

Literature, Theory, and Time: Reading Portfolio

Module Code: EN2G4


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1. Time Clock Piece (One Year Performance 1980-1981) (with reference to E. P. Thomson)
2. *The Iceberg* by Marion Coutts (with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin)
3. *Arrival* directed by Denis Villeneuve (with reference to Martin Heidegger, and Gilles Deleuze)
4. 'A Map to the Next World' by Joy Harjo (with reference to Carlo Rovelli, and Dipesh Chakrabarty)

1

'Time Clock Piece (One Year Performance 1980-1981)' is a performance piece by the Taiwanese artist Tehching Hsieh, who did not sleep or leave his Manhattan studio for more than 59 minutes for an entire year. The seminal display consists of Hsieh shown photographed on 365 film strips, wearing the same plain grey uniform, as well as a 16mm movie projected onto the wall — a six minute time lapse of his year-long project. It is clear that this artistic performance is underpinned by the complex theme of passing time. I will explore the questions it raises on this topic in relation to E. P. Thomson's ideas on work time, the contrast between clock time and corporeal time, and finally Hsieh's own interpretation of his piece as representative of universal 'pure time'.

The gruelling repetition of the piece seems to immediately comment on the monotonous work that increasingly consumes our modern capitalist society. The second-hand fatigue that can be grasped through



observing the piece alludes to a sense of lost time. This is an idea that is familiar due to its mirroring of ‘clocking in’ at one’s workplace, as well as losing control over our own free time, which leads personal expressions of identity to disintegrate. Moreover, I would argue that the performance itself is a rebellion against the nature of the 9-5 work schedule. It is inherently unproductive in nature, and until the final piece was published, it was a commitment to a lack of productivity in terms of financial gain¹. The absence of active production within a capitalist society is often interpreted as **inauthentic**, with self-affirmation being associated with marketing oneself as economically high-yielding. Hsieh’s dismantling of the boundaries between ‘art time’ and ‘life time’ through his experimental work ties into this commentary on the separation between our personal lives and labour, given that Hsieh himself earns his livelihood from making art. His workplace becomes his home — perhaps the piece highlights the inhumanity of viewing the two as **interchangeable**.

Moreover, the physical intensity of the performance accentuates the stark contrast between corporeal time and clock time. Amelia Groom highlights the importance of the 133 times that Hsieh did not manage to punch the clock over the course of the year². She draws parallels between the circadian rhythm of our bodies and the structured clock time that Hsieh rigorously adhered to. They also seem to be in opposition with one another; perhaps we lack a respect for fluidity of our natural cycles, and instead force them into the capitalist mould of clock **time**. The physical changes that Hsieh undergoes, as Groom notices, also reinforce this corporeal fluidity that the rigid clock time simply cannot contain. **Another** take on the physicality of this piece can be found by examining the performance as presented within space. The exhibit room which features his work is ultimately attempting to display a specific section and experience of time, which does not seem possible. By allowing visitors the ability to **corporeally walk through a symbol of time passing** raises important questions about the relationship between temporal and spatial

¹ Ash Dilks in Cummings, Andrew. 2018. ‘Art Time, Life Time: Tehching Hsieh’, *Tate* <<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/event-report-tehching-hsieh>>

² Amelia Grooms in Cummings, 2018

dimensions, and the relation of our bodies to both³. Moreover, this can be linked to E. P. Thomson's ideas on the 'irregularity of labour patterns before the coming of large-scale machine-powered industry'. With the punch clock symbolising the strict time-keeping of modern labour, Hsieh's performance highlights its misalignment with nature. Our bodies seem to naturally adhere to 'task-orientation'⁴, tending to duties when they are required and not merely for the sake of labour. This can be particularly observed in early farming communities⁵. Task-orientation as an approach to labour assimilates one's work and one's life, though it must be conceded that Hsieh's timed labour commentary also blurs such distinction. Therefore, I believe Hsieh is exposing the impact of timed work on our lived experience through specifically displaying it in its most excessive form.

