

undisciplined thinking_

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**W. J. T. Mitchell_ PRESENT TENSE: Time, Madness, and
Democracy around 6 November 2018**

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“The present is real in a way in which the past and the future are not.”
—Saint Augustine

“May you live in interesting times.”
—Ancient Chinese Curse

“Insanity in individuals is somewhat rare. But in groups, parties, nations, and epochs it is the rule.”
—Friedrich Nietzsche

This essay is written in the present tense about a tense present. It concerns the period leading up to the US midterm election on 6 November 2018, and it will no doubt continue writing itself after that date. It is not an attempt to predict the results of that election, which seem to become more uncertain every day but will be known by the time you read these words. The aim is to reflect on time itself as an experiential, qualitative category, in the midst of a time in American political culture that is by all accounts tense, uncertain, “interesting,” and (above all) crazy. The craziness of the moment is threefold: (1) it is a collective psychosis, involving a pathological detachment from reality by large masses of the American population; (2) the individual pathology of a psychopathic and narcissistic sovereign who channels and exploits the collective insanity to maintain his power; and (3) a world order that seems to be trending inexorably toward the death of democracy and its replacement by authoritarian regimes led by strong men. If it has been clear for some time that Friedrich Nietzsche was right about the madness of “groups, parties, and nations,” we must now turn our attention to the epoch, the swerve or tipping point in history that is experienced by many with a sense of astonishment, anxiety, and alarm. On every side one hears ominous predictions that if the Trump party (formerly known as Republican) is victorious on 6 November and holds on to the House of Representatives, Trump will reign unchecked for at least two and possibly six more years. In that time he could deal a decisive blow to American democracy itself, and (in the longer durée of climatological time), deliver a death blow to the meager efforts to stave off a planetary crisis of rising sea levels, displacement of large populations, and increasingly disastrous weather events.

In view of the urgency of this moment, who has time to reflect on time? It might seem like it is time to act, not to think. But the only actions available to a private citizen (voting, canvassing, sending money to candidates and causes) seem like pinpricks on a runaway elephant. The knowledge that “the system is rigged” by voter suppression, gerrymandering, hacking of voting machines, dark money, foreign interference, and the inequities of an electoral system that makes a vote in Nebraska twenty times as powerful as a vote in California has the predictable effect of dampening any notion that “every vote counts.” So it may be a good time to reflect on time after all.

Saint Augustine set the problem of time up beautifully, noting that when he wasn’t thinking about time as a concept he knew perfectly well what it meant. It was when he turned to philosophical reflection, asking the question “What is time?” that difficulties began. I am going to avoid the question of what time is by turning instead to how we see it and represent it, and specifically to what sort of images of time, both visual and verbal, underlie the discourse of temporality. Instead of an ontology of time, I propose an iconology of time. I will begin with three pictures of time that I am sure will be familiar to you and that are everywhere in the way we talk about it, measure it, and experience it.[1] The first, predictably, is the image of the line, with all its associated notions of succession, sequence, flow, and directionality. This is the image that governs our individual experience of time, beginning with birth and ending with death, or our supra-individual time sense of line that extends from our forgotten ancestors in the distant past down to the present and leads on into possible futures. It is personified in classical mythology by the Greek figure of Kronos—the Roman Saturn—who devours everything, including his own children.



Giovanni Francesco Romanelli, Kronos/Saturn with Child. 17th c. National Museum in Warsaw.



Peter Paul Rubens, Kronos or Saturn devouring his own son. 1636. Museo del Prado (detail).

Linear time is what underlies the sense that we are “ahead of our time” or “behind the times,” part of the avant-garde or doomed to obsolescence. Raymond Williams’s concept of historical periods as containing “residual, dominant, and emergent elements” suggests that the moment itself is characterized by three parallel vectors or lines of force, one pointing to the past (residual) but

persisting in the present, one pointing forward to a possible future (the emergent), and one that is bidirectional, the dominant poised in “the floating now,” a phrase that Jonathan Culler has proposed for the lyrical present. In this regard, we should not forget the linear character of language itself and particularly of the structures of discursive time, of speech spatialized in writing. This can be seen at the microlevel of the sentence, which proceeds in acoustical time and scriptive space, interrupted by pauses (that is, dashes, commas, semicolons) and, most notably, by periods, with full consciousness of the pun on units of language and of history.

