**On (Not Being with) Time (Queerly) in Post-War Britain**

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Christian Marclay’s The Clock (2010), a singular film of a real-time clock constructed from successive moments of film that capture images of clocks, makes apparent that cinema is not a medium marked just by the passing of time, but by the performance of its own timeliness (Burges and Elias 2016: 8). Being a child of the 1980s, my own iconic moment of cinematic timeliness is that of Doc Brown hanging-off the hands of the town hall clock waiting for lightning to strike in order to send Marty McFly Back to the Future (Spielberg 1985). Marty’s failure to be on time brings into question his relationship with time and, with it, the project of constructing a more desirable future to which to return. The whole purpose of Marty’s adventure back in time is to straighten out the events of the past in order to produce the ideal time of the conjugal family that will secure his own successful heteronormative future. The reverse Oedipal operation that Marty must perform, while ostensibly about reinforcing a naturalized notion of generational, heterosexual, reproductive time, allows us, as viewers, to indulge in a queer reconfiguration of family relations that sees the child become matchmaker to his parents and near lover to his mother, with the primary bond of affection existing across the films between an ageing ‘mad’ scientist and a strangely adult teenager—a relationship that appears throughout the trilogy as always both out of time and outside of time.

If Back to the Future ostensibly presents the entwined performances of straightness and being on time, it also raises the question, might queerness emerge in moments of intentional and accidental untimeliness, lateness and too-soonness? Indeed, the relationship between queerness and non-normative models of genealogical, familial and consumptive time has been well-theorized (Ahmed 2006; Edelman 2004; Freeman 2010; Halberstam 2005, 2011; Muñoz 2009). To this established discussion, a queer reading of Back to the Future may contribute a further meditation on the relationship of the post-war period to the heteronormative conjugal family, capitalist work-consumption and the performance of contemporaneity as a being with time. The ‘saved’ McFly family at the end of the first Back to the Future film now have a perfect alignment of conjugal love, work ethic, conspicuous consumption and bourgeois habitus. Watching the McFlys’ on-screen straightening-out through temporal (re)adjustment leads me to ask what is the relationship between the performance of timeliness, forms of desiring alignment and the apparatus of film, display and performance? And how may such apparatus, not just as a witness to a passing present, but also as a performer within the (re-)orientation of the contemporary, help stage queer forms of becoming together with time?

**Exhibitions and reflective surfaces or, being with time in post-war Britain**

While concerns with what it is to be together or not with time were not peculiar to the post-war period, the idea of the contemporary did accrue new and especially anxious meanings at this time and in Britain particularly. The move from war-time to peace-time anxiety was embodied in the title of Council of Industrial Design’s (CoID’s) 1946 exhibition Britain Can Make It*.* Despite its upbeat tone, the purpose of the exhibition was to tempt both British consumers and producers alike into desiring new stripped-back contemporary designs and technologically up-to-date and competitively reproducible production methods in the face of Britain’s rapid decline as an exporting power (Maguire 1997). To do this required the straightening out of the country after the war through a clear articulation to the public of the relationship between Britain’s past, present and future—a progression that suited the neat paths and clear delineations afforded by the exhibition format (Woodham 1997). Such an attempt was exemplified by the juxtapositions and zones of the 1951 Festival of Britain (Conekin 2003). If the festival was a large-scale attempt to reconstruct the broken time of war into a new narrative of national reconstruction on all fronts, then one front was the explicit target of much post-war attention: the heteronormative home and the conjugal family. In particular, it was the young couple, either with children or with children on the horizon, relentlessly reflected in adverts for everything from kitchen appliances to New Towns, who were the primary target of exhibition models, catalogues and films telling them not only what to buy, but how to become contemporary.[{note}]1. Indeed, the exhibitionary mechanism emerged as apparatus for the staging of post-war reconstruction (Larkham and Lilley 2012). I use apparatus here in the sense that Giorgio Agamben extends from Michel Foucault as ‘anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings’ (2009: 14). As such, the post-war exhibition was not just any apparatus, but an exemplary one for the alignment of the British public with the demands of contemporary life.

