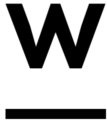
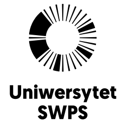

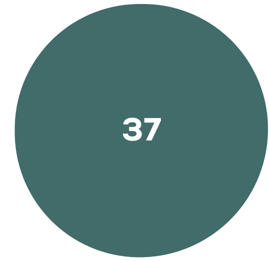

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This essay explores how regimes of time-discipline have operated—and met with forms of resistance—across three critical sites of modernity: the factory, narrative, and the prison. Through a historical discussion of factory labor and drawing on E. P. Thompson's analysis of time and work-discipline, the essay examines the industrial capitalist methods of timing that underwrote workers' exploitation and large-scale theft of life and health. Readings of modernist authors show how the non-plots of modernist narrative push, within a limited sphere, against the imposition of progressive, developmental time. Finally, the essay examines the empty time of incarceration—modern time-discipline through a mirror darkly. In their prison writings, Black revolutionaries such as George Jackson wrested with the reality of a stolen futurity, illuminating empty time with liberatory political philosophy and anger.

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Timing Modernity: Factory, Prison, Narrative

Do you have time? How much? How do you measure it? Do you waste it? What do you spend it on? How do you save it?

The designer Brian Eaton invented a Memento Mori Clock, which used to be available in the Art Institute of Chicago gift shop. You plug in your health information, which is then routed to the World Health Organization; the clock will tell you, to the minute, how long you are going to live. When your time is up a song is played – I guess either to memorialize you or to congratulate you on beating the clock. Do we want to know the exact moment of our death? As Samuel Beckett put it, "the day you die is like any other, only shorter."[1] But do we want to know the date of our death or how many hours (or minutes) we will get on that last day?

This is a kind of *time clock* – in the sense that you punch information into it – a seeming redundancy, but also a set of nouns that draws our attention to the profound reification involved in the noun "time." For the sociologist Norbert Elias, "The verbal form 'to time' is legitimated by the substantive form, time, which disguises the instrumental character of the activity of timing."[2] The modern state, Elias writes in his "Essay on Time," uses time as a violent form of discipline.[3] De Certeau writes that "Recast in the mold of a taxonomic ordering of things, chronology becomes the alibi of time."[4] The ordering of events requires an adherence to clock and calendrical time, and we adhere because we are used to discipline in its modern form – unexplained but inevitable.

At other times and in other places, time was not the concept around which people oriented themselves. When sixteenth-century Jesuits brought astronomical science to Imperial China, the Chinese were grateful to be able to see the heavens more

clearly. But they did not want clocks: that would be an individualizing abstraction of a duration they experienced differently.[5]

Philosophers of time don't think about timing very much (as far as I know, which is not very far); Elias in fact calls the term a football that philosophers like to kick around. I can only imagine he was thinking of Heidegger, who does not look to me like a football player. (As I was browsing on JSTOR, I saw an essay by Elias called "Dynamics of Group Sports with Special Reference to Football."[6] There is very little he did not write about.)

Time becomes money, which according to the historian E. P. Thompson happened during the Industrial Revolution – although Benjamin Franklin coined the phrase in a mostly pre-industrial America, and, as Thompson says, "It is, in some sense, appropriate that the ideologist who provided Weber with his central text in illustration of the capitalist ethic should come, not from that Old World, but from the New – the world which was to invent the time-recorder, was to pioneer time-and-motion study, and was to reach its apogee with Henry Ford."[7] Time seems benign and abstract, but timing is a crucial part of modern cruelty.

I experienced this sense of time as a commodity with a value outside of myself when I punched a time clock for twelve years. If you were four minutes late, the administrator would circle the time you punched in with a red pen. Eventually, if you were more than fifteen minutes late in a week, the time – that is, the money – was deducted from your paycheck. It was infuriating. It was impossible for me to always get in at 7:00 a.m., largely because of the invention of the snooze button – surely a momentous occasion in the history of time-keeping, or -wasting. Once, I was running up the stairs at Kings County Hospital, at one time considered the closest thing to working in a field hospital

