

Slide 1 (on screen at the start)

Slide 2

The purpose of this paper is to create a critical context for the photo-series 'Untitled (2:10am)' that will inform the work's development and realisation in an exhibition at Bankley Gallery in Manchester in late 2016. The work's title refers to Sergei Eisenstein's 1927 film 'October', whose closing scenes mark the moment of the Bolshevik victory – 2:10am with a montage of clocks from across the globe. Time is foregrounded as the medium of revolutionary action. In thesis seventeen of his 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History' Walter Benjamin also draws upon the iconography of clocks to link the task of changing time with revolutionary action, referring to an eye-witness report of insurgents shooting clock towers during the French revolution of 1830, claiming that revolutionary emancipation invokes the closure of a mode of temporality. Similarly, Jacques Derrida utilises the iconography of revolutionary France in order to articulate the process of revolutionary change in his lecture 'Spectres of Marx' (1993). My argument is that in both these instances the iconography examined by these thinkers functions in an operative manner, in a way that relates to recent debates on performativity, and is relevant to Peter Osborne's theorisation of critical art practice in relation to notions of contemporaneity. The core question this paper addresses is how images operate within and shape events in a manner that not only brings about a change in circumstances, but somehow changes time?

Slide 3

For Benjamin the temporality to be changed is the rhythm of capitalist productivity, or capital-time, which Benjamin describes as 'homogeneous empty time'. Sami Khatib identifies capital-time with a reciprocal interaction between abstract labour and chronometric time. Abstract labour is a historical variable indexed to the use-value of labour within a given field of production. Chronometric time unitises periods of work and renders them commensurable with a particular exchange value. Both elements pre-suppose each other in a reciprocal dynamic. We cannot determine the level of productivity without invoking the notion of abstract labour as measure and cannot unitise abstract labour without the medium of chronometric time.¹ Moishe Postone describes this dynamic as a 'treadmill effect', claiming that accelerating rates of productivity also contract units of chronometric measurement.² Further Khatib claims that accelerating rates of productivity and exchange have to be rationalised by a 'false historiography' of continuity and progress; a task currently performed by the dominant neo-liberal discourse described by Boris Groys as a post-communist condition. Groys describes the production of the private sphere within the former Eastern Bloc during the 1990s as a feast upon the corpse of the communist state that makes the constructed nature of capitalism, otherwise presented as an 'unavoidable and 'organic' historical transition' radically visible.³ Thus the politics of our time is marked by advocacy for perpetually rationalised and accelerated production and exchange relations coupled with an ideology that links the capitalist economy to the natural order.

1 Sami Khatib, *The Time of Capital and the Messianicity of Time*, [www.academia.edu/.../The Time of Capital and the Messianicity of Time Marx](http://www.academia.edu/.../The_Time_of_Capital_and_the_Messianicity_of_Time_Marx_), p. 55.

2 Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*, 1993.

3 Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, (London: Verso, 2009) pp. 124-125

Slide 4

For Benjamin messianic time has the potential to disrupt this validation of sequential linearity and progressive development. Messianic time flashes up in moments Benjamin refers to as 'jetzzeit' or 'now-time' where the dominant viewpoint is shaken, freeing the historical past from the grip of capital-time. Benjamin notes, 'Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallises into a monad.'⁴ Jetzzeit arrests sequence, cuts through a period of time, and fuses its components in a manner that allows them to be appropriated at a glance. Viewpoints can be shifted and new alignments made possible, creating the possibility of redeeming aspects passed over in dominant accounts.⁵ 'In this structure he recognises the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.'⁶ In Khatib's argument capital-time is replete with opportunities for re-interpretation, because of the unstable relations between the processes that comprise it. There is no measure of productivity without abstract labour and no measure of abstract labour without chronometric time.⁷ In Khatib's words jetzzeit 'gives us time to free and retroactively redeem the contracted, congealed time encapsulated in capital-time.'⁸

Slide 5

In contrast Jacques Derrida locates messianicity without messianism within a horizon of anticipation (awaiting without expectation of arrival) and affirms the radical openness of the future-to-come. In *Spectres of Marx* (1993) Derrida emphasises the dislocated nature of the present, which is haunted by a spectre of justice. Mar Rosàs Tosas notes that for Derrida laws presuppose justice but exclude it from their operation. Justice remains an unrealisable promise. '[L]aws form a chain at the end of which there is supposedly justice, but justice can never be attained, because it constitutes the condition of possibility for laws.'⁹ ¹⁰ As laws are instituted and enacted through accountable codes and protocols they violently transgress justice's promise by reducing the other to the rule of the same. Nonetheless we approach justice when we grasp the heterogeneity at the heart of our time. Owen Ware notes, '[D]isjointed time does not necessarily lead to justice; it simply opens up the heterogeneity crucial for any respect and responsibility towards the other.'¹¹ The messianic promise of justice remains unimaginable when events are perceived according to a linear chronological order underpinned by a developmental telos towards the natural law of the market. Alternately capital-time encountered as a series of discontinuous processes can operate as a field in which heterogeneity is expected and can be welcomed.

