



Clock Time

Christian Marclay's unprecedented work *The Clock* embodies our long history of trying to tame time.

Jonathan Crary
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In the opening scene of [Fritz Lang's](#) 1943 *Ministry of Fear*, Ray Milland sits rigidly in a chair, staring unwaveringly at the movements of the minute hand on a pendulum clock on the wall. Lang here presents a concentrated visualization of the cinematic spectator as one who perceives time, who is exposed to the implacability of time. The audiences of [Christian Marclay's](#) *The Clock* (2010) occupy a similar position, although on a massively enlarged scale. It is a matter not only of following the passage of actual time, of minutes on a dizzying array of time-pieces, but of observing a kaleidoscopic compendium of the countless ways in which our subjection to time has been portrayed in film and television. The innumerable narratives out of which the film is composed detail the dissonance and incompatibility between human emotions and aspirations and the inflexibility of clock time. Repeatedly, we see how desires are frustrated by clocks that move too slowly (children in a schoolroom restlessly waiting for class to end) and fears or anxieties heightened by clocks that advance too quickly (someone caught in a traffic jam late for a plane departure).



Christian Marclay. Still from *The Clock*. 2010

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One of the most influential characterizations of clock time was in Lewis Mumford's book *Technics and Civilization*, in which he insisted that the clock, not the steam engine, was the most important machine of the industrial era. His observations highlight a crucial part of the historical background of Marclay's work. As much as his film is composed out of 20th-century media, it is also inseparable from changes that began hundreds of years earlier with the widespread use of the first clocks. The abstraction of clock time imposed a quantified framework around individual and collective behavior which superseded the organic time of natural cycles and bodily rhythms. Public time increasingly conformed to the divisions and measured intervals of the clock, and these quickly became essential to modern forms of social and economic life. By the early 20th century, the outlines of a nonstop world of 24/7 processes had already emerged, intensifying the incompatibility between the needs of human life (such as sleep) and the demands of institutions and communication networks. One of the early manifestations of this in cinema is another Fritz Lang film, *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (1922): looming over the clamorous activity on the floor of the stock exchange is an immense clock, but, disturbingly, it is numbered one to 24.

Clearly, Marclay is concerned with much more than the control and standardization imposed by this invention. He has noted the long-standing association of a clock with the *memento mori*, the reminder of death. Early clocks were often decorated with skeletons which amplified the brevity and ephemerality of mortal existence, as minutes and hours ticked away, in stark contrast to the eternal life and the immortality of the soul available to the devout and faithful. However, secular modernity diminished expectations of an afterlife, and clock time acquired an unforgiving relentlessness. Marclay's clips provide many instances of this finality in many ways, such as the ticking time bomb or the desperate hours before an execution when there still might be a pardon. In a scene from [Akira Kurosawa's](#) *Ikiru* (1952), no clock is shown but we see the despairing Takashi Shimura walking numbly on a busy street, having just been diagnosed with a fatal illness and given under a year to live. However, *The Clock* also affirms the capacity of cinema, of the dream factory, to reverse the fatality of time, with its "resurrection effect" of bringing the dead back to life. The clip from Carl Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955) is taken from one of the most celebrated films in which someone is miraculously brought back to life.

Christian Marclay. Still from *The Clock*. 2010

Artist unknown. *Automaton Clock in the Shape of Diana on Her Chariot*. First quarter of 17th century

Jasper Johns. *Target with Four Faces*. 1955

However, it's important to remember that from early on the clock as *memento mori* was supplemented by other important features. The great clocks overseeing the public spaces of cities, starting in the 14th and 15th centuries, often included mechanical figures, or automata, that would appear on the hour, and perform a wide range of human gestures or actions, often enacting scenes from biblical or mythological narratives. The imposing public display of clocks which combined timekeeping with animated figures was paralleled by the production of smaller but wildly intricate clocks for the elite owners of *Wunderkammer* (room of wonder) or cabinets of curiosity. Many of these also conjoined their clockwork mechanisms with the movements of automata of many kinds. For example, a jeweled silver clock from 1603 featured the goddess Diana with a moving head and a centaur which rolls its eyes and wields a bow and arrow. Automata are particularly important for their role in the prehistory of film. [Sergei Eisenstein](#) positions these devices within his far-reaching archeology of the medium in his *Notes for a General History of the Cinema*.

Incontestably, Marclay has created a singular and unprecedented work. However, It's possible to see one aspect of it as a modern reimagining of the clockwork automata of the *Wunderkammer* in which someone simultaneously engages the mechanical passing of time and the entertainment of the illusory simulation of movement and living forms. Marclay acknowledges this background in a clip from the 1940 *Thief of Bagdad*, set in the *Wunderkammer* of the Sultan who proudly displays its marvelous contents to visitors. Notably, these include a mechanical clock and a small-scale diorama with miniature living acrobats performing. Effectively, Marclay's work is a synthesis of these two disparate contrivances.