during a war, and there was a cat in the stairwell. I rushed past it, only mildly surprised. I tore open the door in my attempt to beat the clock, and came face to face with a rifle on a tripod pointing right at me. I stopped, but of course the clock did not. Someone in care was apparently a very bad guy. A sharpshooter was in the hallway around the clock. This is to suggest that time-discipline is potentially fatal, but we know that already from Amazon warehouses and Apple factories. Hospitals want to run like clockwork. They don't, of course – they just want your work on the clock. Surely the disorder represented by a stray cat in a hospital stairwell, and the potential hideous violence of being shot with what I assume was a high-powered rifle, don't suggest profoundly good organization. Now I teach at NYU, and the administrative staff uses "scheduling software." That is, they punch in online when they get to their desks. This makes it sound as though there is some kind of agency involved: that they are scheduling themselves, but it's just neoliberal time-discipline.

Sam Hsieh did three one-year durational performances. In one he lived on the streets of New York City for a year and created a map of his peregrinations; in another he stayed in a prison-like cell for a year and had no contact with other human beings. In a third he punched a time clock every hour, on the hour, for a year, and documented each time-punch with a self-portrait; he then spliced those pictures together to make a film.[8]

The phrenetic pace of the stills turns into a kind of tragic cartoon, evoking the herky-jerky pressure of discipline within chaos, of being used as an object to prove or produce the idea of a system. What other gestures, forms, counter-times have emerged in response to regimes of time-discipline?

Factory: the stolen time of labor

In the nineteenth-century factory, time became money, and thereby a commodity. Mill workers fought for shorter hours,

but they didn't fight the commodification of their work, their bodies, and their minds. E. P. Thompson considers this one of the great tragedies of industrialization: that instead of rejecting time-discipline, workers thus agreed to "a distinction between their employer's time and their own time [...] time is now currency: it is not passed but spent."[9] Josiah Wedgwood tried to introduce a time clock in the potteries, but the potters simply refused to use it; just one example of resistance to time-discipline, that Thompson actually points out later in the essay "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism."[10]

We see the time of labor congealing in things before it congeals as capital in a *Household Words* essay on buttons written by Harriet Martineau, a British popularizer of political economy. In the essay, which has the ungainly title "What There Is in a Button," we see the time of labor congealed in the button. The making of "dies" for various styles of buttons (acorns, Queen Victoria's head, and so on) "will occupy one man for a month, with all his faculties in the exercise [...] To think that one thousand in a year, produced by this effort and ability, and then to remember that button dies are among the highest productions of art, cannot but elevate our respect for buttons very remarkably."[11]

You would think that our respect for the makers of these dies would be elevated, but commodities are already, as Marx put it, turning into social beings. The value of labor, the time of labor, belongs to the button, resides in the button. Commodity fetishism just creeps up on us, and naturalizes itself with the help of this kind of essay. Martineau went to several button factories, thus engaging in the kind of industrial tourism that was a massive leisure and scholarly activity in the nineteenth century. I have quite a few deaccessioned books on factory tourism; the fact that libraries get rid of them is symptomatic, I think, of our own lack of interest in the social relations of production. We have little idea of how anything we use is made, how much time it

takes to make it, and how that time converts into money.

The history of the British Factory Acts shows the agonizingly slow and often petty measures by which the state regulated hours, days, meals, sabbaths, the beginning of your working life, and, indirectly, its end. The Factory Act of 1833, for example, banned children under nine from working in a factory, but parliamentary testimony from inspectors showed how often children had no idea of their own age, so this was difficult to enforce (there were also precious few factory inspectors).[12] Children aged nine to twelve were not allowed to work after 8:30 p.m. and before 5:30 a.m. In the Act of 1844, children aged nine to thirteen could work nine hours with a lunch break; the Factory Act of 1850 extended the working week from 58 to 60 hours; the Act of 1874 specified that on Saturdays, six hours could be spent on manufacturing processes, and another half hour on other duties; with the Act of 1878, children under ten were not to be employed and should attend school for half the time until they were fourteen; with the Act of 1891, the minimum age of child workers was raised to eleven years old; and with the Act of 1901, children could take up a full-time job at the age of thirteen. Workers resisted these measures: they observed Saint Monday, during which they drank all day to recover from their work; they worked slowly on Tuesday, and then sped up some as the week progressed.[13]

The reports of the Factory Inspectorate, which occasioned a report by Michael Sadler that put these small reforms into action, was criticized by mill owners for what we would now call "cherry-picking" the worst cases. Many mills, they claimed, don't beat children who fall asleep, don't let them get ground up in the mill itself, do allow them to eat and go to school, however briefly. The mill owners were invited to write a report of their own, but declined.

