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Out of Time, Out of Mind

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What does it mean to be out of time? Such an ambivalent temporal status might connote timelessness or anachronism—a paradoxical set of values, at best. Both have occasioned a subject’s figurative or literal disappearance from their own time. Much has been written about who or what has been marginalized by established art-historical canons and master narratives. Scholars have devoted their careers to bringing such occluded objects and individuals to light and back into relation to these canons and narratives, often by using the very same tools of evaluation that constituted these narratives and canons in the first place: by marking them as actively resisting, or striving to acquiesce to, the terms of the status quo. But what if, instead of seeking to subvert or accommodate themselves to these terms of inclusion, some artists are merely unaware of or indifferent to them—or what if engaging with them at all is a luxury they can ill afford? And what if it is then the scholar who maps her own adherence to the terms of the status quo onto the lives and work of artists whose own sense of themselves and their historical moment have never been subject to them?

The same can be true of historians’ conceptions of time. Being out of time is relative, as it depends on how one conceives of and values varied yet contemporaneous experiences of time, both historical and as lived. A disconnect between considerations of the historical, as opposed to the seemingly mundane experiences of the day-to-day, often generates hierarchies among generations, classes, genders, sexualities, and races that have traditionally endowed one—usually young, white, male, electively downwardly mobile, and preferably living in a major city—with a quality that constellates and thus defines a “moment,” while disparate others presumably remain in the background as supporters or followers, or operate outside of or out of sync with this “historical time,” as defined by the terms of the privileged category.

In my current work on intergenerational relationships among New York artists and critics circa 1940 to 1970 that were shaped by shared, if heterogeneous, commitments to Surrealism and its legacy, primarily through an engagement with film, I address, among other things, a pervasive tendency to conceive of generations as discrete and superseding one another in relatively neat succession, the assumption being that although an older individual may be still alive, active, and engaged within a heterogeneous community of other individuals, because of that person’s age, their contributions are viewed as precedent to or outside of the very time they are in and living through—a perception that is generally only compounded if they are foreign-born, non-white, non-heteronormative, non-male, and living outside a major urban area.

Such accounts can, however, also acknowledge, if indirectly or unwittingly, contemporaneous experiences of different temporalities. Generation provides a useful framework for thinking about these different experiences of and feelings about shared time, how they might occur simultaneously and yet constitute different relationships to history. In “The Problem of Generations,” Karl Mannheim outlines two nineteenth-century approaches to the problem—positivist and historical romanticist—each dependent on a different conceptualization of time. Positivists defined generations quantitatively in terms of external measures of time: contemporary biological lifespans occurring at roughly thirty-year intervals. Historical romanticists acknowledged these quantitative measures but privileged qualitative, interior experiences of shared time. In this latter approach, generation was not determined by the simple fact of similar birth and death dates or by the co-existence of individuals between particular sets of dates, as all people born or living at the same time do not necessarily share the same history. For a generation to occur, “the time-interval separating generations becomes subjectively experienceable time; and contemporaneity becomes a subjective condition of having been submitted to the same determining influences.”¹

Mannheim acknowledges that generations do tend to occur in a biological rhythm, but they are not necessarily deducible from it. For him, generation is a social category, akin to class, as both generation and class denote an individual or group’s location in the social structure. This shared location can remain unconscious and potential, or it can be actualized through exposure to and participation in “the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization.”² This generational consciousness, or what Mannheim calls “generation as an actuality,” is not present in all generations and does not manifest in the same way for all members of a biological generation. In times that are stable, gradual modifications in thinking can be so slow as to become imperceptible or unattributable to one generation. In times of rapid change or marked by significant destabilizing events such as war, what Mannheim identifies as distinct, antagonistic generational units work up the material of their common experiences in singular ways, sometimes becoming agents for change. In these situations, such generational units always interpret their situation in terms of one another. Some dominate, others are diverted, and some are suppressed—but the dynamic interactions among them produce the feeling of generation or generational consciousness.³

Even though Mannheim does not privilege biology’s role in determining generation, he acknowledges that youth is the central driver of cultural development and change due to its “fresh contact” with the accumulated heritage of an existent society: “In the nature of our psychical make-up, a fresh contact (meeting something anew) always means a changed relationship of distance from an object and a novel approach in assimilating, using, and developing the proffered material.”⁴ Mannheim is quick to admit that individuals, such as immigrants, who are forced to leave their own social group and enter a new one, regardless of age, experience a similar change of consciousness, but the former type of contact, which is more properly generational than the result of personal biography, is potentially more radical because its encounter with accumulated cultural possessions is initial rather than renewed or rethought.

Mannheim’s privileging of youth’s initial cultural contact reveals that historicist and progressive values continue to color his descriptions, yet his “generation as an actuality” suggests a more heterogeneous synchronic temporality in which potentially more than one biological generation is actively engaged. “Actuality” can signify reality but also a specific

temporality: “the here and now,” the present. For some, this actuality is empty. George Kubler famously describes it as “the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events.”⁵ Mannheim’s actuality is certainly not empty; nor is Kubler’s, in terms of experience. For both, the past is felt, shared in the here and now, even if differently. Kubler describes the present instant as “the plane upon which the signals of all being are projected. No other plane of duration gathers us up universally into the same instant of becoming.”⁶ These signals are past actions, “neither here nor now, but there and then,” perceived in the present but transmitted from the past.

For Kubler, the historian’s principal aim “is to condense the multiplicity and the redundancy of his signals by using various schemes of classification that will spare us the tedium of reliving the sequence in all its instantaneous confusion.”⁷ But we need this instantaneous confusion if we want to write different kinds of history—and the plurality is central—histories that can encompass a wide range of temporal experiences that do not all conform to the idea that time only moves forward and at one pace. These histories would allow for a perpetual experience of asynchrony, what the historian Carolyn Dinshaw elegantly describes as “different time frames or temporal systems colliding in a single moment of *now*.”⁸ For the now is always what we are dealing with, regardless of our disciplinary or temporal focus, whether we are willing to acknowledge it or not.

Notes

¹ Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 282.

² Mannheim, “Problem of Generations,” 303.

³ Marc Bloch echoes this characterization of generation in *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 185: “To be excited by the same dispute even on opposing sides, is still to be alike. This common stamp, driving from common age, is what makes a generation.”

⁴ Mannheim, “Problem of Generations,” 293.

⁵ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), 17.

⁶ Kubler, *Shape of Time*, 17.

⁷ Kubler, *Shape of Time*, 23.

⁸ Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.