Lamenting the meek modernism of the ‘Festival style’, the artist Richard Hamilton commented that it ‘was, and is, a sub-classification of contemporary, a term sanctioned and frequently used by the Council of Industrial Design prior to the Festival, and which has doubtful value’ (1982: 147–8). Hamilton’s own investments in the notion of the contemporary came through his work at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) (Cranfield 2012, 2013). The ICA, in its very post-war inception, embodied the anxious question at the heart of modernism and its offshoot, the post-war contemporary: how to be with one’s time? Without a clear answer, the ICA became a vessel into which forms of contemporaneity, as ‘joined times or times together’ (Luckhurst and Marks 1999: 3), various and contradictory, were poured. One of Hamilton’s greatest contributions to this exploration was the plethora of exhibition designs and formats that he produced for the Institute (Crippa 2016; Walsh 2014). While these early ICA exhibitions were experiments in spatial design, they were as much about considering a relationship with time. Hamilton’s collaboration with Victor Pasmore and Lawrence Alloway, an Exhibit (1957), was his most temporally concerned exhibition experiment, because of, rather than despite, the fact that it primarily comprised a maze-like structure of semi-transparent free-hanging Perspex panels devoid of images to be negotiated by ‘viewers’. The project mirrored a concern with the contemporary in two crucial ways. First, it was conceived as iterative—designed to be recomposed for different spaces, reflecting and parodying the post-war moment of pre-fabrication, reconstruction and the need for multi-functional, mutable spaces. Second, its material quality of semi-transparent reflective planes literally mirrored the spectator (now reconfigured as participant) into the exhibitionary moment, allowing them to apprehend themselves within the impermanent display apparatus (Cranfield 2012; Crippa 2016; Moffat 2014).

The exhibitionary experiments at the post-war ICA spatialized the question of how to be together with one’s time. The with-ness implied by the ‘con’ of contemporary necessarily lends a spatiality to a concern for temporal belonging. Indeed, for Peter Osborne, the contemporary is a term that attempts to connect that which is disjunctive (2013: 25). While, for Agamben, it is the peculiar spatial condition of being at once the one who fractures the back of time and simultaneously sutures time through a notion of the present who is contemporary (2009: 43). If, for Agamben, ‘the contemporary’ is a person positioned as astute but alienated observer and narrator of the zeitgeist, the post-war contemporary moment was sutured not by individuals, but by devices—screens, cameras, projectors—that acted as constitutive of and witnesses to the passing present.

**Being together (queerly) out of time**

One of the most poignant reflections of post-war timeliness is Lorenza Mazzetti’s 1956 film Together that formed part of the first Free Cinema programme at the National Film Theatre in its year of release. The film follows two men, apparently dockers, who appear to be unable to hear and unable to speak, as they move through the bombed streets and working-class spaces of the East End of London, simultaneously part of and detached from a community of playing children, pub regulars, other dock workers and neighbours. While the characters’ apparent deafness and muteness could be viewed as a hackneyed and problematic metaphor for alienation and estrangement, they are also conditions that allow the protagonists to be at once at the centre of and marginalized within the ‘scene’ of urban life and to eventually become the victims of this scene.

In plot terms, the pair’s inability to hear the approach of a group of playing children, who have been intermittently pursuing them throughout the film, becomes a crude way of creating the film’s denouement when, in a rare moment of separation, one of the pair goes to use a public toilet, while the remaining partner is startled by the children, falling off a bridge into a river to be seen no more. Upon returning from the toilet, the other partner finds his friend and interlocutor missing, and is unable or unwilling to find out what has happened to him. Despite this tragic ending, Mazzetti has claimed that the film is hopeful (British Film Institute 2006). But this is certainly a strange hope, one that does not conform to usual understandings of happy and hopeful endings. If there is a hope, I wish to argue, it is present because of the protagonists’ performance as contemporaries (together in time) and their failure to be contemporary (not quite together with their time) through the queerness of their friendship.