Slide 6

Such a mode of appropriation is compatible, I argue, with recent debates on the notion of

4 Walter Benjamin, *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, in 'Illuminations', (Pimlico: London, 1999), p. 262-263.

5 This is in the same way that a crystal allows the same point to be seen from several perspectives. The monad Benjamin describes is thus a fragment within which the core aspects of the social whole are manifest and re-configured.

6 Walter Benjamin, *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, in 'Illuminations', (Pimlico: London, 1999), p. 263.

7 Marx discussed revolutions as 'the locomotive of world history', Benjamin frames revolution as the passengers on the train pulling the emergency break.

8 Sami Khatib, *The Time of Capital and the Messianicity of Time*, [www.academia.edu/.../The Time of Capital and the Messianicity of Time Marx](http://www.academia.edu/.../The_Time_of_Capital_and_the_Messianicity_of_Time_Marx_), p. 61.

9 Ibid.

10 Tosas also identifies an affinity between the structure of Derrida's argument here and earlier writings, such as 'The Problem of Genesis in the Philosophy of Husserl' (1953-54) where Derrida argues that there can be 'no genesis without structure and no structure without genesis. There can be no atemporal structure, so genesis cannot stem out from nothing.' She compares this aporetic argument with 'The Force of Law. The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'' where Derrida contrasts a similar pairing justice and law. Mar Rosàs Tosas, *Derrida's way out of dead end contemporary messianism*, *Journal of Cultural Research*, 18:4, 350-369.

11 Owen Ware, *Dialectic of the Past / Disjuncture of the Future: Derrida and Benjamin on the Concept of Messianism*, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol 5. no. 2 (April 2004) p. 107.

contemporaneity. For Terry Smith contemporaneity is awareness of a 'multiplicity of ways of being in time'¹² and for Peter Osborne it is characterised by a coming together of 'different but equally 'present' temporalities or 'times', a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times.'¹³ In Osborne's argument ever rationalising production and distribution within a globalised market place informs social actors' horizons of attention/memory/and expectation. Groys highlights the political ramifications of this condition.

The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future – of constant political narratives beyond any individual grasp or control.¹⁴

For Osborne critical modes of contemporary art foreground this disjunctive interplay of times and raise the lived temporalities of social actors to the level of historical time and change, allowing audiences to imagine a changed future.

Slide 7

In order to elaborate the operative function of art practice that Osborne identifies here I will now examine the role that Benjamin and Derrida attribute to imagery in the production of the revolutionary event, before exploring how these arguments have informed the current development of my photo-series 'Untitled 2:10am.

Slide 8

Benjamin's Arcades Project catalogues imagery drawn from shops located within Parisian passageways, which Benjamin identifies as dialectical images. Susan Buck-Morss notes dialectical images offer 'way[s] of seeing that crystallise antithetical elements by providing axes for their alignment.'¹⁵ These interrupt normative patterns of interpretation, triggering flashes of now-time, because of their capacity to accommodate oppositional terms. The fetishisation of the commodity serves as a primary example. 'With its price-tag the commodity enters the market. If its substantive quality and individuality create an incentive to buy, for the social evaluation of its worth this is totally unimportant'¹⁶. Commodities project an array of contradictory qualities by virtue of the mythic phantasmagoria they manifest in order to maximise consumer appeal. Such images convey a vision of apparent novelty tethered to the rigorous continuity of economic abstraction. Further Buck-Morss states 'this fetishised phantasmagoria is also the form in which the human socialist potential of industrial nature lies frozen, awaiting the collective political action that could awaken it'.¹⁷

Slide 9

The defaced clock towers Benjamin refers to in the 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History' also function as dialectical images that are consistent with the intentions of their producers to 'stop the day.'¹⁸ The broken dial counterposes chronometric and messianic time, simultaneously conveying a method of measurement rendered inoperative, and a continuum of time brought to a

12 A Clark Workshop 2009, Summaries of Papers and Notes on Discussions, Terry Smith Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture <http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu> Vol 1 (2011) | ISSN 2155-1162 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp.2011.32

13 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All? The Philosophy of Contemporary Art?*, (London: Verso, 2013).

14 Boris Groys, *Comrades of Time*, e-flux journal #11 – December 2009

15 Susan Buck Morss, *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (Cambridge (Massachusetts): M.I.T. Press, 1991), p. 210.

16 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, (Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 245.