The second image is of an expanding/contracting bubble, trivial and ephemeral or “momentous” and catastrophic (economists employ this metaphor to describe times of runaway speculation and the bubble’s inevitable burst). This is a moment spreads out in all directions like an endlessly ramifying fractal, so that dimensions such as past, present, and future are seen as copresent, and multiple temporalities range all the way from the individual experience of time to the vast scale of paleontological “deep time” and the blinding speeds of machinic time measured in nanoseconds. It is the temporality that the Greeks associated with Kairos, the opportune moment that comes and goes and must be seized at the right time or lost forever. It is King Lear’s “ripeness is all” or (conversely) Hamlet’s sense that “the time is out of joint,” wherein every action seems futile and unprofitable. In Christian thought, Kairos is the time of special grace and inspiration, when a given moment is seen as the convergence of distinct time scales ranging from the tiny, ephemeral moment to the momentous era. Kairatic temporality is invoked when a poet/prophet like William Blake declares that he can “walk up and down in Six Thousand Years,” a temporal panorama that is equivalent to the “pulsation of an artery in which the poet’s work is done.” It is also the image that Walter Benjamin describes as a “constellation,” when a pattern linking past and present in a moment of crisis flashes up in a dialectical image.

Kairos is personified by a winged youth who balances the scales of decision and judgment on a razor’s edge. His most notable feature is a strange hairdo with a large, exaggerated forelock and a prominent bald spot on the back of his head. Kairos’s haircut illustrates the commonplace that the opportune moment must be grabbed by the forelock as it arrives, because once it has passed by there will be nothing to hold onto. As should be clear, the figure of Kairos in our present moment is none other than Donald Trump himself, the clever opportunist who sensed so accurately the collective mood of the post-Obama era and leveraged it into the most powerful political office on the planet.



Kairos. Roman work after the original by Lysippos, ca. 350–330 BCE. Turin, Museum of Antiquities.



Kairos emphasizing forelock and bald back of head. The hair illustrates the proverb about Kairos as the “carpe diem” moment.



Nicolas Poussin, *Dance to the Music of Time*. 1634-36. Wallace Collection, London. The two headed pillar on the left is the figure of Prudence, that looks both to the past and the future.

The third is the image of the circle, which emphasizes the repetition and return epitomized by the cycle of the seasons and the diurnal cycles of night and day. At its most cosmic scale, one is reminded of the image of the Ouroboros—the serpent with its tail in its mouth, Nietzsche’s image of “eternal return”—or the Greek figure of Aion—the youth who stands in the center of the Zodiac wheel in the clouds in Nicolas Poussin’s *Dance to the Music of Time*. Poussin combines figures from all three of our pictures of time. The chariot of Aion is led by the female personification of Fortuna, who rains money from above the clouds. The circular dance of the seasons is performed to the lute accompaniment of old Kronos or Father Time and is framed between a pair of cupids, one holding the hourglass that symbolizes time as something that is “running out,” and the other blowing bubbles that will quickly expand and burst.

To these three pictures of time I want to add a fourth dimension that I will call the affective temporality that specifies the mood of a time, what Williams called “the structure of feeling” that

characterizes a period, or the particular emotions and attitudes that arise in a specific moment or epoch.[2] The idea of affective temporality inevitably suggests that categories of individual human feeling such as anxiety, hope, fear, dread, shock, depression, happiness, and joy are also experienced collectively, as shared, common, and contagious “feelings of the time.” There are numerous small-scale stagings of affective temporality, as in moments of panic and terror, or enthusiasm and hatred. Trump rallies, with their ritual performances of hateful mockery of innumerable enemies, are the most vivid examples of these moments in our time.