As has been repeatedly noted, *The Clock* is literally a clock (in much the same way that a Jasper Johns's *Target* painting is also an actual target.) However, the work is supplemented, interwoven with imagery and sound that is completely extraneous to the functioning of a timepiece. His thousands of clips are components of the clockwork but at the same time are narrative fragments that, as they flicker past us, are glimpses of divergences, even abandonments of the linear trajectory of the passing minutes. Marclay's brilliant use of sound also creates anomalous continuities between clips, blurring or dissolving the segmentations of clock time. The heterogeneity of all these tiny extracts of larger stories pull our attention into the unruliness, unpredictability, and mysteries of a human world despite the ubiquitous wrist watches and wall clocks. The richness and depth of the film depends on both the separateness and the intertwining of these two directions.

Christian Marclay. Still from *The Clock*. 2010

Andreas Feininger. *Times Square at Night*. c. 1946

It's also important not to underestimate the significance of Marclay's plan for the physical conditions within which the film can be screened. Crucially, it requires that the film be viewed collectively, within an enclosed arrangement that approximates the dim lighting and layout of a classic movie theater, with rows of seating and aisles. Because of the length of the film, one's attentiveness to the screen is periodically distracted by people entering or departing the viewing space. This adds other textures of durational experience into the work, which are the real-world exigencies of individual spectators. The 24-hour length of the work, in practical terms, means that there is no fixed start or end time. This approximates some of the random comings and goings that characterized lower-tier urban movie houses in the 1950s and '60s (such as those that once lined 42nd Street in New York City), when it was common to purchase a ticket with no concern for when the show might have begun. Similarly, for all the precision with which *The Clock* is calibrated with the local time of wherever it is exhibited, Marclay has pointedly integrated into the work countless small threads of film drama and the aleatory activity of spectators that deviate from the regulative imperatives of clock time. The uniqueness of *The Clock* is that it's a machine of metric, non-human functionality, but one designed with openings to lived temporalities that are erratic, indeterminate, and entangled.

[Christian Marclay: The Clock](#) is on view at MoMA through February 17, 2025.

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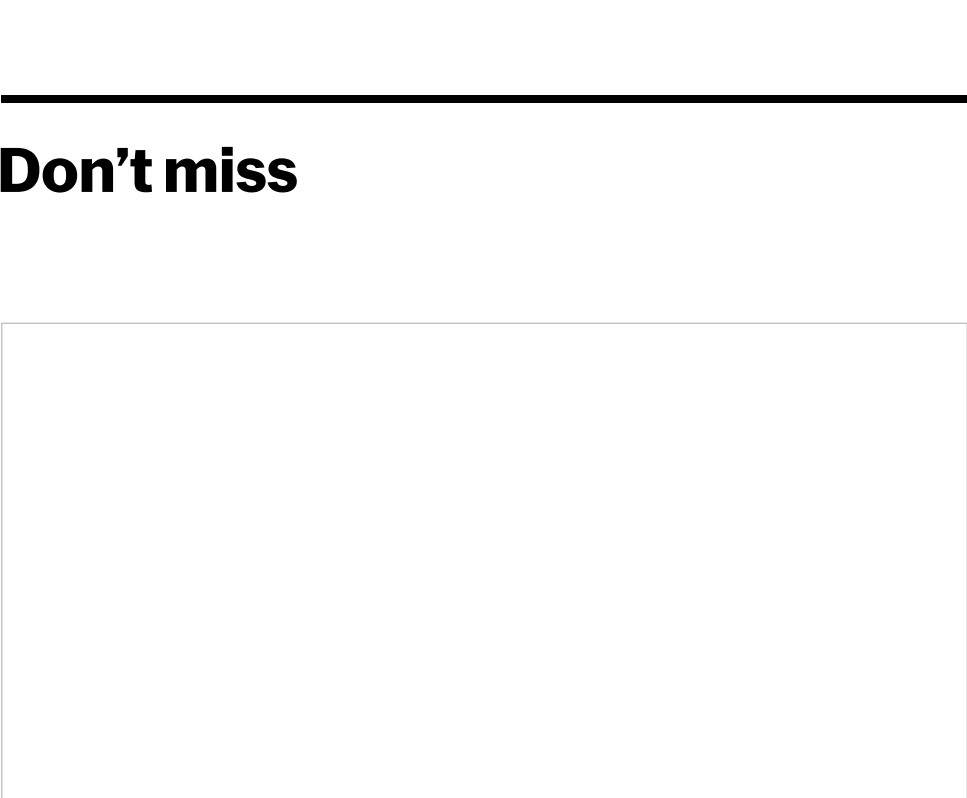


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