Perhaps the greatest and most minute analysis of time-

discipline we have comes from Chapter 10 of *Capital Volume I*, "The Working Day." Marx charts the ways in which factory owners would chip away at workers' time and make it their own: they would add fifteen minutes at the beginning and end of each of day, cut breakfast and dinner times by ten and twenty minutes, adding up to a total of 340 minutes stolen from workers every week. The workers called it "nibbling and cribbling." And there was more than the open exploitation of time: factory masters changed clocks periodically to add extra minutes to the working day. Marx also points out the industries that were virtually unregulated: the massive pottery works in Staffordshire, lace manufacture, and the making of the lucifer match, which resulted in phosphorous poisoning and a condition called "phossy jaw." Young women often had their entire mandibles removed, and sometimes the bones glowed in the dark. The death rates for these workers were very high, as they were for the metal workers of Birmingham, who kept their noses to the grindstone – ensuring that they inhaled the maximum amount of metal dust, which they later coughed up as chunks of steel and brass. Their life expectancy was about 35.[14] The time stolen from people's lives in the Industrial Revolution – or in industrial revolutions – is inestimable, but we can probably think, not inaccurately, of millions of years of unlived life.

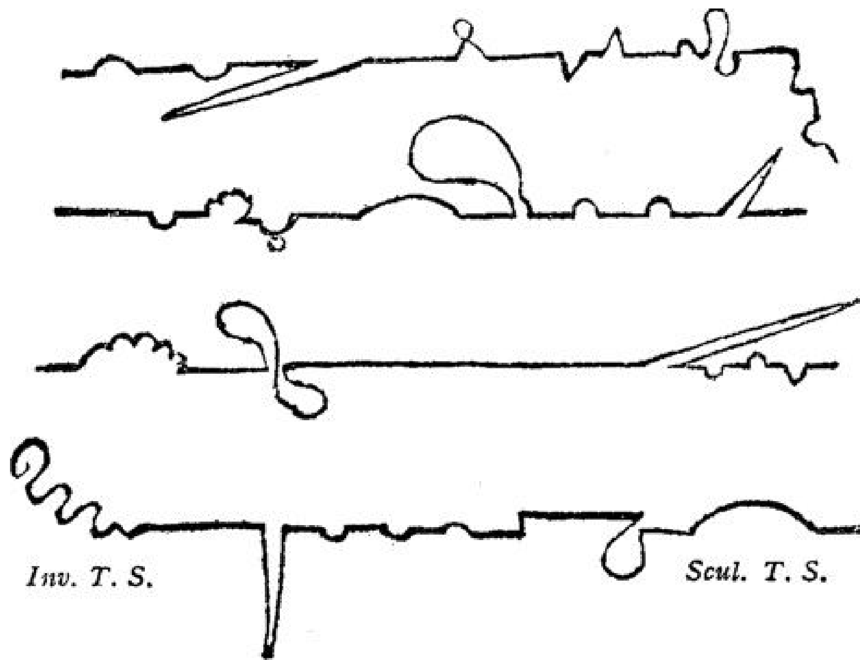
Narrative: plots against time-discipline

This necessity of measuring time minutely may have had a part to play in the rise of a certain kind of novel in Britain and France. Plots are made out of units of time, and plots suggest a forward movement, progress, development, and social fulfillment that only comes with time and its obstacles. Even typographically, developments like the chapter break, the paragraph, and punctuation mark time. The liberal (meaning large) blank spaces on the page are the result of the industrial

production of cheap paper. You couldn't leave blank space on parchment: it was just too laborious to make – hence marginalia.