Other forms of affective temporality are even more visceral and long-lasting. We speak of hot and cold periods, times of normalcy and exception.[3] The Chinese curse “may you live in interesting times” suggests that the best, the happiest times are relatively boring, containing relatively few memorable incidents outside the ordinary. The “normal” includes a limited range of special or extraordinary events, mundane recurrences like births, deaths, and marriages, the punctuating moments in ordinary human life that mark a period, pause, or transition. To live in a hot period is to share experiences of crisis, trauma, uncertainty, and rapid change. It is to feel that history itself is pressing down on individuals’ and groups’ consciousness, disrupting lives and interrupting the normal cycles of daily life. Perhaps the most extreme version of the hot period is what American evangelical Christians refer to as “end times,” when history itself will come to an end after a cataclysmic battle or holocaust and the revelation of an eternal order beyond time. This is also the affective temporality that Nietzsche’s rule associates with the “epoch,” the turning point or tipping point that feels like madness.

A period of hot temporality is one in which multiple scales converge in a singular present and the pace of events and crises seems to accelerate. For the purposes of this essay, the present is a historical epoch that began on 9 November 2016 and is rapidly approaching a critical moment of decision in the very near future—in fact a precisely datable future, the election on 6 November 2018. I call this a hot period first because its onset was widely experienced as a surprise and shock. Very few experts saw it coming or predicted it. Second, the ensuing two years have been widely experienced in American political culture as one of almost constant shock, scandal, and dramatic news events, ranging from threats of imminent nuclear war to revelations of criminal behavior among powerful political actors, rumors of treason by the American president, and shocking breaks with long-established customs, alliances, and norms. Part of the heat of this two-year moment is its contrast to the previous period, the by all accounts relatively cool presidency of “no-drama Obama.” It is not merely that the previous eight-year reign of the nation’s first African-American president has now been succeeded by the regime of an openly racist white-supremacist president. The contrast has more to do with the quality of temporal rhythms or what is called “the news cycle.” The Obama era was almost completely scandal free. (As if in compensation for this “scandal deficit,” one of the most popular TV series in the Obama era was *House of Cards*, the story of a completely corrupt president who ruthlessly lies, betrays, and even murders his way to power). During the Obama era, there were no new wars, no investigations of his administration, and no personal issues to speak of, other than a boringly perfect marriage. By contrast, the daily and weekly news cycle since the election of 2016 has been an almost constant series of shocks and surprises, a 24/7 reality TV show that has driven the ratings of cable news to an all-time high. Deplorable as Trump may be, he has produced huge profits for television and social media along with an overheated stock market fueled by massive tax breaks for the rich. The phrase “breaking news” is now joined by Trump’s favorite line, “fake news,” which treats the idea of objective truth, reliable information, and scientific knowledge as delusions to be abolished by fiat and arbitrary power. Every evening, the news begins with so many breathless updates of new or ongoing scandals that yesterday’s events are crowded out of attention.

The affective temporality of the Trump presidency has been described in the language of insanity, mental illness, and madness so many times in the last two years that it has become utterly commonplace to think of this as the perfect fulfilment of Nietzsche’s rule about “epochs” of radical change. Trump himself has been labelled by numerous members of the American Psychiatric Association as possessed by a pathological and dangerous “narcissistic personality disorder.” I won’t go into the debates over this diagnostic language (see my [“American Psychosis”](#) essay for a fuller discussion). My only point here is to note that insofar as the affective

temporality of an epoch is often defined by the sovereign figure, the most prominent image of power and the most powerful image of the time, Trump is the incarnation of one of the craziest periods in American history, comparable to the 1960s and the Civil War.[4] More important, he is not just a harmless lunatic, but a highly skilled demagogue and con man who understands crowd psychology very well. He is a genius at what is called gaslighting, the production of delusions, false beliefs, and outright lies presented as truths. So skilled is he at the art of manipulation that he openly brags about it in public—most famously when he bragged that he could murder someone in broad daylight and his followers would still stick with him.

