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For the Time Being

Reflections on life's insistent companion

SUSANNE PIËT

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Susanne Piët asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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Contents

Introduction 7

Part I We, self-made slaves

- 1 The undeniable present 13
- 2 Don't touch my Breil 18
- 3 The clock as a life changer 25
- 4 Meanwhile is everywhere 31

Part II The feeling of time

- 5 Man as the owner of private time 37
- 6 No time to waste 41
- 7 Waiting 48
- 8 Urban paradoxes 57
- 9 Timeline 62
- 10 Panic as a pastime 67
- 11 The ultimate entertainment 71
- 12 Watching the future 76
- 13 When sci-fi collides with the present 80
- 14 Sense of timing 83
- 15 Deadlines 86
- 16 Time to go 88
- 17 Midlife and other crises 91
- 18 Rites of passage or mood-messing moments 95

Part III Take time

- 19 To sublimate the feeling of time 99
All sorts of time 99
Human as in human time 102
The moment of bliss 104
- 20 To reinvent time 111
Magic with age 111
Deadlines don't exist 116
- 21 To outlive time 120
The blessing of being mortal 120
Memories define you 122
Mood like a train in time 128
The significant presence 132
Turning time around. Period. 135
- 22 The moral tidings 144
All in good time 144
We, trustees of time 146

Bibliography 153

Acknowledgements 157

About the author 159

Introduction

“Well, in our country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you run very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.”

“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

Time is always present for us, even though we may live in the past or in the future, and struggle to live in the moment. Time should be familiar and well-known company by now, but do we acknowledge time for what it really is? We cannot stop it. It is manifold in its varieties, untouchable like space and yet frighteningly near. There is no why for time, or it would be, as Einstein suggested one time, so that everything doesn’t happen at once.

Time has always been on my mind. Now even more than ever. I feel the approach of our current transformation in time rumble more every minute. A cozy, familiar, obedient, adaptive, socially rebellious environment has turned into a whirlwind where everything seems possible, even the defiance of formerly held laws of nature and morality. Other laws rule now: of economy, profit and faith in makeability. Most of what happens now would not be possible without the precision of a super clock. The face of time, that is totally indifferent to ethical standards and emotional values and keeps ticking away the nanoseconds. I, for one, am not indifferent to ethical standards and emotional values.

We cannot live without time, willingly or not. Do you feel that too? Society is hung up on time. Time seems to be our lifeline, judged by how often we check the time on clocks, smartphones, and watches. Even as our lives are ruled by financial data and the economy, I am convinced that we are dysfunctional not only in how we spend money, but also in how we spend time. We are in fact wasting our time, if that is at all possible. We could make much better use of it. That is why time intrigues me. Instead of a tool, time has become a threat or a whip, constraining our lives. Thanks, by the way, merely, totally and solely to our own doing or thinking.

When I look around, I sometimes feel that we are slaves of time. We check the clock all the time. We hurry and multitask, because time, or rather the seeming scarcity of it, has become our challenge to overcome. Of all the diseases to which no cures have been discovered, stress is the most apparent and most persistent. But the scarcity exists only in our minds. Still, this sense of scarcity brings about amazing things, inventions that seemed impossible, it enables us to speed up, save time, liberate ourselves, and be ubiquitous. The wish to beat or control time drives economies, generates profits and therefore, statistically at least, creates wellbeing.

One would think that we would know by now what time is exactly, but it is not so easy to establish. What is time other than a construct of our mind? A construct is an abstract reality, if you will. According to some scientists, time is not even there. For ordinary people, time often poses a problem. If time would be a mere construct, the problems that it presents in practical life should be easily solved. But either we have not found the answer yet or we do not wish to find it. It could be that something prevents us from taking the simple path in dealing with time. But what? My first hunch is that it is our innate Darwinian psychological drive for competition and survival that lashes us blindly forward, embracing everything that provides relief, no matter how short term, without taking time to consider whether it is good for us.

The problem, I know already, is not time itself, but the

construct we created of it and the way we stubbornly stick to it and feel time. If I were to look for an explanation of this phenomenon, I would probably find a way to make better use of time. Already in the 17th century William Penn noted: "Time is what we want most, but...what we use worst."

We need a different mindset and a different attitude towards time. And I would like to find it.

