

Chronophobe

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Number 110, Spring 2017

Grégory Chatonsky : Après le réseau
Grégory Chatonsky: After the Network

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/85056ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

2368-030X (print)

2368-0318 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Trigg, D. (2017). Chronophobe. *ETC MEDIA*, (110), 74–77.

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CHRONOPHOBE



The easy thought “I am in the eighteen-nineties” ceased to be a few approximate words and was deepened into a reality. I felt dead, I felt as an abstract spectator of the world; an indefinite fear imbued with science, which is the best clarity of metaphysics.

Jorge Luis Borges,
“A New Refutation of Time”

At dusk, the city glows red in the distance; its silhouette briefly lit in a crimson hue before again expiring into the darkness. In the morning, the extent of the destruction will be visible. Remains of steel towers, telegraph poles, mailboxes, secret vaults, databases, filing cabinets, well-worn books, electrical wiring, memory cards, personal belongings, and impersonal artifacts of an archived era will each undergo a series of transformations, eventually becoming a new organism freed of its servitude to humanity.

On the surface of the Earth, nothing will remain. The complex network of alleyways and boulevards will morph into a collection of dead canals and lifeless cavities. Vast monuments peculiar to the contemporary era will suddenly cease to function as intended. A lake freighter, previously docked in the bay, will be tossed into the centre of the entertainment district. When the ship’s hull pokes through the carcass of the historic theatre, it will act as a beacon of a forgotten world. Around these urban shipwrecks, cargo originally designated for remote parts of the globe will be scattered throughout the streets of the city like traces of a lost civilization to be excavated carefully and cautiously by future archaeologists. Children will be born amongst the scarred earth and molten embers, but the city that remains will no longer be fit for human habitation.

You have been gazing at this spectacle for several years. From a vantage point—sealed off as you are by living on an adjoining island—you assume a detached perspective on the force of destruction. Indeed, watching this scene from the roof of your apartment, you declare it an ecstatic vision

already anticipated some 200 years earlier in the paintings of romantic visionaries. Each night, you ascend the ladder to the rooftop and document the fading light in the darkness. Fires of the broken earth fuse with gnarled steel and contorted wreckage, the symbiotic rapport between these divergent materials serving as a candle for your reveries.

Against the backdrop of protracted endings, you will think of the nightclubs, strip malls, business complexes—all surely destroyed—in the city. You think of the university where you had previously worked, of your office in the Department of Philosophy, and the books you had forgotten to collect much less read. You will think of your colleagues, of their mannerisms, the wrinkles etched in their faces; of conversations held in hallways, of meetings conducted in anonymous offices. Unable to flee in time, your colleagues are now buried beneath the wreckage, their limbs and crushed bodies trapped in black rubble. Keyboards, computer monitors, and office supplies protrude through the ruins, each of them marking the precise moment the city came to a standstill. Doors will cave in and entire blocks will be razed to the ground. Above all, you think of 1989.

Between your dreams and your memories, there is an imperceptible boundary that you seldom transgress. But on the crest of sleep and wakefulness, the threshold is ambiguous, and it will take you several seconds before you recognize where you are. The space around you is a collection of impersonal lines and poorly constructed angles affixed together so as to resemble a room, which, as if by chance, haphazardly emerges into your apartment. Your dream seeps into this anonymous world, colouring the anodyne surface of the present with the brilliant vibrancy of the past. In these confused moments where space eludes you, time is also subject to a partial dissolution. For a second, you forget who you are.

In a haze, at once present in and absent from yourself, you freely inhabit the past

without any anchor attaching you to the present. The humidity and atmosphere of an obsolete era returns to you as an organic reality. You feel the warm rain pelt against the facade of the Café Rodenbach. A fog, which originates from the distant mountains surrounding the city—and is thereby held within a circular ridge—fills the air with a thick impenetrability. Shards of pink, flecks of lime green. Each tone a variant of slime cascading through the mist before trailing into the street. You are amongst the derelicts and the insomniacs who form a line outside the place. Each of you has come here by way of a respite from your memories and dreams. The atmosphere is not so much decadent as forlorn. Somewhere in the city, a crime is taking place in the name of progress. But outside the Café Rodenbach, one could be forgiven for thinking that time had come to a standstill.

You have been dreaming again. Dreaming of faraway cities, of distant times. In the morning, you return to yourself—to this after-world where you have ceased to belong, and which is the site of an irreducible anxiety. An anonymous space surrounds you, but it is time in all its perturbations that makes your skin crawl. Indeed, the very idea of drifting freely through time, irrespective of its outcome, is abhorrent to you. What arbitrary law, you ask yourself, forces human beings to live in conformity with the present? What measure was needed to calm its increasing velocity?