And it is his followers who most potently transform his individual talent for the production of delusions into actual political power. This is where Nietzsche's rule about the madness of "groups, parties, and nations" comes into focus. Nationalism, tribalism, and the Party triumph over all appeals to common sense and ordinary decency, much less appeals to professional journalism or scientific fact. Trump's followers, taken individually, are precisely the "normal, decent" folks you encounter every day in the suburbs and small towns of America; it would be "rare" to encounter a Trump follower who is mentally ill. But as a group, and especially as a crowd, they are transformed in an instant into a paranoid, sadistic, and cruel mass that is ready to heap contempt on any target of Trump's abuse, most notably journalists who are denounced as "enemies of the people." And hovering in the shadows behind the crowds at the typical Trump rally are the political and economic elites who see themselves as beneficiaries of the political power he generates. Like Trump himself, they help to fuel the mass hysteria with the clear-eyed cynicism and opportunism he provides. As a representative of this Faustian coalition of fools and knaves, Trump has managed to give mental illness a bad name. Unlike most people who are mentally ill, and generally harmless, Trump does not suffer from his condition, but exults in it, particularly in his psychopathic lack of empathy for other human beings. As a final insult to common sense and the reality-based community, anyone who questions the legitimacy of the Trump regime is denounced as mentally ill—suffering from a completely novel diagnosis known as "Trump derangement syndrome." [5]

The Trump epoch was launched by an election, and the long-awaited event that has the potential to produce a significant turn or break in that era is the impending election, just a few days in our future. How can we picture the temporality of this miniature moment, the days leading up to this election? What is the moment's structure and affective charge? Most obvious is perhaps the figure of the circle, explicitly named in the language of American election "cycles." There is also a sense of the linear progression from its onset to a critical instant of "punctuation," the first time the American public gets to make a collective statement and an electoral judgment about the Trump presidency. One might hope for a period, the emphatic punctuation mark for an ending, but a less decisive mark is more likely. The end is not at hand, only a hope for a slowing of the Trump juggernaut. Since the shocking day of Trump's election, the majority of American citizens have been waiting for an end, a punctuating event—indeed, a sentence such as an impeachment or indictment—that will bring an end to his presidency. So the Trump epoch is unlikely to come to an end on 6 November, and we can be sure the madness will continue. The best we can hope for is the application of some restraints on his behavior and that of his followers, in the precarious possibility that the House of Representatives will be flipped to a Democratic majority. We are in a moment when, much as we would like to predict and talk about the future, we are incapable of making any verifiable statements about it such as "the sun will rise tomorrow morning." But we are not quite in the condition that Aristotle described in *De Interpretatione* when, reflecting on statements about time, he said "It is necessary that either there will be a sea battle tomorrow, or there will not be." In fact it is necessary that, in the chronological cycles of democratic time, there will be "a sea battle tomorrow," in the form of the election on 6 November. What is not necessary or certain is the outcome.

So this moment has to be seen structurally as the convergence of all three of my pictures of time: the line that moves in a direction out of the past, into the present, toward futurity; the cycle of American democratic elections; and the bubble containing its network of different temporalities that are all concentrated in this moment. This last structure becomes visible if we simply remind ourselves of the matters that are at stake and will be at least partly decided on 6 November. The clearest way to imagine this is to contemplate the possibility that the Democrats will fail to take

the House, and the Trump juggernaut will be free to push forward with little or no institutional opposition beyond street protests (dismissed by Trump as “mob rule”), professional journalism (denounced as “fake news” and the “enemy of the people”), and a rapidly diminishing number of “so-called judges” who will uphold the rule of law and the US Constitution. At the level of macropolitics, one has to admit that the fate of American democracy hangs in the balance, on the razor edge wielded by Kairos. If Trump reigns unchecked for two more years, he could well be fatal to the Constitution itself. Worst-case scenario: he could follow the example of the political leaders he admires most and declare a state of exception in which future elections are postponed, suspended, or hopelessly compromised by even more extreme forms of gerrymandering and voter suppression. He has joked about being “president for life,” but we have learned the hard lesson that Trump’s jokes are no laughing matter.

At a completely different level of temporality, larger than the fate of the United States and the Constitution, there is the question of the world. Admittedly, I have been sketching a dark picture of what he could do to my country, but we have already seen a sample what he could do to the rest of the world. At the largest time scale there is the question of climate change, which he has repeatedly denounced as a Chinese hoax, while pulling the US out of the very fragile international agreements that address this longest-term threat to the quality of human life. Our problem is the world’s problem and is part of a global process of failing democracies, failed states, and the rise of authoritarian governments and warlords as the emergent tendencies of our moment.