PART I

**We,
self-made
slaves**

The fact that we think time passes is just an accident of our nervous systems - of the way things look to us. In reality time does not pass, we pass. – MICHAEL CRICHTON

Why do people think they cannot survive without the clock, why do people need a clock to, literally, know where and who they are? This book tries to face up to a remarkable and self-inflicted situation: we have been synchronized, domesticated and made anonymous by the clock. Against our better judgment, we heed false assumptions about time, even though these cause us stress and suffering. One is the linear concept of beginning and end. Ownership of time is the other aberration with major consequences. We are self-made slaves of time. Almost constantly aware of time, as the only species capable of that, we often think of the future or dwell in the past, more so than actually live in the moment and forget about time. Why do we heed them? Innovation, economy, society and, last but not least, our emotional system stirs, trembles and shudders due to commonly shared assumptions of saving, spending, losing and creating time. Time is not only a worrying but also a motivating force. Time's significance seems to be that it is what makes economies tick. How can we liberate ourselves from this stifling preoccupation with time's clock? It is one minute to twelve, they say, but the beat goes on.

CHAPTER 1

The undeniable present

The human way of experiencing time as passing and of aiming for free will to make the most of the time we have constitutes an ability that no other species on this planet possesses. And Douglas Coupland notes in his book *Player One* that, "Dolphins and ravens and Labrador dogs come close, but they have no future tense in their minds." The protagonist clarifies: "They understand cause and effect, but they can't sequence forward... They live in the perpetual present, something humans can never do."

This unique awareness of time and the inability to shut it off is what makes our world turn and moves us in many ways. Especially since misconceptions of the essence of time are somehow more authoritative than scientific knowledge. We live time as a linear phenomenon, with a beginning and an end, and sequential events along the way. The other crucially mistaken idea is that we, as human beings, own time. This assumption of ownership defines our moods and emotional experience of existence. Time is ours until we die (though faith of any kind can provide extra time in the hereafter). People who somehow live longer than doctors predicted or miraculously survived some near-fatal accident, often say they are living on borrowed time. The implication is that we can either lose, spend or save time. Why do we do that? It both worries and motivates us. Our reason behind this compulsive approach to time could be that it keeps the cogs of our economy turning. It inspires us into endeavors to actually make and mold time, to invent devices and other means to speed

up or slow down our lives, to relax, compete, to stretch time and ultimately to free ourselves.

What is time? "Time is the measure of movement between the after and the before," is what Aristotle suggested, relating time to the now. The place where you and I are, I presume. Time is the gift we have been given. And at the same time, it seems to fly (*tempus fugit*) and dissipate into thin air. We crave to be in it and live it (Kundera envisions the human as desperately hanging on to the fragment of time that has been cut off from past and the future, torn away from continuity and therefore out of time). This image of a drowning man in the ocean of time is frightening and with reason. For one, we are born with a hunger for control. So, we need order, and the clock gives us that. Yet, since we have been domesticated by the clock, we can hardly escape its regime. We are all synchronized. And dependent again.

We depend on time. As I write this, Western European countries are losing 8 minutes due to a misbalance in the power grid in Kosovo, of all places. Digital clocks across Europe work based on the frequency of the Pan-European power grid, and when that frequency drops, as it has due to a power grid operation dispute between Kosovo and Serbia, the clocks slow down. Only 8 minutes, but 8 minutes can have major impact. Systems are increasingly more precise. Synchronization to the minutest particles like nanoseconds is a prerequisite for information systems, such as computers and robots, with which we obediently deal and live on a daily basis. The misconception that time is moldable and controllable has inspired many business models that seek to meet widespread market demand for ways to spend time. Time in one form or another has always been a crucial factor of the economy, but the current era has seen time's significance rise meteorically. The world economy has long been driven by agriculture, manufacturing, trade, and services, but there is a new kid on the economics block: entertainment. The entertainment industry is growing bigger every year. The offer of possibilities to spend time will gain ever greater social, psychological and political importance. We, in the post-capitalist now, simultaneously experience a scarcity and a surplus of time, but above all we experience our

dependency on time's capricious and sometimes volatile character, where control is what we generally want and need. Of course, the entertainment industry as an answer to part of this has already been recognized, and the same is true for the industry of luxury health and wellness, but that is not all.