Certain kinds of plots – and, as the structuralists taught us, there are not all that many – may come to shape the times of our own lives: when we should rebel, when we should conform, when we should marry, or when we should run away from our spouses. We come to hope for various plots for our own lives; in Steven Marcus's analysis of Freud's case history Dora, something like mental health is signaled by the ability to narrate one's life story coherently.[15] Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels rely on plot; even those like *Tristram Shandy* that satirize it confirm its centrality to the genre. Indeed, time in *Tristram Shandy* becomes a problem for clockmakers: because Tristram's father winds up the clock on the same day of the month that he has sex with his wife,[16] winding up clocks became a kind of slang or code for sex. In an eighteenth-century pamphlet condemning *Tristram Shandy*, a clockmaker complains that "the directions I had for making several clocks are countermanded; because no modest lady now dares to mention a word about winding up a clock, without exposing herself to sly leers and jokes [...] Nay, the common expression of street-walkers is Sir, will you have your clock wound up."[17]

I think Sterne is winding us up, in the current British usage I know so well from *The Office*, about the one-way direction of time and the imperative to move ahead quickly. The novel has so many digressions that Tristram, the narrator, is not born until page 207 in my edition. Narrative loops that move backward and sideways derail a more timely birth for a narrator. Sterne actually makes a pretty hilarious diagram of the novel's plot, perhaps anticipating some of the worst gaffes of narrative theorists (of which I am one):



Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971)

Just as some workers resisted or tried to modify time-discipline, so did some writers, largely those connected with the movement we call, pretty loosely, modernism. Gertrude Stein, whose syntax is maddeningly static (a rose is a rose is rose) and her language intensely repetitive (the rose again) also stages a kind of protest against progress, capacity, and getting bodies to do the most in the least time. *Tender Buttons*, subtitled "Objects," is one of Stein's most illegible texts. Under the entry "A BOX" she writes: "Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, is it not, it is so rudimentary to be analyzed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again."[18] I can't tell you what this passage means, but I can tell you what it does. It jams the forward movement of prose we expect; a green points to point again. A "fine substance" is seen "strangely." Language might be that substance, and Stein makes it strange through her refusal of the order of things in grammar and sense. There is

a point: language is refusing to produce the grammar we want, and it is refusing to produce a plot, forward movement, the ideals of production in any form. Not unlike Bartleby. Perhaps this is part of what Douglas Mao calls the ostensive intentions of modernism: ostensive denotes a way of defining by direct demonstration, e.g. by pointing.[19] And pointing again. Virginia Woolf often does this: we see things, but a plot does not necessarily accrue. Knitting a stocking in *To the Lighthouse*, buying flowers for a party in *Mrs Dalloway*: there is very little in the way of narratability in these mundane actions.

The non-plot of modernism, Jacques Rancière has written, requires us to "enjoy sensations as pure sensations." In order to appreciate non-plots, we need to appreciate with our acute sensibilities that life is made up of fleeting moments that produce fleeting, evanescent experiences, but not of stuff and not of sentiments. Flaubert kills Madame Bovary because she wants art and life to merge. Flaubert wants art to get out of life: he writes, as Rancière puts it, the first "antikitsch manifesto": he wants all the junk out of our houses and out of our minds. He wants us to distinguish, severely, between art and life. So he kills Madame Bovary in the space between fiction and reality – the space of writing.[20]

A famous quote from Virginia Woolf may illuminate this idea a bit more: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?"[21]

It is curious and chilling to compare this to George Jackson, the Soledad Brother who was given one year to life for robbing a gas station and was murdered by prison guards at the age of 30 in 1971: "Life is at best a nebulous shadow, a vague contingency, the

merest of possibilities."[22] He read, as I note below, just about everything during his seven years in prison, much of this time spent in solitary confinement, but I doubt he read Woolf. Nonetheless, the shadow, the contingency, the "merest of possibilities": Jackson was a modernist by way of revolutionary writers rather than reactionary ones.

The symmetrical arrangement of gig lamps might be a metaphorical plot – a realist one in which a plot proceeds in one direction and we understand its grammar – writ large and writ small. In modernist literature you experience the luminous halo: externality is rejected, and thus the social world would seem to be left behind in the nineteenth century or with the Edwardian novelists Woolf famously derided: Arnold Bennett's novels read like rental agreements and Galsworthy catalogs, with all the verve of a bureaucrat. The well-organized material world is not the stuff of the novel. Or not anymore.

Rancière's famous case-study is Madame Bovary: she must be killed by Flaubert because she takes novels literally – she wants the things in novels – she literally wants the furniture, the romance, and ultimately she wants the (or a) plot. Flaubert thus distances himself and his much finer sensibility from the grubby details and relentless time-keeping of the realist novel by killing off his most realistic heroine. She must die so that he can literally kill off the kitschiness of her life: the endless trinkets, the bad novels, the furniture she cannot afford and does not need (of course she actually dies of suicide because of her indebtedness).