The figure of ‘The Friend’ lies between Agamben’s discussion of apparatus and his meditation on the contemporary in his trilogy of essays What is an Apparatus?(2009). *‘*The Friend’ may be said to provide, for Agamben, a conceptual path between the apparatus of our time, as that that subjectifies us (literally creates us as subjects), and the contemporary—one who manages to be a part of and outside of the moment of historic incorporation. Taking friendship back etymologically towards philosophy, Agamben argues that, for Artistotle, friendship provided the fundamental connection between human existence and being, through the process of con-senting (2009: 34). If Agamben’s notion of the contemporary draws attention to the with-ness of temporal belonging—the paradoxical quality of being adjacent to one’s time in order to apprehend it—then ‘The Friend’ marks with-ness as fundamental to the becoming of selfness: ‘The friend is not an other I, but an otherness immanent to selfness’ (ibid.). Whereas the notion of apparatus sees the subject dissolved within and through the technologies of a time and the contemporary is the condition of contorted adjacency to time, what Agamben calls the ‘con-sentiment’ of friendship opens up the possibility of feeling ourselves together in time.

The friendship at the heart of Together holds out just such a hope of con-sentiment in time. However, the time of this hope in Together is a queer one—not future orientated in a conventional sense of a plot that moves us to a hopeful place of the ‘ever-after’. Nor quite a hope in its time or of its time. Rather, the hope exists as an excess in time—something that, although too soon and not yet, is none-the-less a moment of con-sent (sensing or feeling together) whose utopic dimension holds out a promise of another sort of contemporaneity—another way of being together in time. Together is an affirmation of friendship and the possibility of consenting even within and through profound situations of dislocation. In this sense the protagonists of the film are, in their queerness, like everyone else in the film—playing children, talking neighbours, a man playing marbles in the pub—in the moment, but beside it. They are both within but incidental to normative times of productivity, progress or recovery that were the official times of CoID’s post-war contemporary, as represented in the film by the swinging arms of the dock cranes, whose movement would gradually slow and then cease over the succeeding decades.

To locate this queer hope of consenting in and out of time it is helpful to draw upon José Esteban Muñoz’s book Cruising Utopia: The then and there of queer futurity (2009), in which hope is something to be found not in visions of a no-place or an idyll to come, but in the ‘then and there’ of an archive of queer moments of becoming. These moments suggest a way out of certain value systems and trajectories that keep people wedded to normative performances of progress, development and conventional attainment in dominant systems of accreditation and acceptance, such as the family, work, celebrity, or critical success. Muñoz searches an ‘archive’ of the cultural underground to find explicit performances of queer hope, what he terms, borrowing from Ernst Bloch, ‘concrete utopias’ (3). Whether the empty, tawdry stage of a nightclub, the final, fatal gesture of a dancer leaping from a window or the virtuoso messiness of a drag-performer, Muñoz ‘cruises’ con-senting spaces and creates a queer quilt of hope from the fragments of ephemera that are strangely out of time and orientated otherwise. While Muñoz cruises those who practised openly queer and, in the main, explicitly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) lives, I want to claim Together, a film that is in no way intentionally about non-normative sexuality or non-normative gender, as a piece of queer utopia. As I cruise this film, my desiring gaze sees two men, locked together in a space of intimate dialogue through signs only they can understand, a part of and apart from those they live with. Two men whose relationship is too soon (cannot be comprehended within the time of the film space or in the time of the film’s making). A friendship that is out of time, that runs out of time, in a part of a city that is also broken by history and awaiting the future of reconstruction. These men, whose relationship cannot be spoken of or about, may or may not have homosexual desire for each other, but despite and because of the uncertainty in what the exact nature of their friendship is, theirs appears as an utterly queer co-existence of consenting indeterminacy rendered forever such by their untimely separation at the film’s end.

However, the togetherness of Together is not an ideal narrative of being, but is presented as a series of vignettes of the everyday performance of interaction. While these micro-performances may not be explicitly theatrical, the scenographic quality of the film’s everyday togetherness means that the performance of con-sentiment is always a quasi-theatrical construction put on for the purposes of timeliness itself. From the awkward gathering around a formal dining table in a boarding house and the conviviality of after-work drinking upon which time is called, to the morning ritual of polishing the front door step or the tender moment in which one man helps another remove his workbooks at the end of the day, con-sentiment is staged as a performance of togetherness with and in time.

