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Moving forward, remaining still:

An interpretive essay regarding the key message presented by Christian Marclay's *The Clock*

It was a Sunday night and I was planted in front of a television watching week nine of the NFL playoffs with my boyfriend. There were about two minutes left in the second quarter of the late game between the Atlanta Falcons and the Dallas Cowboys- two minutes left on their clock but about ten minutes of my time after all the stop-and-go plays. This is the Sunday routine since football season kicked off and no doubt will remain as such until it ends. Not caring for football I found myself watching the clock on the cable box more than the game, even as its display of the time was interrupted by the channels jumping around on commercial breaks. Up until a week prior I would think nothing of this routine, rather I'd patiently wait for the game to end so that I could be the main attraction for the last twenty minutes of waking time. A week prior my concern with time was only to the extent of keeping schedules, making money, and not burning whatever was in my oven. A week prior to that Sunday night I would become one of the many viewers entranced by the Swiss-American artist Christian Marclay's 24 hour video *The Clock*. Never have I been so affected by a piece of artwork but what Marclay has presented to us, the viewer, with *The Clock* is a seamlessly synthesized, real-time functioning video portrait of the self in

modern society through splicing together a century's worth of cinematic fragments that are as obsessed with time as we are.

It was week prior to that Sunday that I sat down on a rather plain IKEA couch in a near pitch black room in The Power Plant Gallery at the bottom of Lower Simcoe in Toronto. The film screening against the back wall in the dark room was *The Clock*, and as I wandered in to join the rest of the forty-odd viewers entranced by the only source of light in the gallery space, I could not help but feel similar to an insect. I had allotted myself a couple hours to sit and watch the film not knowing that, much like an insect, it is nearly impossible to break away from the light once you've allowed yourself to behold it. After entering the space just after twelve in the afternoon I found five hours had escaped me almost without my knowing, had it not been for the constant flash of time in the film. I only got up because I had to be somewhere else at 6pm. The next day after nine hours of work, as if brought back to the gallery in a trance, I would view the hours of 8pm to just after 10 pm. It was on that following Sunday as I sat watching those four glowing green numbers exists as a point of reference in my life -counting down to the end of the dragging football game, to the end of my night- that I couldn't help but feel *The Clock* referencing me. What haunted my thoughts then was *The Clock's* comment on how modern beings in Western Society have been conditioned to live: through the act of watching and waiting.

*The Clock's* weave of thousands of movie scenes, their charged dialogues in clips that last no longer than a minute each, was not dissimilar to the channel surfing during commercials I experienced that, or any other night. As I waited and watched the television flicker from a

Swiffer commercial to Homer Simpson, to some unrecognizable film, I felt as though I became one of the clips in *The Clock*. I was placed somewhere in between John Travolta making his time-sensitive demands at 2:05pm and a film-noir starlet lighting up a cigarette alone around 9pm. That was when I felt *The Clock's* meaning. Each time-obsessed movie clip makes apparent that we have grown to participate in and experience everyday life passively. Our lessons and experiences are gained vicariously through watching: the disasters of the daily news, photos from those we follow on the internet, Bette Davis in *Jezebel* or as Baby Jane an hour later. *The Clock* strategically uses the aging of these familiar and unfamiliar faces, time sensitive disjointed scenes, clips of burning cigarettes and clock faces to drive home the idea that we have always been watching something, someone, and waiting for that something, someone. As we relate our place in life to one of those 30 second clips in *The Clock*: watching, waiting, checking the time, existing somewhere in between Bette Davis' transformation from a fresh faced lover to a drunken has-been, we are made aware that our time is passing just as rapidly as hers. I am waiting for my lover's eyes, a cigarette has burnt out somewhere; am I far behind?

Of course Marclay has gone about transitioning his jumping video clips in a way much more sophisticated than my Sunday night channel surfing. As a master of audio-mixing<sup>1</sup>, Marclay rhythmically overlapped relevant dialogue and anxious repetitions of clocks ticking, footsteps and beating hearts to guide the viewer from one clip to the next and back in some cases. As these sounds chime in and out from one another one cannot help but be reminded of our channel surfing habits: but too, as those habits carry forward as we walk through the traffic of city streets, eavesdropping and constantly selecting our audio focuses in the world around us.