It is not only about speeding everything up through faster cars and faster Internet. Think also about the wish to lengthen life, or to shorten the term a woman carries a fetus. Or solving the problem of human capabilities like ubiquity, how to be physically present in different places at the same time, or to have influence, presence or power even after you die, being able to determine freely when and how you want it all to end. In the near future, answers to those needs will be invented. They will throw up ethical and practical questions, more and more prominently as time goes by. There are many ways to consider time and ponder how crucial its role is in our lives. And how its significance changes over time. Time and the misperceptions about it govern our existence and our society. Time messes with our lives, souls and well-being. That is why the subject of time fascinates me. We are, willingly or not, nearing a point in time where a new moral revolution will begin. A new revolution of morals will be a future wave in the ocean of trends.

A wave we are currently seeing is that of urbanization, of people moving to cities en masse. Urbanization creates a different relationship with time compared to country life, where time means seasons, light and dark, moons and suns. Or sea life with tides. It transforms a formerly largely self-sufficient person into a mere consumer. As consumers, we, mostly subconsciously, feel compelled to organize our lives according to relentless time schedules. Cities never sleep. Sunday as a rest day is a thing of the past. Changes in economy and technology call for time shifts. The once sharply etched line between productive time and leisure time, which marked the start of the industrial revolution, is blurring now. A bigger part than ever of the western population will soon be middle-aged or old, but still healthy and sane and maybe still working. The dividing line between paid work and volunteering is fading. A large part of the population lives alone instead of

in a family unit. A growing part of the younger world population will be without paid work. And paid work changes, you can do it any time any place, thanks to IT and the Internet. Though they are indeed domesticated by the nanosecond, robots are also more independent of time than we are. They can work while humans sleep, move around to engage in programmed activities whenever needed, or spend time on other activities. They have infinite patience and endurance.

Cities pulse forward. Human citizens, however, need relaxation and entertainment to calm down or revitalize. Hence the cherished concepts of quality time and pastimes. Pastimes are relevant on both sides of the market. People of today are eager to regain quality in their lives and to chase away problems, boredom, fear, and death. About that battle against boredom: to fill voids of time (caused by unemployment, the lack of possibilities to develop in problem areas, the forced paralysis for people waiting for a legal status, a permit, a job, surgery, no longer having to go to war or church, and the inability to entertain oneself without devices), we create a broad demand for action, stimulation, justification, significance, meaning, mood management towards uncontrolled release of anger, and the constant craving for highs. When humans experience absence of formal habitual time schemes, they usually feel bored. Various possible alternative ways to spend time are not only economically but also socially and psychologically relevant. Various studies in the fields of psychology, sociology, and criminology have shown that boredom, often the result of a lack of purpose or lack of confidence in the attainability of a goal, is one of the main causes of crime (Robert M. Merton and Emile Durkheim). One criminologist, Prof. R. Dessaur, once said: "Why do people steal? Mainly because they have nothing else to do." And a sociologist (M. Humbert) concluded after ample research among college students that they merely engage in criminal activity in order to experience a high. Unemployed people lack stimuli that can give them feelings of competence, confidence and identity. Gratuitous violence (a strange phenomenon of our time to begin with) is the price any decadent society pays. In the aftermath of capitalism, time has

become a challenge and a problem, and has therefore created various kinds of market demand.

We may feel superior to all other species, blessed as we are with the ability of being aware of time, but it is a curse as well. We are unable to live in the eternal present, or rather, to live in the moment. All the time. This fact creates unhappiness, stress and a great demand for therapeutic, religious or spiritual guidance. In the study of our time, emotions are considered an innovative domain. Understandably. We live in a confusing transitional era, where given values are questioned or turned around, where the sustainability of our planet and human existence is questioned. Surprises, excitement, questions, and suspense are what drive and legitimize our choices and decisions. I think that we are living in a time where hormones rule like never before. We give them status. The emotions they produce are legitimized motives for our actions and we seek release from them through consumption. We know about them, though we do not acknowledge enough their importance in our life. Can I? Can I possibly understand the time I am living in?

CHAPTER 2

Don't touch my Breil

If you think about it, which we can, as outlined above, you will probably agree that almost everything we do or think has somehow, one way or another, to do with time. The main problem is, I think, that we hardly seem to be able to accept time for what it is. Lots of things we seem to need or want to buy offer a special emotional experience of time. The ultimate item being the classic wristwatch, creating premium-brand facades based on words such as Rolex or Breil, the ultimate costly means to impress your peers and others with your identity. Why the watch is still presented as a status symbol beats me. "Don't touch my Breil." As Umberto Eco observed: "Nowadays we are all children of the civilization of clocks."

