and complex history, but I start with this modern artistic and intellectual reflection on the modernity of time because it is part of what has motivated this book. These attempts to locate and understand the rupture that defines modern time – along with the recognition of the continuities that make identifying such a rupture hard – have largely turned their back on what has a strong claim to be the first truly great transformation of thinking about time. This transformation is the Christian invention of time. The aim of this book is to describe and understand how notions and practices and experiences of time changed in late antiquity as the Roman empire became Christian, and how such a transformation transformed the representation of time in the literature of the era. There can be no adequate historiography of time that does not recognize this fundamental reorganization of Western thinking, institutionalization and experience concerning time.

Now, there are also many books about time in antiquity too, so many indeed that it has become a trope of their introductions not only to make such a statement, but also to note how many scholars have made such a statement before (time and time again). The few paragraphs that Aristotle dedicated to a theory of time – hugely influential paragraphs in the history of philosophy – have resulted in long books based on innumerable articles.<sup>15</sup> The history of the water-clock and sundial have been traced.<sup>16</sup> Augustine's brilliant discussion of time – his celebrated statement that he knows what time is until someone asks him is one of the few moments of antiquity to appear repeatedly in books on modernity – not only has

<sup>13</sup> Barak (2013); Wishnitzer (2015); Ogle (2015) 75–119; to add a (post-)colonial perspective to the works already cited. Banerjee (2006) smartly links temporal and monetary systems in colonialism.

<sup>14</sup> Jameson (2002) 79.

<sup>15</sup> Coope (2005) on Aristotle; Sorabji (1983) for the tradition, both with bibliographies.

<sup>16</sup> Allen (1996); Hannah (2009); Winter (2013); Talbert (2017); Jones (2019); and in a long history Dohrn-van Rossum (1996).

proved one of the most discussed arguments from late antiquity, but also has played a fundamental role in the by now extensive bibliography linking time and narrative.<sup>17</sup> The history of the calendar – like the history of astrology, often requiring obsessive attention to details of mathematical calculation – leaves a heritage on everyday living still, and cannot be told without Julius Caesar’s interventions.<sup>18</sup> There are also discussions of time in various genres: historiography most intently, but also epic, tragedy and rhetoric.<sup>19</sup> More recently, we can see the beginnings of an interest in anachronism or ‘queer time’ in antiquity.<sup>20</sup> The whole history of classicism, indeed, the later reception of antiquity, depends on a genealogical view of how modernity is connected to the past – a construction of what it means to inhabit the time of now.<sup>21</sup> This too has its own historiography.

Yet it is striking that the history of the invention of Christian time – how Christianity’s multiform development slowly changes the temporalities it inherited – has not been analysed from the multiple perspectives that such a large-scale cultural transformation needs, although the recognition that Christianity changed the understanding of time is readily acknowledged.<sup>22</sup> In part, this silence is a product of the institutionalization of the disciplines, so that classics and theology, ancient history and church history, are separated, institutionally and in practice, in modern universities (for all their shared backgrounds and past involvement).<sup>23</sup> It is still the case that most theologians and most classicists – even when both groups work on late antiquity – look anxiously (dismissively, longingly) at each other across the divide of their disciplinary expertises. In part, this silence is a reflex of the regular assertion that modernity secularized time – that such secularization is indeed a sign of its modernity.<sup>24</sup> Religion is the past to be left behind. The claim that modernity is the progress (in all senses) of secularism has been sharply dismantled by recent critics,<sup>25</sup> but its influence is evident in the unwillingness to consider the deep influence of religious thinking on the most basic concepts of time, despite the evident religious

<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur (1984); Kennedy (2013); Nightingale (2011); Pranger (2010); Allen ed. (2018).

<sup>18</sup> Rüpke (1995), (2006); Feeney (2007); Kosmin (2018); Stern (2001), (2012).

<sup>19</sup> Grethlein and Krebs eds. (2012); Grethlein (2013); Hartog (2011); Lianeri (2011), (2016); Bakker (2002); Purves (2019); Phillips (2020); Georgiadou and Oikonomopoulou eds. (2020).

<sup>20</sup> Attack (2020); Holmes (2020); Rood, Attack and Phillips (2020); Phillips (2020). Nagel and Wood (2010) is influential.

<sup>21</sup> The Postclassicism Collective (2019).

<sup>22</sup> Hartog (2020: 83): ‘There is for sure a Christian regime of historicity’. More commonly, it is totally ignored, as in Elias (1992).

<sup>23</sup> Conybeare and Goldhill eds. (2020). <sup>24</sup> Davis (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Asad (2003); Taylor (2007) have been particularly influential; see Levey and Modood eds. (2009); Modood (2019); Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and van Antwerpen eds. (2011); Mahmood (2015).

roots of the week (as Zerubavel showed nearly forty years ago<sup>26</sup>) or the holiday or the idea of daily routine. In part, not looking towards the invention of Christian time is also a pragmatic if rather feeble response to the sheer scale of material and the complexity of the interlocking subjects that such a topic summons.

The first part of this book is an attempt thus to outline the Christian invention of time. The transformation that Christianity achieves engages both with the experience of time – the accepted structure of the seven-day week, the order of daily prayer, the festal calendar of Christmas and Easter – and with time’s conceptualization – a new discourse of eternity, of life after death, of the triviality of the mundane, of waiting for the end of days. This Christian temporality was formed in and against the Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures in which it slowly developed. This, then, gives the founding question of the first section of the book: What were the institutions and languages which structured the experience and understanding of time, and which Christianity inherited both from Greek and Roman cultures and from the Jewish tradition, and how did Christianity reshape such inheritances?