Another way to put this in the terms of our discussion here is to see that Kairos and Chronos are converging in the coming days. Chronos—the irresistible force of time with his scythe—gives Kairos—the beautiful youth who personifies possibility and the potential to seize the occasion—a cut-off date. We tend to think of Kairos in mainly positive terms, as the opportune moment when luck and readiness might lead on to good fortune. But Kairos is also a figure of precarity, balancing uneasily on a globe holding scales that could tip in either direction. Kairos closely resembles the later figure of Fortuna, an equivocal image of uncertainty and risk. And Fortuna is haunted by her dark sister, Nemesis, who stands blindly over scenes of catastrophe.

The affective temporality that accompanies these structures and figures of time is one of peak intensity, a mixture of hope and fear, possibility and dread. It is, above all, a sense of what the Greeks called *parousia* and Christians call “advent,” the inevitable approach of something that will certainly happen on a certain date but which has not yet shown its face. This moment stands in stark contrast to October 2016, when a majority of Americans were complacently sleep-walking toward a Clinton regime that would continue the cool temporality achieved under Obama, with every expectation that Trump would fade into oblivion. This time is different, at least in the sense that the American public is awake, alert, and alarmed. We can only hope that this will make a difference on the day of reckoning, the “moment of truth,” and decision that approaches.

The image of Kairos and his scales links him to icons of judgment and justice. It is notable in this regard that the weeks preceding the 6 November election in which these pages were written were marked by an even more literal crisis of justice, namely the tumultuous hearings over the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court of the United States. Judge Kavanaugh was credibly accused during the hearings of attempting to rape a young woman when they were teenagers, over thirty years ago. His response to the accusations was to engage in a tirade of counteraccusations, insulting the Democratic senators, claiming that the rape accusation was a political plot, and (even worse) dissembling and perjuring himself about his behavior during his high-school years. Within the larger moment of *parousia* leading up to the elections, the process of Senate confirmation provided a miniature passion play of the crisis of the Trump regime. On the day I wrote these words, the Senate approved Kavanaugh’s nomination by the slimmest margin in history, voting almost exactly along party lines to give him a lifetime appointment. The right-wing effort to stack the courts with conservative judges succeeded in elevating a morally tainted liar and ideologue to the highest court in the land, with the high probability that he will be serving there for the next thirty years. The decision was widely regarded as a repetition of a drama that was played out twenty-seven years earlier in the confirmation of Judge Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court despite the credible allegations of sexual harassment by Anita Hill. This time

was arguably worse in every way. Anyone hoping for a Kairatic moment with respect to justice in our time had to be devastated by this outcome.

I have no idea whether this essay on the images and affects surrounding temporality will have any utility in answering the perennial question of political crises and historical epochs, namely: what is to be done? Written in a present tense with uncertainty and dread, its only use may be as a message in a bottle. One can hope that it will be washed up on shore by the hoped-for “blue wave” that will check Trump’s power. The alternative is too awful to contemplate. In the meantime, there is no time like the present to produce critical pictures of the times.

1. Henri Bergson also proposed three pictures of time (the “two spools,” the “spectrum,” and the infinitely small piece of elastic) much more complicated than the commonplace ones I propose here. What we share is: (1) the basic distinction between Chronos and Kairos, mechanical or clock-time versus subjective, experiential time; and (2) the need to avoid ontological questions such as “what is time?” in favor of iconological models, triangulated so as to orient our ways of experiencing and discussing time. See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (Mineola, N.Y., 2001). The triangulation of time seems to be an ancient obsession, as the triad of Chronos, Chairos, and Aion indicate.

2. Williams coined this phrase originally in his *Preface to Film* (1954) as an alternative to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. I am adapting here Marshall McLuhan’s distinction between hot and cool media, defined as “high” and “low” resolution respectively, the hot medium bombarding the senses with information overload, while the cool medium invites the recipient to fill in and supplement the gaps in information.

3. See Thomas L. Friedman, “The American Civil War, Part II,” *New York Times*, 2 Oct. 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/opinion/the-american-civil-war-part-ii.html>

4. The origin of this phrase is credited to conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer, who coined it during the presidency of George W. Bush. It has been widely adopted by a variety of conservative and moderate pundits as a way of underscoring their own possession of a balanced, mature, and reasonable sensibility.