The exile of plot, the advent of tenselessness,[23] then puts us in a bind: for most of the population, life is lived to a strict, often unbearable schedule, and therefore the desire for things, for plots, for the sense that one's life has not only futurity but forward momentum and meaning, seems reasonable – even if most of us may get none of this. It is only intellectuals, or perhaps more precisely, academics with secure jobs or trust-fund inheritors, who can have tenselessness: many of us prefer

not to, and don't. And we don't have to. As with so many critiques of industrial capitalism and the drive for growth and productivity, the critique of timeliness ends up in literature departments, which may also be the places where Marx is taught the most.

The time of neoliberalism can devour its own critique, keep it sequestered in highbrow texts for the very few and the very privileged. Modernism is self-consciously undemocratic – not only because many of its practitioners were fascists or fascist-adjacent, but because you need an education – an academic education – to read modernism. It is not for everybody, as they say. Most of us remain in tenses, and thus we are very tense.

Prison: futurity's glow in empty time

If factory time and the time of the realist novel rhyme in a pretty loose analogy (one of my own making), prison time is a horrendous rendering of the time of modernism. For the incarcerated, time is distorted and denied, so that there is no plot: you lose the thread of your own life. Austen Reed, the earliest African-American writer of a prison memoir (as far as we know), uses a wide array of verbs to portray his sense of the changing quality of empty time: it rolls away, hours hang heavily, nights wear slowly away, one ploughs through time, one kills time. When he returns to visit the juvenile detention facility in which he spent much of his childhood, there is no record of his life there. A fire destroyed all the facility's documents, and thus he is erased from a written history.[24] He would not exist historically at all were it not for the finding of his unpublished memoir at an estate auction in Rochester several years ago. This manuscript was then verified as authentic by Yale professors and librarians. The paper and ink, the times and places, the consistency of the handwriting: Reed is authorized into authorship and a degree of authority, but like the narratives of enslaved people, his is surrounded by paratexts by white authorities, the only people from whom he can gain his precarious authority. Perhaps his text

could have been authorized just as well by current residents of Auburn Prison, or current residents of juvenile detention centers, or in a collaboration between the two. There is no way for anyone to understand the quality of incarcerated life through the usual methods of academics, no matter how "rigorous."

In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr. evokes time repeatedly, as the critic Edward Berry points out.[25] Toward the end of the letter, King notes that he wouldn't have written at such length had he been at his comfortable desk, but the lack of any pressing activity in jail made his discourse balloon. He apologizes for the length of the letter, but he does not apologize for pressing the time of civil rights by disobeying the injunction against demonstrating in Birmingham, Alabama. He is told by many that the time is not right, and that his actions are untimely; that he and his followers should wait, negotiate, and so on, as if these strategies had not been tried for decades and centuries. Toward the end of the letter he writes: "I had also hoped that white moderates would reject the myth of time."[26] This myth, I think, is the idea of patience, of not being in a hurry, of the virtue of waiting quietly. Prisons accomplish this to some extent, but they also offer boredom and empty time and perhaps extra anger, which can lead to what King describes as his "book-length" letter. I am left wondering if his comments about his own writing don't constitute a kind of warning to those who incarcerate people: there is the risk that incarcerated people will have the time and the inclination to write and make trouble.

The Black Panthers did just that, in and of jails and prisons. They also wrote memoirs that document both political positions and prison conditions. From Angela Davis's *Autobiography* we get a graphic description of time as torture: "Eight o'clock was the first lockin of the day, and it lasted as long as it took to count prisoners and silverware to make sure a person or a spoon was not missing."[27] There were two more lock-ins, at 3:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. The lock-in or count, according to my students at

