

Erupt/Endure

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On visual culture, John Berger writes, “we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> A worn photograph of a street, for instance, can speak something to the viewer; it can conjure up a memory, a smile, a curious attachment to cobblestone. It feels natural to say, and even to write, that a photo speaks—that an object *brings* sensation. We often attribute our reactions to the objects involved, as if they deliberately summon responses we cannot control. Materiality and humanity, as parallels to Berger’s “things and ourselves,” have mutual stakes in the creation of meaning.

Time, on the other hand, forms a sheath to sensory experience. Once again, characterizing the inanimate feels natural; we blame time—the impenetrable, propelling force—like we blame objects. It moves too fast, or saunters at our expense. Because we uphold its authority, a clock overseeing a room—it shapes material experience. When the same tattered photograph is flipped over to show a sentimentally penned “1918,” suddenly it functions as a relic of the twentieth century. During the initial experience of feeling frayed edges, finding the sepia cobblestone romantic, the viewer’s sense of time recedes. But the number, the reminder of a period, displaces the previously ageless experience; what was once purely sensuous is now flung onto a timeline.

Pinching the proposed continuum between feeling and era, sensation and structure—is tricky. Materiality induces emotion and time notes fact, both as discrete forces of an object. Fervor does not dovetail with schedules; goosebumps are not precise enough to slice timelines. But a synthesis is likely once both perspectives are realized. An object creates meaning, and therefore possesses powers that operate, in the words of social theorist Michel Foucault, by “a

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<sup>1</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 9.

complex play of supports in mutual engagement.”<sup>2</sup> But here we are, yet again, personifying the inanimate.

Before an object can be defined or influenced by materiality and time, we need to locate the voice. As a voice asserts its impressions of an object, it testifies to its personal impressions of the present and the past. So I now share my perception of a clock while ticking with old clocks.

Nameless duty, one’s sin: shallow breathing, not giving in.  
fast. We are moving  
gasping Encouraged to compete, by time and ourselves

DUTY  
is for an idea. Its strains  
blamed  
by  
convenience. But  
WHAT  
is the ultimate  
the pull the  
source when its stressor its host  
morphs  
?

In *Ways of Seeing*, art critic Berger speaks of “mystification,” the product of persuading the validity of one’s reasoning to the self:<sup>3</sup> because something is seen, something is known. But what is it that ultimately pulls on us? I answer: us pulling on the present.

Staring at a clock on a window ledge, I mystify myself. As is commonly done with archaic paintings, I can use the object to corroborate swirling conjectures, and make the mistakes

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1980), 159.

<sup>3</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 16.

historian Peter Burke says “historians cannot afford”<sup>4</sup> to make: I can suppose this box represents its time, or the attitude of consumers these days:

The clock is ever-changing, like the leaves of a tree, while its wooden body, its trunk, preserves something so integral to life: nature. The core prevails despite the hour. It represents the core of existence that capitalist America sees dwindling with the work day. Workers operate from nine to five, stuck in schedules and petty concerns; this box, however, signifies a yearning for primordial truths. The innocent wood still houses a clock, but its authenticity somehow warrants the speed of our culture. Modern consumers have conflicting desires for purity and convenience, so if they can find it in a product, the twenty-first century manufacturer can benefit.

This analysis is glorious and beautiful and everything, but I am mystifying myself and the reader; I am defining an object by my own speculations, and simultaneously using it to validate personal impressions of other people. A single item can mean a variety to different people, and time, depending on one’s relation to it, is fluid. My struggle between the spiritual and the temporal, on the other hand, is not necessarily felt by all millennials. Berger states, “the inherent contradiction in perspective was that it structured all images of reality to address a single spectator.”<sup>5</sup> The contradiction privileges the viewer; “he is himself the situation.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the idea that an artifact can reveal an entire time period or population is flawed; a visual invites interpretation, but interpretation does not invite truth. Burke writes that film, for instance, “gives the viewer a sense of witnessing events. This is the danger of the medium. . . this sense of witnessing is an illusory one. The director shapes the experience while remaining invisible.”<sup>7</sup> It is the viewer’s challenge to remember that any visual artifact constitutes a personal lens, whether

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<sup>4</sup> Burke, Peter. *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 187.

<sup>5</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Burke, Peter. *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, 159.

it be through my societal representations or those of a documentarian. Struggles for meaning, according to Foucault, are only valid for discussion if one verifies “who is engaged in struggle,” and “what the struggle is about.”<sup>8</sup> As the director, a responsible thing I can reflect upon is my own point of view:

*The wooden finish is smooth, the digits are urgent; I believe I am smooth and urgent. This clock—I can feel it, smooth its smoothness with a gliding palm, smash its ticking apparatus when it doesn't beep at the expected number.*

*But I don't use the alarm clock for one of its prime purposes. I don't set it. Tree trunks don't beep, so the wooden box is too natural to warn of the morning. If I programmed it, its very function would debase its essence.*

*Just looking at the box evokes stream of consciousness; it is authentic, like blurted thoughts. Perhaps I bought it to feel natural yet modern, free yet punctual—and to impress those around me with my taste in clocks. This description needs to be in italics.*

Suddenly, the world is not accountable; I am accountable. I *must* be accountable because human perceptions are contingent: where one is standing, how one is feeling, what one ate for lunch that day—can easily affect relations with an object. If I'm running late for a 2:30 event and the clock shows “2:26,” its wooden grace is rendered evil; the time is not favorable to my current situation, so nothing about the box is favorable. I'm in a rush, curse the box. I must go.

My impressions of the clock represent themselves and how I feel, which can sway from admiration to aversion, noting its beauty to damning its function. The clock itself is not beautiful or menacing. I am saying it is so.