The following truth struck me: time is not our friend, it is not our environment, it is not our gift or tool. Time rules us, we have been made slaves of time. We stress and struggle to obey its regime. And we try in the meantime with all our might and ingeniousness to wrestle ourselves from its grasp. We desperately want to be in control of time, in control of how we spend it, how to avoid losing it, how we check it, how we try to gain time, how to get ahead of it, or how to make up for lost time. This is remarkable to say the least, because even when we should know better what time is, we stubbornly keep trying to mold it to our liking or need, as we have to conform to a shared rhythm at the same time (pun intended).

Where are we, errant slaves, going, as we consume seconds with every step? This conjures up an image of Jack Nicholson for

me. There he is, blending into New York's street crowd, wearing a dark suit and a white shirt. He lights a cigarette while waiting at the crosswalk for the traffic to stop. Amidst the sea where fellow men and women are floating on invisible waves, his head bobs to the spring in his step. In slow motion, this is a Sean Penn film after all. It is true what author Hillary Mantel observed, that time ticks in the city, there is a rhythm in the public space that you have to join in with ("break the rhythm and you'll rue it") to avoid collision with elbows, purses, and the likes. "It occurred to me for the first time that this rhythm is a mystery indeed, controlled not by the railways or the citizens, but by a higher power. That it is an aid to dissimulation, a guide to those who would otherwise not know how to act."

Haruki Murakami's book *After Dark* is set at night. The protagonist girl looks through the window of an all-night cafe near the train station. As the last train pulls out of the station, she observes the people passing by: "People coming and going – people with places to go and people with no place to go; people with a purpose and people with no purpose;" and, of special interest to us "people trying to hold back time and people trying to urge it forward." I see the image of people checking the time by hurriedly looking at wristwatches or, especially nowadays, their phones.

Their time seems limited, they run the risk of arriving late. They want to avoid that at almost any cost.

We have an as yet inexplicable inner urge to know what time it is, almost every minute of our life. And if you do not believe me, check out the experience of the protagonist in another Haruki Murakami book *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*. His name is Toru Okada. For reasons for you to find out by reading the book, which I recommend you do when you have the chance, he voluntarily chooses to lower himself into a deep dry well in the garden of an empty house, situated in an alley behind his own. So, he finds himself there at the bottom of this well, which is covered by one half of the lid, creating a crescent-shaped crevice through which light enters the well. He has taken a knapsack with a penlight and a thermos of water with him. And a few lemon drops since he recently quit smoking, so you know he is acquainted with the

phenomenon of addiction. He can only see the sky from his point of view, until someone (maybe the girl he knows?) covers the well completely. In the pitch dark, he notices that what he misses most is knowing what time it is. He discovers that he must have looked at his watch some two thousand times since he descended into the well. And then he thinks: "Something strange was happening to my sense of time. I decided not to look at my watch for a while. Maybe I didn't have anything else to do, but it wasn't healthy to be looking at my watch so often. I had to make tremendous efforts to keep myself from looking, though. The pain was like what I had felt when I quit smoking. From the moment I decided to give up thinking about time, my mind could think of nothing else. It was a kind of contradiction, a schizoid split. The more I tried to forget about time, the more I was compelled to think about it. Before I knew it, my eyes would be seeking out the watch on my left wrist." Then, after deciding, finally, to give up on that useless continuous checking of his watch, the following discovery happens: "And so time flowed on through the darkness, deprived of advancing watch hands: time undivided and unmeasured. Once it lost its points of demarcation, time ceased being a continuous line and became instead a kind of formless fluid that expanded and contracted at will.")

At first, I was not aware that we live disciplined and forced by time so much. But that was until one of my students at the Design Academy Eindhoven in Holland came up with a project. Its aim was to liberate people from time's tyranny. He took his project to a department of a company and was allowed to work with its managers. After deliberating with them on the theme, they started to make an inventory of all the clocks and other time indicators around them. Then they were taught how to knit. Don't laugh, it worked, they liked it. They enjoyed the relaxing effect of endorphins that are released by doing repetitive low attention demanding tasks. Therefore, it was rewarding in itself as a pastime. But what did they produce? They knitted covers for all kinds of time-telling devices such as clocks, smartphones, computer screens, and watches. Another one, world famous by now, Maarten Baas, created a clock, the hands of which were