17 Susan Buck Morss, *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (Cambridge (Massachusetts): M.I.T. Press, 1991), p. 211.

18 Thesis on the Philosophy of History (Thesis XV), *Illuminations*, (Pimlico: London, 1999), p. 253.

standstill waiting to be superseded. Further to this, I argue that the clock towers' presence within a fray of action also informs their significance and political potential. The defaced clock towers are remarkable because they are landmarks, set into the wider context of the cityscape, and when encountered as dialectical images they ramify onto the milieu of the city lending their disruptive charge to the unfolding revolutionary event surrounding them. Yet by doing this they overstep the frame of the dialectical image itself, defined by the flash of *jetztzeit* that allows a particular field to be encountered as a constellation. The clock towers appear to be conditioned by their outside, linking this iconoclastic presentation of stopped time with the revolutionary task at hand.¹⁹

Slide 10

Similarly, Derrida's attention to the French revolution links iconography and messianicity addressing the revolutionary's search for an identity through re-enactment, evoking themes of haunting inheritance and debt. Derrida explores Marx's observation in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' that

just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has not yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from their names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.²⁰

For Derrida, this conjuration 'in the face of the ghost is properly revolutionary', because it invokes the phantasmagoria of past epochs in the name of the new. Marx probes this paradox claiming that revolutionary inheritance is comparable to how 'a beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue'.²¹ Borrowed figures from another era give identity to the revolution. Another mode of action has to be appropriated, assimilated and then acted out. Marx continues,

[T]he heroes as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution, performed the task of their time in Roman costumes and with Roman phrases, the task of unchaining and setting up modern bourgeois society.²²

An inherited performance of statesmanship enacts a conjuration of spectres. This haunting troubles and dislocates a mode of political organisation, breaking through and allowing another one to emerge.

Slide 11

Whilst the dialectical image constellates the past through a disruptive performance that is conditioned by its context, the figures of revolution Derrida analyses amplify discontinuities in the current organisation, bringing the force of an alternate political conjuncture to bear upon them. The result of both Benjamin's and Derrida's accounts is a disruption of perceived continuity and linear development through a reconfiguration of contextual relationships and/or a performance of pre-established or borrowed roles and identities. J.L. Austin theorises such performative language, or illocutionary acts, which he claims invest language with particular functions and force.²³ Roland Barthes famously identified authorship as a function ascribed through language, and the notion of performativity has shaped recent debates on curation to which Dorethea Von Hantelmann

19 Such observations recast dialectical images as provisional ruptures that retain a level of integration with wider framework of signification and fully realise their political potential because of this.

20 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol 11 (New York: International Publishers, 1979), pp. 103-104.

21 *Ibid*, p. 104.

22 *Ibid*, p. 104.

23 See J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975)

contributed her claim that 'there is no non performative artwork.'²⁴ In Osborne's theorisation 'contemporary art, critically understood' performs the function of displacing lived temporalities onto historical time linking art to the disruption of continuity in a manner that is correlates with Benjamin's and Derrida's accounts.

Slide 12

These reflections have informed the development of the photo-series 'Untitled (2:10am)'. The work has been tested at the conference 'Time Freedom and Narrative' at University of Manchester on 3rd July 2015 and then as a commission for issue 15 of the Manchester Review. This is the slide show that I am currently showing. This paper has been an moment for conceptual reflection upon a project in the process of development, which I will resolve for an exhibition at Bankley Art Gallery in Manchester in late 2016.

Slide 13

The series is made of double exposures made from negatives of an alarm clock produced by the Jantar company in the former USSR in the years running up to its collapse in 1989. The photographs were shot with a Kiev 60 medium format camera, also from the late 1980s, in a standard set up for product photography. The shoot comprised the production of 12 photographs. For each photograph the clock rotated 30 degrees in a clockwise direction and the studio lights rotated in the opposite anti-clockwise movement revealing the object in different combinations of light and shadow. In the darkroom different negatives were combined to produce this set of double exposures. Introducing another reference to circularity and the clock face, the principle of combination was determined by the number pi, which I then used to select from a set of sixty six possible unlike combinations of clock positions. In the resulting photographs the clocks emerge into presence and dissolve into absence, intersecting with the other manifestations they overlay. Curving surfaces and sweeping shadows, cogs, and dials intersect and hybridise.

Slide 14

Alarm clocks offer a universally recognisable image of work's subjection to chronometric time and economic value and the decision to work with particular clocks from the USSR allows me to draw reference to this past era and the discarded principle of collective work that still haunts the treadmill effect of post-communist capitalist productivity. Thus 'Untitled (2:10am)' seeks to address inheritance and debt in an attempt to disrupt the false-historiography of the present day, foregrounding the disjunctive interplay of times that inform our contemporaneity.

Slide 15