~~Finally~~, Hsieh is particular about the universality of his work, rather than its political implications. The inmate uniform, along with the self-inflicted necessity to remain within his studio forces him to be imprisoned by his own work. While this seems to be a nod to his identity as a Taiwanese immigrant for his first 14 years in the US, he claims that this is overemphasised in certain readings of his work. Hsieh asserts that his pieces are themselves passing time, rather than concerned about the theme of time. He remarks that 'life is a life sentence', highlighting his thinking in terms of our inability to live outside of time's passing, and how we are inescapably in the renewing present⁶. To the Guardian Australia, he explains that he is 'not a political artist... [he is] interested in the universal circumstances of human life'⁷. However, I maintain that Hsieh cannot simply avoid the political nature of his work — his investigation into the experience of time is on a scale that encompasses all of humanity as one. His project

³ Ash Dilks in Cummings, 2018

⁴ Thompson, E. P. 1967. 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 38.1: 56–97 (60)

⁵ Ibid. (Thompson, 1967, p. 60)

⁶ Ibid. (Cummings, 2018)

⁷ Marks, Kathy. 2014. 'Tehching Hsieh: The Man Who Didn't Go to Bed for a Year', *The Guardian*, section Art and design
<<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/australia-culture-blog/2014/apr/30/tehching-hsieh-the-man-who-didnt-go-to-bed-for-a-year>>

acknowledges both objectivity and individuality, which encourages the avoidance of generalisation prejudice.

In conclusion, Hsieh has made an imaginative contribution to the conversation about what it means to exist in time. His performance inspects the contrast between our natural rhythms and the structured clock time. He also exposes the potential lack of distinction between work time and life time; the performance is intrinsically unproductive in the eyes of the capitalist economy structure, which critiques the monotony of labour and conformity. Hsieh's performance questions the artificial restrictions that humanity imposes upon itself in order to contribute to the economy, consequently raising important ideas about the commonalities between every human's experience of temporality, and the extent to which we distinguish between different types of time passing.

2

Marion Coutts' memoir *The Iceberg*⁸ retells the painstaking eighteen months leading up to her partner Tom Lubbock's death caused by an aggressive brain tumour. I will argue that the memoir's temporality, with the events taking place in the shadow of the build-up to death, deems it to be incredibly prone to chronotopic writing. Certain features of the text, such as the regular email updates, the linguistic progression in their child Ev, and the diagnosis itself can be understood as generic and major chronotopes that situate the events of the novel as defined by their place in time and space.

Firstly, in order to reflect upon Coutt's memoir in light of philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's theory, I must first define the 'chronotope'. Broadly speaking, it is the arrangement of time and space and their representation in language⁹. They also distinguish genres, and have 'narrative, plot-generating

⁸ Coutts, Marion. 2016. *The Iceberg* (Open Road + Grove/Atlantic)

⁹ Wikipedia Contributors. 2019. 'Chronotope', *Wikipedia* (Wikimedia Foundation)


significance¹⁰. Bakhtin asserts that all language is essentially chronotopic — prose narratives allow literary time to become ‘artistically visible’¹¹. While to varying extents, this can be said of all narrative driven prose, *The Iceberg* is intrinsically constructed around the passing of time, particularly given that the plot takes place in the shadow of Lubbock’s prognosis of inevitable decline. In this way, the events in the memoir are fused with spatio-temporal qualities as they are written about purely in the context of what is to come.

For example, I would argue that the frequent medical update emails that Coutts sends out to the couple’s close circle serve as a generic chronotope in the text. Though they are spatially ambiguous since they are digital, they are temporal indicators which also function as plot drivers. The novel is defined as a memoir through the inclusion of these real and chronological emails that punctuate the narrative — *The Iceberg* is a non-fiction collection of moments in time and space that take place chronologically in the context of the final event of Lubbock’s death. On top of this, I would say a major chronotope in the narrative is the inverted speech progression of their son Ev, which occurs alongside the decline of Lubbock’s own ability. This structure seems to represent how contrastingly time can affect different objects, even if they exist within the same space. Moreover, space seems to become more abstract as Coutts surrenders to time. She writes: ‘I do not know where we are but I feel very sure of myself here’. Time becomes all-consuming, and defines the stages of the illness, which in turn makes the family’s relation to space more ambiguous and non-material¹².