Just as Marty McFly navigated his temporal dislocation through intricate performances that allowed him to fit in with his temporary contemporaries, so the incidental protagonists of Together act out micro-rituals of being together in time to fend off the violence of a contemporaneity that sorts out who will and will not be a part of the present in its reorientation to the future—a violence that haunts the film through the background soundtrack of the cruel and racist children’s chant ‘eenie meenie miney mo’. However, if the staging of consenting togetherness in Together may be a part of a normative performance of temporal belonging (such as the hasty drunken post-pub fumble with a young-woman that one of the protagonists engages in), then gestures of con-temporal excess emerge as distinctly queer (such as the slow, out-of-time shaving and dressing scene that sees one of the men playing aimlessly with glass marbles, while the other gently cajoles him into getting ready). These moments of temporal transgression (taking time where it should not be taken) may be understood as what Muñoz terms ‘queer gestures’—those movements that seem out-of-time, such as the time-defying struts and poses of club performer Kevin Aviance (Muñoz 2009: 74–5). Exemplified by what Elizabeth Freeman calls ‘temporal drag’ (2010: 59–94), the explicit performance of temporal dislocation, like the sudden collapse of a voguing performer’s death-drop, the adoption of an outmoded style of dress or the failure or refusal to take up the required parts of pre-conceived heteronormative life stages, creates a dissonance with time that allows for other dissonant con-sentiments to emerge. It is not just that being queer is to be out of time, but that to con-sent differently necessarily produces different sorts of timeliness that somehow exceed the conventions of the given scene of the contemporary.

But if the temporal dissonance that the protagonists of Together enact suggest a queerness, the hope of Together lies in a much more pervasive queer orientation. This is the orientation not of the protagonists towards one another, but of the camera towards the contemporary city that records the dissonant con-sentiments of its inhabitants. When Mazzetti set out to make Together, she intended to make a short silent film within the East End of London called The Glass Marble (British Film Institute 2006). But as Mazzetti worked with the possibilities of the camera, reams of footage of the city emerged (ibid.). Employing the assistance of experienced film-maker Lyndsay Anderson, Mazzetti managed to edit the footage back into a manageable form, now called, enigmatically, Together. Despite this, the veracious desiring of Mazzetti’s camera is still present in the film. Indeed, it doesn’t just record; it performs its reflective power within the present time of the film’s making. When the children pull faces at the backs of the two men in Together, they are, of course, actually pulling faces at the camera, a natural thing to do for children excited by unfamiliar technology. Throughout the film the camera is both reflective and reflected—catching looks and catching itself in the looks of others as it cruises the city for moments of reflective recognition. Mazzetti’s camera does not take up the eye of the modernist city planner, nor of the critical male flaneur or that of the distanced ethnographer, but of a dissonant contemporary, someone at once a part of and apart from the scene of timeliness. The camera seems to confront the city as its equal, as a friend; both apparatuses that cannot help but reflect the lives, desires, fears and failures of those caught within its technologies. The film camera finds the city’s surfaces, like the graffitied wall, in mutual moments of consent—feeling with and feeling together.

Why do I call this orientation of Mazzetti’s camera queer? As Sara Ahmed reminds us, queerness is question of orientation, not just the difference our desire orientates us towards, but the ways in which we are unable to or refuse to follow the particular orientations that attempt to straighten our paths and our perspectives (2006: 68–70). Because of the way in which we become with and within the world through the orientation of our desire towards others in the difference of our orientations, the spatiality of our lives may be created as other to and perhaps at odds with the dominant ways in which space is planned for us and without us. The camera in Together, like the reflective, moveable planes of Hamilton’s an Exhibit, is orientated towards those material-moments that capture something of its own reflective quality, such as walls, faces, water, desire and hope. Mazetti’s camera does not look from a position that we may clearly understand as a subject position. Rather, it looks from and at the back of things. Ahmed, contemplating what a queer phenomenology may be, wonders if it may be ‘one that faces the back, which looks behind phenomenology’ (2006: 29). If phenomenology is about being in the world, to look at the back of that is to look at the conditions of that being in the world. As such, a queer phenomenology never can take the spatial or temporal orientations of our worlds for granted. If being contemporary, being with time, requires us to be, paradoxically, to the side of time, seeing our age as a part of a grand narrative of history, proceeding straightly, generation by generation, then perhaps performing time queerly means working with those apparatuses with which we become subjects in order to embrace hopeful moments of accidental and less-than-valued con-sentiment that exceed the strict delineations of accepted contemporaneity.