Still, because I am part of today and affected by today, my social moods may reflect others' social moods; this is why Burke considers images helpful in revealing “past ways of seeing and thinking.”<sup>9</sup> My frustration with clocks, or struggle for purity and lightheartedness

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 164.

<sup>9</sup> Burke, Peter. *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, 185.

amidst humdrum agendas and trivial concerns, may be relatable. The whimsical clock-life analogy could later supply a footnote to a description of living in capitalist America. But my voice is not alone in the story, and neither is the clock. Thus, historical analyses and objects can contribute to a picture of culture—but they cannot define it. Historians’ “methodological conservatism,” author Michael L. Wilson writes, prioritizes “the documentary and reconstructive aspects of their work more highly than its interpretive dimensions.”<sup>10</sup> Facts, or “reconstructive aspects,” are more gratifying than interpretations; they seem unequivocal and sturdy, while interpretations require too much subjectivity. Every statement is nonetheless an interpretation—a way of making sense. One rationalization, or one item, should not silence or blot out others; they all represent something worthy of consciousness. If a historian’s construal of an artifact is used to characterize the source of that artifact, or if I pull on this box to confirm *myself*, to make sense of the world according to *me*, there arises a danger which leads to Berger’s theorized “mystification of the past,”<sup>11</sup> and a lopsided attitude towards the present. One opinion has value, but should not stand alone in the conversation.

Heeding interpretive traps can motivate historians towards accountability for their reasoning, and promote even-handed analyses. To these effects, materiality and time of an object must both be examined. The two agents, according to Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, form “a complex and fluid relationship between people, images and things.”<sup>12</sup> They influence a viewer’s portrayal of an object, and shape the ways in which it can be understood. “But can the

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<sup>10</sup> Wilson, Michael L. “Visual Culture: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis?” in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (eds) (New York: Routledge, 2004), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards, Elizabeth, and Janice Hart. *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

meanings of images be translated into words?”<sup>13</sup> Burke asks. Again, objects do not speak; someone is using his or her perspective to speak for them.

Every utterance, tone, and hesitation is affected by materiality and time as it expounds on materiality and time. In many ways, words are valid, but only unto themselves. Language is its own power, but to believe its articulations “inherently just,” Foucault argues, is to overlook its influencers.<sup>14</sup> Small talk, for example, wholeheartedly eschews our role in object-human conversation. We ascribe to the object what is exclusive to the living, or rather what can only stem from ourselves. Whether paperwork or person, it is the coercion—the force that stresses, annoys, or confounds: “It’s/you’re stressing me out.” Objects or agents, then, define us as we remain unaccountable, as if our assignments of meaning and causality are all-inclusive and true. They are *reassuring* and *tender* to us, these concocted truths—offering escape from what Berger calls “fear of the present,”<sup>15</sup> or happenstance of feeling. A sensation is slight in relation to time, yet anything current and genuinely felt, no matter how short-lived, is enough to dictate the aura of eternity. Though we know things change, we fear change, and shove what will change—deep sensations, half-held beliefs—into outsiders. Externals seem stable, logical, and true, so we use them to embody our temporary feelings, and convince ourselves of some veracity of thought or emotion. We instantaneously erupt as they endure. It is the acknowledgement of this search for meaning that guides us towards acceptance of situations with no inherent meaning at all.

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<sup>13</sup> Burke, Peter. *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 162.

<sup>15</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 11.

Ultimately, Foucault says, “language could be nothing more than a higher-order instrument of thought.”<sup>16</sup> As individuals label and define, they assert authority over language, construing the world as it relates to them. I sat down by a window this morning, and found myself saying, “the sun is bright today!” But is the sun not bright everyday? I tailor a big ball of hot gas to *me*. I cling onto it because it *makes sense*. Why else would I be squinting? Like clouds obscure solar rays, outfitted language obscures alternative outlooks on the world, both in others and in the self; it creates a “higher-order.” Avoiding this process is unlikely—humans *want* to understand. But when a voice’s “higher-order” is impenetrable, hostile to any other reasoning, it pedals “a machine in which everyone is caught”;<sup>17</sup> it thinks itself overpowering others, while it also overpowers itself.

When asked for a solution, a viable method in the search for identity, philosopher Marshall McLuhan instantly answers, “dialogue.”<sup>18</sup> An individual can create identities, or meanings, by clinging on to what is comfortable; yet when situations are picked apart, agendas, complacencies, fabricated causalities—collapse. Rather than transcend outside judgements, individuals can communicate their opinions, meditate on others, and therefore achieve greater complexity and a more universal significance in their representations of the world. “Higher-orders” can become “dialogues.” Exchanges of ideas are crucial; without them, a new violence pillages meaning. This “violence,” McLuhan claims, emerges in the “quest for identity”: while

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 151.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 156.

<sup>18</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. “Marshall McLuhan Full lecture: The medium is the message - 1977 part 1 v 3.” (YouTube), 8:38.

genocides exterminate racial diversity, “facts” dismiss the dialectic. A lack of openness predisposes the individual to a smug assurance of viewpoint.

The phrase *La petite mort* translates from the French to “the little death.” It connotes different concepts to different people, but often signifies a personal transformation following orgasm. References to sex may be inappropriate in the pure craft of essay-writing, but what about sex is inappropriate, and what about academia is pure? As a French example of ambiguity, *la petite mort* can express ideas beyond its English translation, as well as beyond sex. Some see it conveying a spiritual release that follows a partial demise of the self; that little death can be of virginity lost to a lover, one identity surrendering to another, or, in this case, a previously stubborn opinion now accepting its limitations. Death of certainty is not an end-all; it accommodates for discussion, openness, and further investigations into objects, meanings, and ourselves. Now it is midnight and my clock says—or I say—let your dialogue rest.