¹⁰ ‘Reading Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination on ‘chronotopes’*, EN2G4: *Literature, Theory and Time*, University of Warwick

¹¹ Bemong, Nele, Pieter Borghart, Michel De Dobbeleer, Kristoffel Demoen, Koen De Temmerman, and others. [n.d.]. *BAKHTIN’S THEORY of the LITERARY CHRONOTOPE: REFLECTIONS, APPLICATIONS, PERSPECTIVES*

¹² Barry, Elizabeth. 2015. ‘The Reading Room: A Review of Marion Coutts’s “the Iceberg”’, *Medical Humanities*




Moreover, the diagnosis of Lubbock in itself is a form of chronotope in the narrative. On the first page Coutts writes: ‘We have had a diagnosis that has the status of an event’. Michael Holquist’s idea that ‘something happens only when something else with which it can be compared reveals a change in time and space’ is particularly pertinent here. This is because the news represents the loss of a certain future, replacing it with one previously **unimagined**. Sarah **Locklann** Jain reinforces the idea of shifts in projected futures by expressing that the act of living in prognosis severs the natural timeline that one orients oneself in, such as the stage of life in relation to the entire lifespan¹³.

In conclusion, it is clear that Marion Coutts’ memoir *The Iceberg* is defined by its spatio-temporal features which ground it in the timeline in which Lubbock will shortly pass away. The inclusion of major chronotopes in the narrative, according to Bakhtin’s theory, allows the status of the event of Lubbock’s diagnosis to be understood not merely as a trivial, personal matter, but instead as a dramatic shift in both the spatial and temporal **dimension**.

3

Arrival (2016), directed by Denis Villeneuve, is an existential sci-fi film which explores geo-politics, time, and language through navigating their disturbance by a theoretical alien invasion. The film is based on the award-winning novella ‘Story of Your Life’ by Ted Chiang (1998). The depictions of time and subjectivity in the film will be unpacked through an analysis of time and space, then time as defined through human experience. Finally, I will explore how the film suggests the latter relates to our acquisition and varied usage of language.

¹³ Jain, Sarah Locklann. 2007. ‘Living in Prognosis: Toward an Elegiac Politics’, *Representations*, 98 (p.80-81)



The protagonist, Louise Banks, is a leading linguistics professor, and is invited by military intelligence to the landing site in the United States. She is confronted by the unexpectedly minimalist image of the alien ships, which are vast, simplistic, and hover just above the ground. They act as what Gilles Deleuze would call a ‘time-image’¹⁴. Certainly, the uncanny and timeless depiction of these pods represents a form of future encroaching on the present. The pods land in twelve different locations globally, which creates geo-political tensions. Different countries react with varying degrees of aggression, with some authorities threatening to attack their country’s pod soon after it lands. In this way, the pods themselves are physical signs that represent the dislocation of linear time in the film. The lack of universal response to the supposed invasion emphasises the fragmented identity of humanity. The contrast between the universal image of the pods across the globe, and the varied international human reactions reinforces the idea that as a species, we overemphasise subjective spatial dimensions rather than acknowledging our unified existence within an objective temporality.

The film begins with a harrowing montage of a couple raising and then losing their teenage daughter, to what is suggested to be a complex form of cancer. From the beginning of the film, as Gabrielle Ulubay¹⁵ acknowledges, we are confronted with multiple forms of foreign invaders within both space and time. As the audience, we perceive what appears to be the past as a ‘pause’ in the narrative, providing us the tragic backstory of the protagonist Louise, who we then meet in the following scene. However, as the film continues, Louise begins to experience ‘flashbacks’ of this same timeline. It is eventually revealed that these are in fact, flashforwards. Deleuze argues that ‘flashback[s are] only a signpost’ and they reveal ‘more complex temporal structures’. In this sense, time is suggested to be scientifically deterministic, as the future is defined and pre-visible to Louise. However, the film presents a perspective of compatibilism, meaning that a determined universe can be compatible with the idea of humanity as free agents. It is suggested that Louise has some form of free will when she chooses to have her daughter, Hannah, despite