As 1989 passes, you decide to reject the conventional laws of time altogether. Desperate to hold onto a past you were never in possession of, you overrule the idea of time as a linear progression of moments dotted on a calendar and replace it with a softly focused dreamscape. Your readings of Gaston Bachelard and the French phenomenologists have taught you that temporal continuity is not given to experience *de facto*, but instead constructed with ongoing and often precarious work. You have merely internalized this understanding of time to your own crisis. From now on, time ceases



to be a public affair and assumes a solely interior function, the purpose of which is to consolidate stray perceptual impressions belonging to the late 1980s into the same atmospheric region.

In the middle of 1995, calendars are no longer being produced to chronicle 1989, and newspapers have long since ceased reporting on the events of that year, save for the occasional retrospective analysis. Much of the culture of the era has died and been replaced with a new sensibility, which is entirely foreign to you. Music, art, cinema are all presented in a new aesthetic, as remote from 1989 as it is from 1889. These and other formalities are merely a triviality to you, however. It is not the objective presentation of time as a sequence of dates that matter to you, but the retention of a certain sensibility. You will live and die in 1989.

Such a fate was not allotted to you. An invisible force will intervene in your plan, exiling you from both space and time. When the city falls, you will take to the rooftop and observe a flurry of white lights pierce the sky before striking the distant horizon. You know now that those white lights carried with them not the promise of a new beginning, but the confirmation of an ending. Each light will fall to the earth with an irreversible finality, sealing you from your homeworld.

You will not let this natural disaster deter you. For several years after, you live a residual existence, drifting peacefully between the years in a fugue state. You spend your nights finding solace in the abandoned malls populated along the crest of Evaline Falls. Propping yourself against the crumbling food plazas, you will stare longingly at the deserted shop fronts. Tape World, Video Zone. These are your havens. At the abandoned Ice Chalet, you can trace the lines etched by skaters into the plastic tiles. Nothing much remains of its former glory, save for a rack of ice skates long since neglected.

It is in such intoxicating moments, sur-

rounded as you are by a stockpile of discarded audio cassettes and worn footwear, that you finally feel at home. As 1998 approaches, you become increasingly absent, both to yourself and to those around you. You know nothing of the World Wide Web, and have yet to discover that NASA has found fossilized Martian bacteria in a meteorite, much less that a sheep has been cloned. Significant advances have been made since the dawn of the decade, and you will miss them all.

The term “nostalgic” only partially applies to you. Yours is a condition that erases the distinction between past and present. It is true, your anxiety signals the existence of a world outside of your inner space, but you take these irruptions in your existence less as disclosures of truth and more as accidents in perception to be mended upon awakening. You are in no doubt: time had come to a standstill just as surely as space had, and to long mournfully for what was lost was an unnecessary expenditure of energy. In the ten years that had passed since you had decided to exit time, you can barely remember anything either prior to or after 1989. Your existence is a prolonged end to the Cold War fashioned through a brilliant pastel filter.

But your evasion of time has carried with it a set of troubling side-effects. You are an ephemeral and fragmentary presence; physically present insofar as you can be touched, smelled, and heard but otherwise almost entirely invisible. Of the friends who have stuck with you through the city’s collapse, of those you once loved and were intimate with, very few now recognize you. When they pass by your isolated apartment on the island overlooking the city, they make a detour so as to avoid your gaze.

You who have lived through the Earth’s extinction have emerged on the other side less as a survivor and more as a trace of an incommunicable era, which now belongs as much to myth as it does memory. You look back upon the ruins of the world as an affront to your personal existence, as

though it betrayed the story you told yourself of who you are. The lifeless terrain that surrounds your apartment is merely the preface to another world. Through the charred roads and dried up forests, your apartment has become the preserve of an ancient existence, adorned in twinkling neon lights that reverberate against the cold dead night. When the presence of the world recedes from your grasp, then you affix yourself with renewed intensity to the complex avenue of memories and images that keep you alive.

In 2029, you are the bearer of a vast heritage, the responsibility of which falls to you to preserve and, if needed, restore. For the last years of your life, you lived from whatever subsistence was in your apartment, rationing stocks to enhance your longevity. For the final year of your life, you never left your apartment, elevating domestic space to the totality of your world. Everything you remembered and knew about the universe, everyone you had ever met or would ever meet was contained in those thirty square meters.

At night, you see ahead to another future. Time will have caught up with your body. Slowly, it will decay before vanishing into a pool of dust. But your apartment will be untouched by the relentless indifference of time. Guarded by its isolation, the place will be found in the centuries that follow your own demise. Inside, future species will find the place perfectly maintained and prepared for its inevitable analysis. Deep within the apartment’s inner core, the investigators will find traces of your body buried amidst the collection of broken watches, antiquated furnishings, and newspaper articles from 1989 portending the end of the world.

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Desert (2007). Digital prints. 100 x 66 cm.

Desert III (2011). Video. Unicorn Art Center (Beijing, China).

Amers (2011). Painting. 42 x 28 cm.