Wallkill Correctional Facility, could take from 30 minutes to an hour and a half, depending on the jail population and the staffing of corrections officers. You just have to sit in your cell or room and wait. This kind of waiting is maddening, but even more maddening is to be thrown in the box or the hole (solitary confinement) and not know how long you will be there. You cannot count off days, obviously, although I suppose you can keep count of them on a wall, just to orient yourself. (I know that when Angela Davis was in jail she used burned matches to write revolutionary slogans on the walls of the Women's House of Detention). As the long-incarcerated leader of the American Indian Movement – and an FBI target, as were the Panthers – Leonard Peltier put it: "The first thing you have to understand in here is that you never understand anything in here. For sure, they don't want you to get comfortable. Nor do they want you to have a sense of security. Security's the one thing you never get in a maximum security prison."[28]

Temporal chaos becomes an ontological torture, so disorganizing that I have no idea how anyone comes out of prison, let along solitary, sane. Of course, a lot of people don't come out sane. Kalief Browder spent three years on Riker's Island awaiting trial for allegedly stealing a backpack. Shortly after his release he killed himself.

George Jackson, quoted above, wrote a series of letters to his family, his lawyers, Angela Davis, and others in which he argues, before anyone else, I think, that there is a continuous line between slavery and prison. This is surely one of the most consequential insights we find in his letters, but *Soledad Brother* remains well-worth reading for many reasons: it is, to quote one of the editors of these letters, "a classic of Black Literature and political philosophy."[29]

Jackson describes, with all the acuity honed through the political philosophy he developed in prison, the destruction of futurity that prisons produce: "Black men born in the US and

fortunate enough to live past the age of 18 are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliations."[30] (I was often told by my students at Wallkill that they never expected to live past the age of eighteen.) Jackson writes: "The pale and almost indistinguishable glow of the future may yet materialize to disperse the gloomy stupor that has encompassed me completely."[31] Without futurity, a sense of unending futility is almost unbearable. Why do anything? And yet Jackson read the corpus of great Marxist writers and other political philosophers. He worked out four hours a day to keep himself sane. He left us over three hundred pages of letters that analyze American racism, the prison system, ongoing slavery, and the cruelty of life lived, even now, for black people whether they are free or incarcerated. Black people live as "captive[s]."[32] Jean Genet called Jackson's letters a "poem of love and combat,"[33] a style that Jackson invents over the course of his letters: at first a bit clumsy and uncertain, and then illuminated by his reading, the glow of his anger, and, implicitly, the consciousness that he will die sooner rather than later.

The timing and time of incarceration, as we see, is mostly destructive, except for those rare people, including Gramsci, Leonard Peltier, Angela Davis, George Jackson, and others, who used their time and effort to change the world, even a world they themselves might not live to inhabit. The refusal of futility is an act of continuous heroism. The lack of a future is not an individual problem – it is one that all of these writers address for themselves and their people, and most generously for those of us who are not captive.

Modernity keeps time. Western intellectuals, as Simon Gikandi has noted, have a profound need for pre-modern cultures, because modernity cannot be understood outside its need to function as a counterpoint to tradition.[34] Norbert Elias, writing on Chinua Achebe's 1964 novel *Arrow of God*, understood it as

representing a pre-modern society, when in fact it represents a society in the throes of decolonization, trying to find the space between tradition and modernity.[35] Modernity, like time, may be two fictions we might eventually supersede. Liberation might require new times, new spaces, which we might glimpse through the haze, the shadows, and the deformity of our present – a long present, stretching back at least two hundred years.

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2 Norbert Elias, *An Essay on Time* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2007), 36.

3 Ibid., 19.

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5 George H. C. Wong, "China's Opposition to Western Science during Late Ming and Early Ch'ing," *Isis* vol. 54, no. 1 (1963), 29–49, *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/228727 (accessed March 5, 2023).

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8 Tehching Hsieh, director, *One Year Performance 1980 – 1981 (Time Clock Piece)*, *YouTube*, *FACTLiverpool*, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90izVR2Kip0 (accessed April 5, 2023).

9 Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," 61.

10 Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," 82–83.

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13 Ibid.

14 Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscripts: Capital Vol. I - Chapter Ten*, 166–171, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch10.htm.

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16 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), quoted in: Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," op. cit., 57.

17 Anon., *The Clockmaker's Outcry against the Author of… Tristram Shandy* (London, 1760), 42–43, quoted in: Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," op. cit., 57.

18 Gertrude Stein. "Tender Buttons [Objects] by Gertrude Stein - Poems | Academy of American Poets," *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, https://poets.org/poem/tender-buttons-objects.

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