

August Informational

Rock Around the Clock

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Camille Paglia, 11.30.98

Nature's clock ticks behind technology's facade. Try as we will to perfect society's gleaming latticework of metal and microfiber, we are hostage to our stubborn bodies, which still pulse to primeval rhythms.

We were once wedded to the sun. In the agrarian past, the calendar was fixed by seasons, and days began and ended with the light. On farms, there was steady, perpetual movement. Work never ended, and energy had to be conserved.

I felt that stately, archaic sense of time in my Italian grandmothers' kitchens when I was a small child in upstate New York. My grandmothers never rushed. Yet they were always on their feet, and they never seemed to sit, even at meals. They tended the stove all day and hovered at the table.

Time seemed hypnotically dense at my grandmothers'; it was something one could almost swim in. That this was no childhood illusion was dramatically proven to me 35 years later, just after I began teaching in Philadelphia. After an exhausting day at my university in Center City, I decided to try to track down a barbecued-rib restaurant I had heard was located in the vast black community of West Philadelphia.

Zigzagging my car in and out of rush-hour traffic, I finally found what I was looking for and, in my usual manic, blitzkrieg style, parked, jumped out, ran down the block, dashed through the door -- and nearly fell on my face. I hit agrarian time, or rather it hit me. My mind could not process rapidly enough what I literally felt on my skin. The only comparable sensation I have ever had was when, as an adolescent traveling with my parents, I jumped into the Manatee River at a Florida campground and felt the reddish, brackish, mineral-laden water heavily swirling around me, thick as syrup.

At the restaurant, it was as if I had glided through a wall and stepped into another dimension in Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*. There were no tables, just a large, dimly lit room packed with chatting customers waiting patiently for their take-out orders. Several generations of the black family who owned the restaurant methodically circulated behind the long wooden counter, hefting and chopping hunks of succulent grilled meat, spooning out salads, and wrapping up bags.

Everything seemed in dreamlike slow motion.

As if struck by a thunderbolt, I was transported back to my grandmothers' kitchens. Here once again was that majestic rhythm, unanxious and unhurried, startlingly removed in this case from the hectic urban clatter outside. I immediately sensed the nearness of Southern rural roots.

In hot regions like the Mediterranean or the American South, people must pace themselves or suffer sunstroke. Hence contemporary Italians from Rome southward still close their shutters and take a midday siesta, after which shops casually reopen at staggered times in the late afternoon. It is a practice that baffles and infuriates Anglo American tourists used to the stricter business clock invented some 200 years ago by the Northern European Industrial Revolution.

In *A Passage to India*, E. M. Forster describes the comic clash between British and Hindu cultures, with their different expectations about organization and efficiency. In college in the 1960s, during my generation's tilt toward the Far East, Hindu and Buddhist ideas about time were everywhere. Even in a class on 17th-century poetry, I heard about the "Eternal Now," the suspension of linear clock time in religious meditation, experienced as well by Christian mystics.

The massive drug taking of my peers (from which, thanks to my Mediterranean preference for Dionysian liquors, I miraculously escaped) was an artificial way to interrupt the Western clock. Its aim was to stop cold the careerist pressure from parents and authority figures on the young to enter the materialistic "system." Marijuana in particular, which squeezes or stretches the ordinary sense of time, was used to blot out external pressures.

So much great 1960s pop music still communicates that hazy reshaping of time, from the Beatles's "Strawberry Fields Forever" to Vanilla Fudge's operatic version of "You Keep Me Hangin' On." The psychedelic style, fueled by LSD, was ideologically hallucinatory, transforming concrete space and time into a higher realm of imagination and art.

However, this was a journey from which many of my generation never returned, their brains so chemically altered that they could no longer focus their energies enough to contribute meaningfully to the society that they eventually had to reenter.

Salvador Dal's famous melting watches symbolize the relativity of Western notions of time, which Freud saw subverted every night in our unconscious dream life. This Freudian and surrealist vision was prefigured in Lewis Carroll's influential Alice books, which open with the frantic White Rabbit, a parody of a British businessman constantly checking his watch ("I'm late! I'm late! For a very important date!" the sputtering rabbit sings in Walt Disney's cartoon film).

The Jefferson Airplane's great song "White Rabbit," from *Surrealistic Pillow* (1967), became a generational anthem. It describes young people's experience of falling down the rabbit hole of drugs, by which they were trying (as the Doors put it) to "break on through to the other side" of reality.

Back then, I had my own interpretation of time resculpting. In one of my elaborate college pranks (40 in all, which got me put on probation for a semester), I created a surrealist homage to Dal. Poking around my dormitory, I figured out that the big white campus clocks on the walls of hallways and classrooms were easily pried out and unplugged. So late one weekend night, while everyone was off at a beer blast, I lifted two of these clocks (each the size of a large pizza) and tucked them into the twin beds of my dorm's resident advisers. Each clock seemed to be sleeping peacefully on a pillow, with the sheet and blanket neatly pulled up under its chin.

I thought the effect was quite striking and humorous -- an anthropomorphic allegory of suspended time. However, the advisers did not find it so wonderful, staggering drunk into their room at 3 a.m. and screaming in surprise and terror. I don't think they ever spoke to me again.

Modern culture has been obsessed with speed since the invention of the steam-powered locomotive in the early 19th century. Our sense of space has progressively contracted and collapsed because of our ability to cross huge distances with magical effortlessness. Many chronic stress-related medical complaints are certainly aggravated by this headlong pace, which has disrupted our physical perception of time.

My theory is that the massive rise of rhythmically intense pop music over the past 70 years is partly due to our urgent need to reset our inner clocks to match this new world. Similarly, the modern pornography industry serves an important function in reorienting our high tech consciousness toward our baseline identity in the fleshly and the organic. Love poets in the lascivious *carpe diem* tradition have always known time is transient, written in the human body, which blooms only to decay.