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As the day moves into night, *The Clock's* audio track loses some of its frantic incorporations of day-life cacophony and becomes more aware of its self, an awareness highlighted by those anxiously repetitive sounds. A woman watches the hours tick away in a foreign film and we as viewers are not welcome into her thoughts more than what the tick, tick, tick of the time will let us imagine. Now we cannot help but remember the nights we sit awake in front of the low-volume television or in silence at 2am awaiting our slip into the unconscious- we are clips in the film again. It is then that we can appreciate that tick, those reverberations and echoes that string all the audios and visuals together; it is then that we can understand them as the factors that beg our eyes to seek out the clock face in the next 30 second clip so we can check how much time have we lost and how much time we left, just like we always do.

Having been trained by the film to use our obsession with keeping time to notice the neurotic and consistent existence of clock faces in every scene, one can undoubtedly decide that the presence of real-time in the film is the most important feature in communicating Marclay's message. Marclay has manipulated familiar faces, unfamiliar foreign films and scenic audios to highlight the progression of real-time in a way that we barely notice. It is in barely becoming aware of each minute that we as viewers can begin to understand that this time exists (if at all) separate of us, and we can never escape it. Decades ago, a comedic actor I have no knowledge of clings desperately to the hands of a giant clock on the side of a building in a clip shown at 2:45pm. Decades later I sit clinging to the hands of my time just as the second quarter of this football game I am waiting out dries up; less literally, but all the same. It is this constant referential point of real-time presented in sequences of emotionally charged scenes that provides the most riveting effect of *The Clock*: the suspension of the viewer in a place where they are

removed from reality and life's concerns by the cinematic qualities of the film while remaining conscious of time's passing and that they are still participants in life. This is the *momento mori* effect that shadows over my Sunday night; this is the enduring essence of the work that separates it from a painting or something static.

*The Clock* does not require an understanding of Marclay as an artist, though he has been hailed as “the most exciting collagist since Robert Rauschenberg”<sup>2</sup>, nor does it require one to be well-versed in the history of film. All *The Clock* requires is the viewer's content passivity in watching the hands of the collected clock faces flow forward, just as they have been doing all along. Marclay has cut and paste together the immaterial<sup>3</sup>, the synthetic world that has been created for our eyes and our ears from a century's worth of filmmakers, composers and actors only to bring to light the severity in our illness of passivity. This malaise is rooted in the act of not acting and our death is ever approaching just as the next clip, the next commercial, the next hour; these are the thoughts that cannot leave us though we have long left the film. The presentation of sequential time bonding these thousands of clips, overlapping dialogues and hypnotic transitions is what places the film in its foreboding co-existence with our world. It is this real-time that keep us in a state that is removed from experiencing both reality and the film wholly, a suspension that presses us as the viewer to actively engage the progression of time by continuing on in our passivity.

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Sunday night has come around again, a week has blazed by me since last Sunday and I am only made conscious of this passage thanks to announcer's indication that it is now week ten of the NFL playoffs. I am losing another staring contest with the flickering green digits on the cable box and again I cannot help but feel *The Clock* making reference to me in another one of its screenings. I exist somewhere in between Denzel Washington yelling over the phone "You've got five minutes!" and a train departing the station at 7:50 pm. I wonder how long it will take Denzel's five minutes to pass, how many stop-and-goes he has left before the train leaves in the next film. The time is running up in the first quarter of the late Sunday game and a scene from *The Twilight Zone* that was shown at around the 2pm hour in *The Clock* is resurfacing in my mind: Grandpa tells the Doctor "*When the clock stops ticking, I'll die.*" I can't help but feel Marclay knew I'd be here again; I am left ashamed of my contentment in my unchanged Sunday night routine of clock watching. I continue on in my sickness, my hours tick away, unnoticed, in tune with everyone else's- I know one day I'll get up and walk away from this too.

## Works Cited

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