To answer this question the first section of the book contains ten essays on aspects of temporality. Each of these ten chapters takes a fundamental question of the discourse of temporality and explores how the traditions of Greco-Roman and Jewish culture are slowly transformed by the gradual dominance of Christianity. Each of these opening chapters is strictly an essay. They are short, with no pretension to comprehensive coverage, and each is designed to outline the parameters of what is a huge area of culture, rather than list all the relevant sources or give a full analysis of what are often heavily discussed and complex texts or conflicted institutions. They set out what I take to be the key questions of this history of temporality. The transformations of Christian time cannot be understood without this double address to both the pagan and the Jewish cultures in which it took shape (truly an ‘entangled history’), and cannot be understood properly without an address to the conceptualization, experience and expression of time through the gradual development of Christian doctrine, power and institutionalization. Christian doctrine developed slowly and painfully and polemically (we should always talk of Christianities in late antiquity)<sup>27</sup> – and discussed aspects of time fervidly. This alteration of normative discourse required power to find social and cultural expression – through institutionalization,

<sup>26</sup> Zerubavel (1985), though there is much that is worryingly parochial in his evidence.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. the exemplary Shaw (2011).



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including the institutions of literary production. All this must be part of a history of temporality. Some readers may find the form of the essay too much of a provocation, some no doubt will find elements of superficiality in their areas of expertise. The aim, however, is to indicate how broad a cultural question the Christian invention of time is. I am fully aware that each of these chapters could be expanded to book length. The wager is that the scope of the foundational question that this organization of material allows to emerge justifies the essayistic treatment of each element of it.

The second section of the book has an equally large question: how did this transformation of temporality change the writing of late antiquity? To answer this question, this second section has five longer chapters, each of which looks in greater detail at specific authors and texts from late antiquity. These extended readings give me the chance to demonstrate how the questions outlined in the first section are embedded in the language and narratives that form the imaginary of the growing Christian community. Again, selection is necessary. There are chapters on Nonnus' *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John*, and on Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*; on Gregory of Nazianzus' poetry and prose, starting with his collection known as the *Aporrhēta*, 'Ineffable Matters', and concluding with a study of his sermon on Christmas Day 380. The final two chapters juxtapose Ambrose and Prudentius, who both wrote collections of hymns on the Christian day; and Sulpicius Severus and Orosius, who both wrote histories of the Christian world, and in the case of Sulpicius a very influential life of his master, St Martin of Tours. There are self-evidently many other authors who could have been included (originally considered chapters on Quintus of Smyrna and on Juvenecus will appear elsewhere), but by this selection I cover Greek and Latin, prose and verse – and the most salient genres of epic, paraphrase, sermon, hymn, hagiography, and historiography, genres rarely brought together to produce a broad cultural picture. These two large-scale, interlinked questions – how the fundamental changes in Christian thinking about time are to be understood, and how these changes are embodied and embedded in the writing of late antiquity – structure this book.

An immediate caution is necessary. I have so far talked of Christianity, Greco-Roman culture, Judaism. Along with pagan and barbarian, these central terms of identification run the risk of concealing the fractured differences and competing claims that actually mark the transformation of the Roman world. Since at least Walter Bauer in the 1930s, it has been recognized not just that there were many different Christian groups from the beginnings of Christianity onwards, but also that any historiography

that focuses on the opposition of orthodoxy and heresy is likely to rehearse the self-serving rhetoric of the later dominant church authorities that defined themselves as orthodox.<sup>28</sup> Whatever claims of universalism and truth we find, in each of the writers I discuss there is an evident rhetoric of conflict between pro- and anti-Nicaean Christians, between church authorities and charismatic individuals, between ascetic and civic projections of religion. Christianity remains Christianities. Similarly, while the Roman empire had an *enkuklios paideia*, a general course of education and culture, that started always from Homer and moved through a curriculum of reading to the institutions of rhetoric and philosophy, there are expressly debated and publicly enacted social and cultural differences both between Greece and Rome, and between different groups in the Greek-speaking East or Latin-speaking West (or the bilingual elites or the Latin-dominated army, say, which go between East and West). Tradition – to paraphrase Heidegger – is a rhetoric designed to present the past as self-evident – an ideological projection not just of what past is to be authorized but how the present finds its own genealogy within it. Again, as we will see, tradition is one of the most *contested* areas for each of the authors I discuss. Similar arguments could be made – and often have been made – for the language of pagans and barbarians. ‘Pagan’ and ‘barbarian’ are collective terms designed to conceal differences, to promote the values of Christian civilization as privileged and dominant: to simplify and polarize. These central terms of identification are all used as persuasive gestures of self-definition and need to be repeatedly pluralized and nuanced. The era of late antiquity is a time of transformation (as well as a transformation of time), and in it there are many shifting contingencies of self-positioning, networks of situated group formation, and traumatic explosions of hatred as well as religious conflicts and exclusions. The violence of supersessionism is integral to these narratives. The detailed readings of individual authors need to be extremely cautious about too clumsy claims of contextualization.

What is more, if there is no ‘view from nowhere’ within the exchanges of late antiquity, there is also no ‘view from nowhere’ in studying any aspect of the historiography of late antiquity, especially where religion is concerned.<sup>29</sup> The modern historiography of the Arian controversy, to take a specifically contentious example, could be said – conveniently and rhetorically – to be bookended by Cardinal Newman, the most celebrated

<sup>28</sup> Bauer (1971 (1934)).

<sup>29</sup> ‘View from nowhere’: see the seminal Haraway (1988). For how critics invented ‘late antiquity’ see Herzog (2002b); Vessey (1998); Rebenich (2009).