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 5-147

¹⁵ Gabrielle Ulubay, *'Arrival' Isn't a Horror Movie but it's Terrifying in its Own Right* (2020)

knowing how 'her story ends'. Louise embodies the form of existence that Martin Heidegger endorses as authentic — both her and Hannah become 'being[s]-towards-death'¹⁶, she exists within 'primordial time' — a future-oriented existence. Hannah's life retains sincere meaning despite being defined by its tragic ending. In this way, Louise's controversial decision can be understood from the perspective of philosopher-psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski¹⁷, in that she can visualise the future of her and her daughter, but she chooses to approach it in a passive way, embracing the human experience of linear temporal existence.


Finally, a key theme in the film is language and how the experience of time is subjective and dependent on our acquisition of different forms of communication. The way the heptapods communicate is particularly groundbreaking. They produce visual sentences out of an ink-like substance which have the same meaning regardless of the reading direction. Filmmaker and critic Eli Solt argues that the language of the heptapods 'transcends spatial and temporal limits'¹⁸. This represents in an extreme sense the idea that one's experience of time can be altered by language. The heptapods experience non-chronological time. As Louise acquires their language, she begins to experience time in the same way, as, for example, when aspects of her daughter's future slips into her present reality. As Deleuze argues in his book *Cinema II*, the past is a general form of 'already-there', and it has a 'general pre-existence'. Even the present is merely a contracted past, and it intrinsically exists as 'already-there'¹⁹. From this, it is easier to understand Deleuze's claim that 'the sheets of the past coexist in a non-chronological order', but both Chiang and Villeneuve assert that this could also be applied to both the present, and the future.

¹⁶ Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell)

¹⁷ Stephen Kern, 'The Future', in *The Culture of Time and Space (1880-1918)*(: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 89-103

¹⁸ Eli Solt, *Arrival: The Nature of Time in Science Fiction Cinema*

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 98



In conclusion, Villeneuve's film effectively depicts the philosophical idea that time is entirely subjective and dependent on experience and language. Louise's acquisition of alternate modes of communication opens her mind to non-linear time, which is typically inconceivable to humanity. This raises questions about how time itself can be defined, and whether an objective knowledge that our future is determined necessarily means that we have no free will or purpose. While the storyline is deeply human due to its portrayal of tragedy, death, and relationships, it also succeeds in its greater Heideggerian message that the existence of finitude and our acknowledgement of it is what defines our authentic being. As humans, we must acknowledge that we are limited by the bounds of our timelines, and the chronological and causal nature of our forms of communication reflects this structure of existence.


4

We are a species whose perception of time is closely bound to our use of language. We learn to perceive our temporal experiences through the rigid grammar rules and linear tenses that we learn while we are young. On an increasingly polluted planet, the devastation caused by climate change has not always been reacted to as gravely as needed to ignite active changes. I will argue that poetry is the most effective form of didactically communicating and representing such destruction, as well as what is required from humanity to prevent it. I will attempt this through exploring the phenomenon that Carlo Rovelli refers to as 'the inadequacy of grammar'. I will then compare the temporality of narrative to poetics with consideration of climate time theory, and finally how these ideas relate to the ecopoem 'A Map to the Next World' by Joy Harjo.

Theoretical physicist, Carlo Rovelli, published a book called *The Order of Time*²⁰ in 2017. In the chapter ‘The Inadequacy of Grammar’, he outlines the argument that the structure of our language impacts the way in which we perceive the world. For example, he focuses on the nature of the human languages as supporting the philosophical idea of ‘presentism’. This is the viewpoint that the only phenomena that exists is that which is associated with the present moment — the past and future are in a state of non-existence, whichever way that state may be interpreted. However, Rovelli maintains that presentism is not the true temporal nature of reality. In fact, in the chapter he explores the idea of ‘eternalism’, in which the past, present, and future are all equally existent, and the flow between them in a linear form is merely illusionary. This is also named the ‘block universe’, in which every moment is real and simultaneous. However, Rovelli reinforces that there is absolutely motion and change in the universe. In fact, though the past, present, and future equally exist, they are most certainly distinct. This is important when considering the moral responsibility that we feel in relation to our future, and our role as agents in the flow of time.

