

Fuck Time: the individual and his story

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I have recently acquired the habit of using coarse language as an intellectual tool. As if these things go hand in hand I have also grown to dislike our concept of time. I learnt to calibrate time as a Historian of Art, I became allergic to it as philosopher. Time makes me feel itchy so to speak. My allergy dates from the time that I realised that a student of philosophy also has to concern himself with the calibration of time into styles of thought. The study of philosophy is really no more than the study of the *history* of philosophy. Students of philosophy are no philosophers, they are to philosophers what art historians are to artists, just as worthy but decidedly different in their activities. An academic philosopher is, first and foremost, a historian. History is a discipline that does itself not generate art or thought, it generates order in our view of things which can then, perhaps, help to generate art and thought. The production of art and thought are not fully represented by the adequacy of their own historical administration. For that is what history is, it is an art of administration. By subdividing art or thought into styles: Determinism, Positivism, Compatibilism, the historian of philosophy becomes concerned not with thinking itself as a wild and dangerous activity that can be disciplined only with much exercise, but with the institutionalization of that discipline, and more particularly with its correct administration.

Institutions are a good thing. They create a clearly perceptible and useful order where there is the perception of chaos and allow people to function together. However, there is no more truth to be found in that imposed order than there is in a world where that order is absent. There is no more truth in the order we create than in the apparent chaos we want to transform. The two questions we need to ask ourselves are: 1. What is the nature of the order that histories create? and 2. Why do we want that?

The nature of the order that history imposes upon our view of the world is essentially heterotopic: What we see in the other is, selected, ordered and framed by our ourselves, our limitations. The order we impose is an order of convenience. Let's face it, it feels pleasant living in a tidy house-of-the-mind. So if I find it pleasant living in a tidy house, where does that pleasure come from? Again that pleasure comes from limitation. We get pleasure from the fact that we are able to cope with the world and use it well when it is ordered to our convenience. Understanding is a creative act, it creates a useful and convenient order in which everything that is felt to be insignificant can be safely ignored and we can focus on what is interesting and manageable. History makes things manageable. So far so good.

My war on our concept of time is a pleasant Don Quichote-like war. But don't underestimate its importance. It is of importance, in the sense that Don Quichote's war on windmills was of great importance. It showed us the nature of war: we fight not the things themselves but our ideas about them. And for this people get killed. Time can't of course help that it is abused, wrongly invoked, lost and put into service to help in the absurd drama that is our short life. So I am waging war not so much against time itself as against stupid people, myself the first among them, who abuse the concept of time. They can be easily recognized, these stupid people. You see them walking about using sentences such as: "we want a building to reflect

the time”, “She was far ahead of her time,” or, “we should move with the times” and there are countless other concrete examples. My argument tonight is that we are caught in a cultural swarm when we use these sentences and we might want to think about no longer using them. We have not stopped to ask ourselves what it is we are saying when we use these expressions.

What we say is this: the way we see the world is the way the world is; we have hypostatized our view of the world. We may pay lip-service to the conditionality of that image, but do not act as if we understand its implications. We have allowed the order we are capable of seeing to solidify, to become *the truth* when in fact it should only have the lowly status of convenient instrument to create a little order in our tired brain. It is a convenience to impose our own limited order upon the world we live in, it should not be seen as more than that. If there is an epoch, it is there because we have instituted it using our limited understanding of these things. We have all become historians because we enjoy the order we thereby create in our lives. But order, as Nietzsche rightly said, is a beautiful and convenient lie with which we make the world bearable for our limited capacity for thought. Beautiful because it fits with our limited view, convenient because we can use it for our limited purposes. That order inevitably breaks down when we look more closely; becomes invisible when we increase our distance and becomes irrelevant when we learn to see things differently. Order is great but it is a tool that crafts the matter in hand: our lives, our society, our understanding. That is all.

It is a good tool and I would not be holding this talk if it weren't for the fact that we have become delusional about it. Imagine if we were to start talking differently. Imagine if we started to avoid all these sentences that presuppose our orderly historical conception of time as a truth. We would begin to find it uninteresting as to whether a building belongs to a particular epoch, whether it is modern or old fashioned, whether it is contemporary or historicist. We would be freed from these gestures of politeness towards our own delusional construction of time. Instead we would be able to focus on the relationship between the body and its environment, a far more interesting relationship to look at.

So my message is this: Fuck the future, Fuck Utopia! Fuck Time! Fuck History. Just get on with your job!

Now, what is your job? How can you as Builders and Designers contribute to society if you are no longer interested in historical self-consciousness? Well the best way to contribute to society is to do your job well, just as the best way to be good, is to be good. There is no short cut. Your job as builders and designers is to create pleasant well-ordered spaces, where people want to be, ordered not by a metaphysics of time called progress, but ordered for good use. Good use involves an understanding of the human body. It involves an understanding of the production of space, of how the human body interacts with its environment. This act of creating order is performed with the classic tools of the trade: thinking about routing, access, orientation, placement, arrangement, taking such things as size, volume, mass and proportion into consideration, not forgetting materialization, construction, detailing, climate and comfort. These things are what should be foremost in our minds. We enjoy theatre, we enjoy the beautifully crafted. We enjoy many qualities, but let's just leave the notion of epoch to rest for a while.

So how does history fit into this? Very well thank you. It makes history into the study of precedent, of experience. It puts your task at the very centre of your concern and the reward will be a building that works well, is well-used and does you credit. It stops history being the subject of a banal wish to articulate all sorts of metaphysical nonsense that becomes irrelevant as soon as you stop to think about it. History is a storehouse of examples and stories of how things can go wrong and how things are done well. It shows how a certain consistency of approach emerges once a new variable is added into the equation, such as a new material, a new technique, a new image of the world. That is fascinating stuff. It is high time that we leave the Hegelian obsession with progress and history behind us. He was wrong! History started getting in our way as soon as it became the measure of progress, the measure of people and their zeitgeist. All of these large sweeping statements about ourselves are dubious and tragic. Concerning ourselves with these things to the exclusion of all else we left our proper task behind and began to worry about how we look in the mirror. That is the worst way to find out how you look. There are so much more interesting ways to create great spaces than through historical self-consciousness. Concentrate on them. Don't worry about time, worry about comfort, enjoyment, the body.

I end with the image of St Benedict who ruled that his followers should concentrate on the here and now. Let the bell tell you when to start on a new task. If you want to be thought well of, do your job well, give the task in hand all your concentration. There is no short cut as far as I can see and historical self-consciousness as a tool to secure your place in history, is circuitous at best. Thank You.