**Staging the failure of conventional time**

To relate the consenting performance of being together differently in time to an explicit apparatus of theatrical contemporaneous capture, I want to offer up a final vignette of post-war temporal excess. In 1964, a group gathered expecting to witness some sort of performance. The group was led up Pottery Lane in West London and through a door marked ‘theatre’, eventually taking their seats in row in front of a pair of curtains. Upon the drawing back of the ‘stage’ curtains, the group found themselves not looking at a stage waiting for the commencement of a timely performance, but in a shop window that framed the street outside (Wilson 2003: 47). The rendering of the everyday as theatrical spectacle made the ‘audience’ into ideal ‘contemporaries’—keen observers sat at a distance from the present of which they were a part. At the same time, of course, the framing of the audience as themselves a spectacle made the act of observance something itself to be observed within the scene of the street. In this moment, the apparatus of the contemporary, its screens, stages, frames and lenses, fell away to produce a reverberating moment of looking that threatened to undo the nonchalance that attends the performance of everyday timeliness and the expectations of theatrical time.

This piece, Street, was created by the artists Joan Hills and Mark Boyle[{note}]2 and formed a part of their multi-media practice of radical con-sentiment, marked by a philosophy of complete and total acceptance of the material moment as it was found (Wilson 2003). Taking place at the height of the contemporary form of the kitchen sink drama, Boyle and Hills’ Street just gave people the kitchen-sink without the drama. But the disappointment or failure of the staging of time as theatrical event was for Boyle and Hills the beginning of a re-orientation to the world that was less concerned with the present as a matter of performative convention and rather as an erotically charged moment of temporal excess. To relate this pleasure in acceptance and excess back to Mazzetti’s film, it is not so much that we should see the tragic end of the friends’ relationship in Together as hopeful, but rather that the rupture of the time-frame of a conventional ending brings us as viewers into a hopeful moment of con-sentiment as witnesses of the failure of timeliness. Or, as, Boyle remarked of his own interest in the interrupted time of expected performance, ‘I think even the stage struck must reach something near orgasm at the dramatic impact of an actor forgetting his lines’ (Boyle 1965: 6). The sudden collapse of conventional time may produce an erotic excess that has more potential than conventional and expected forms of being with time. In other words, even or especially in failure, as Muñoz (2009: 169–84) and Judith/Jack Halberstam (2011) would have it, a hope of a radically other way of consenting can emerge. Perhaps, then, Back to the Future would have been a more hopeful film if Doc Brown had slipped silently off the clock face of the town hall and left Marty McFly forever out of time.

**Notes**

1 Although the Evening Standard’s Ideal Home Show had been running since 1908, it was relaunched with a renewed vigour and popularity in the post-war period, while exhibitions like At Home with Bill and Betty (Whitechapel 1952) attempted to orientate recently married couples in the new landscape of social housing and contemporary goods.

2 Mark Boyle and Joan Hills' practice, beginning collaboratively in 1960, was so interdisciplinary that it defied easy categorization. Famous for creating one of the first 'happenings' in 1963, In Search of Big Ed, on the final day of the International Drama Conference in Edinburgh, they went on to produce many anarchic anti-theatrical events including the infamous Oh What Lovely Whore at the ICA in 1965. Working simultaneously across assemblage, live projection shows and participatory events, Boyle and Hills' work was as likely to be found at a Soft Machine concert as it was in a conventional gallery. Most well-known for their widely exhibited 'earth studies', the Boyle Family, as they became known once their children were old enough to participate in the production of work, continue to this day to pursue their unfaltering interest in the reality of things in their utter contingency (Boyle Family 2018).

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