This theory becomes particularly pertinent when we consider it in relation to narrative forms and ecological writing. Climate change is a global issue, one which requires the understanding of the entire scope of humanity. At the centre of the appeal for change in campaigns is its temporal aspect — our previous and current active destruction is limiting our future possibilities. We are in communication with the humanity of tomorrow. It is understandably difficult for us to reach this level of empathy and projection due to our language and its insistence on understanding the present. Poetry, rather than narrative fiction or nonfiction, is one of the few forms that feels outside of time. Its flow, as opposed to narrative, is able to explore the concept of cause and effect, but is not bound to the same temporal rules. A commentary on the present moment in a poem is more of a universal representation of lots of moments that all ‘exist’. Therefore, ecopoetry brings the future to life in a way that feels visceral, present, and


²⁰ Rovelli, Carlo. 2019. *The Order of Time* (Penguin Books), pg. 93-101


consequential. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty²¹ provides some key insights into understanding the nature of the impacts of climate change. He argues that it is necessary that we distinguish between recorded history and deep history — the latter is the history of humanity that we do not have written records of. His argument is that ‘without such knowledge of the deep history of humanity it would be difficult to arrive at a secular understanding of why climate change constitutes a crisis for humans’. In this way, the deep history of humanity is what establishes us as part of the history of this planet, rather than something separate and threatening. As we do not have this insight into the past, it is difficult for us to comprehend that global warming does not merely threaten the geology of the Earth, but also our own species greatly. Our lack of a full temporal view of reality removes the required context for us to understand the devastation that is to come.

A significant example of atemporal ecopoetry that I believe can be seen through the lens of ‘climate time’ is ‘A Map to the Next World’ by Joy Harjo²². The narrative of the poem begins in the past tense, which gives it a mythical, almost religious quality, as though the story is something that has already happened and is to be learned from. She speaks of our ‘detour from grace’ and the ‘altars of money’ that have caused this. Harjo then switches to the present: ‘what I am telling you is real and is printed in a warning on the map’. She then shifts to the future tense, the narrator explains that ‘you will have to navigate by your mother’s voice’. The second last line encapsulates the temporal message of the poem: ‘crucial to finding the way is this: there is no beginning or end’. In this way, as humans we must form a species wide identity that extends beyond the present moment. We must understand ‘the blood of history’ and ‘the language of suns’ in order to save ourselves and move to the ‘next world’ — a location which I interpret to be a better future than the one we have set up for ourselves as of now. Chakrabarty’s ideas on our lack of understanding of humanity’s ‘deep history’ is reflected in the poem in the line: ‘In the legend are

²¹ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2: 197–222

²² Harjo, Joy. 2020. ‘A Map to the next World by Joy Harjo | Poetry Foundation’, *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49621/a-map-to-the-next-world>>




instructions on the language of the land,/ how it/ was we forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it'. In order to comprehend the true form of the damage we are doing to our planet, we must remember that the history and future of our species and planet are intertwined — a conclusion we can only come to once we observe the relation from an atemporal perspective that poetry is **close enough** to provide.

In conclusion, it is clear that our grasp on reality is dictated by language, though its temporal structure limits us to a linear understanding of cause and effect. Through poetry, we are able to experience a singular moment on a universal level, breaking down these restrictions of time. Eco-poetry is particularly effective, since in order for us to understand our history's interlaced relationship with the history of our planet, we must embrace this atemporal form of writing. Chakrabarty's emphasis on 'deep time' and our lack of access to it can be applied to future landscapes too — as humans we find it difficult to comprehend our role in the climate change process as we do not naturally view the future as 'real' in the same sense that the present is. Rovelli refutes this through expressing the inadequacy of grammar for establishing this view, and reinforces the existence of future events but acknowledges that they are not determined and exist in a line of causation. Finally, Harjo's poem 'A Map to the Next World' brings the themes of temporality, climate destruction, and humanity's active role into light; through her narrative we are taught about and guided through our participation in the planetary story in the past, present, and **future**.



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