Foreword:
Disciplining Time

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[Adam Smith] formulates a principle of order that is irreducible to the analysis of representation: he unearths labour, that is, toil and time, the working-day that at once patterns and uses up man’s life. The equivalence of the objects of desire is no longer established by the intermediary of other objects and other desires, but by a transition to that which is radically heterogeneous to them; if there is an order regulating the forms of wealth, . . . it is because [men] are all subject to time, to toil, to weariness, and, in the last resort, to death itself. Men exchange because they experience needs and desires; but they are able to exchange and to order these exchanges because they are subjected to time and to the great exterior necessity. . . . From Smith onward, the time of economics . . . was to be the interior time of an organic structure which grows in accordance with its own necessity and develops in accordance with autochthonous laws—the time of capital and production.

—Michel Foucault
*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*
(emphasis in original)

I.

Personally I would think any Cyndi Lauper ballad from the 80s could make a decent special issue in a humanities journal, as her songs evoke a decade in which walls broke down on various fronts and coming-together initiatives were everywhere (not least because there were songs made for them). A time when songs had a followable tune, a time that is making YouTubers reminiscing over it as “the
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best decade ever.”

Time, indeed, is a time-honored topic in literature. In philosophy, the twentieth century is never shy of thinkers organizing their most vital formulations around time and temporality: Henri Bergson’s “duration,” Martin Heidegger’s temporal ontology, Jacques Derrida’s “hauntology,” Gilles Deleuze’s cinematic “time image,” Alain Badiou’s “event,” Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of simultaneity, Giorgio Agamben’s secular messianism, and practically everything Walter Benjamin has written. On top of this, who could have missed Freud’s famous one-liner, “Wo Es war, soll Ich werden” (“Where it was, I shall come into being”)?

What we are intending here, however, is more than just a random treatment of time as theme. What we have hoped to provoke with “Time after Time,” risking the impression of cheesiness, is some kind of metacommentary (more literally understood than in the sense Fredric Jameson has meant), some reflections on the ways in which temporality comes into play in the formation and operation of a field of knowledge. I once heard a software programmer friend say that a golden rule in his industry is readability: you must always take into account the dynamic between the present you and the anticipated future you, and even the past you, while writing a program; you don’t want the future you to not understand what the present you created. That is very close to what I have in mind here: a discipline sensitive to and even constituted by the element of temporality.

A more scholarly example (in a negative way) is how globalization discourses have attempted to spatialize social theory and call into question temporality as an outmoded episteme altogether. Underlying these discourses is the conviction that a spatial turn in theory provides a much-needed corrective to the linear historicism of modernity. Time is thus dismissed as a Eurocentric and questionable category.

Such a demotion of time does disservice to the humanities; it bypasses the existential aspect of temporality as well as its “normative” implications for different humanistic disciplines. ¹ Historian Harry Harootunian has noted how the withdrawal of time from disciplines like area studies affects comparative work adversely. At the heart of area studies’ privileging of the spatial, he points out, is the modality of the nation-state that leans on a presentism and flattens out the unevenness of temporality; the kind of comparative scope that area studies had aspired to in its inception has thus been forsaken. What intrigued our special topic

¹ This is not to say critical writings that address the centrality of spatiality in certain experiences are skewed observations. Far from that. But a compelling example would be something like the work of Henri Lefebvre, who in his theorization of the everyday in modernity looks deftly into the dynamic of the spatial and the temporal, which he calls “rhythm.” See his Rhythmanalysis.
The proposal in the first place, then, was the hope to reexamine the existential and normative aspects of time in the humanities. The point here is not so much to demand a total reversal of the spatial-temporal hierarchy, as to encourage “considerations of the crucial spatiotemporal relationship that must attend any explanatory program” (Harootunian, “Some Thoughts on Comparability” 24).\footnote{Harootunian is among the most insightful on the relationship between temporality and humanistic disciplinarity. For his critique of the oppression of the temporal factor in today’s social and historical studies, see his ‘Postcoloniality’s Unconscious’; “Some Thoughts on Comparability”; and ‘Memories of Underdevelopment.’}

The tendency toward spatializing theory, most would agree, is occasioned by the new geopolitical, sociocultural developments sweeping the globe in the postwar era. Attentiveness to the spatial in intellectual discourse is, in other words, a response to the putative spatialization of experience of our time. Area studies aside, comparative literature, the discipline Concentric is generally identified with for its editorial agenda, has also undergone transformations over the years in terms of these temporal-spatial seesaw dynamics. Echoing social studies’ call for a spatial turn in theory, comparative literature in the age of globalization has also come up with propositions that seek to account for the new, spatialized world: most prominently, the panoramic program of “world literature.” Whether it is a morphological approach like Franco Moretti’s, which looks at the local inflections of the same literary trend, or whether it is a circulation- and reading-mode approach like David Damrosch’s, which promotes cultural literacy through an extensive exposure to works from other places, “world literature” can indeed provide useful knowledge required of today’s “global citizens.” Yet, while “world literature” is intent on offering intelligibility of different cultural systems, its positivistic trajectory sometimes falls short of elucidating issues of comparability.

II.

Again, the temporal category can prove to be productive in helping to recast these discussions. Drawing on the findings of neurophysiology, Agamben has argued for an ethical approach to the question of contemporaneity. As neurophysiologists tell us, the absence of light triggers the activity of “off-cells” in the retina, which then generate a particular kind of vision called darkness. That is to say, darkness is not to be considered a privation; it is rather an ability activated in the face of singular circumstances (“What Is” 44-45). The contemporary, Agamben suggests, is someone “who perceives the darkness of his time as something that

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concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him”; he is the one “whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time” (45). What may that “beam of darkness” be, then? It is that which “remains non-lived in every life, that which . . . remains unexperienced in every experience” (Signature 101). It is the archē, or the condition of possibility, of the event: it coexists with us without falling within the grasp of our cognition.

It is beyond the scope of this foreword to explain how such a susceptibility to the unexperienced will not necessarily fall back to the sentiment of powerlessness surrounding earlier versions of ethical propositions (the rhetoric of “unrepresentability,” for instance). Suffice it to say that Agamben would also put forth a messianic approach to contemporaneity which, inspired by Benjamin’s figure of recognizability, would prescribe action on the part of the historical subject: if the “beam of darkness that comes from his own time” indicates “a necessity that does not arise . . . from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond” (“What Is” 53), the contemporary is able to “read” history, single out moments of crisis, and put them in relation to other times.

Comparative work in the humanities and social sciences may have a lot to gain by integrating the temporal dimension this way—that is, by positing comparability as a guiding question of our critical inquiry.

Works Cited