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Horology *in* Art

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

The word “awesome” constantly is heard these days, but it hardly ever refers to something worthy of the term. However, “awesome” definitely applies when describing *The Clock*, a 24-hour video artwork by Christian Marclay.

Marclay, a Swiss American artist born in 1955, completed this prize-winning project in 2010 and sold just six editions to major museums, which must screen it in its entirety and in real time. Tens of thousands of people have already seen it, but only at museums, because it cannot be viewed in theaters, rented, streamed, or watched in any other way. Composed of a beautifully flowing almost rhythmic sequence of thousands of brief movie and TV clips of watch and clock faces or actors saying the time, the film actually is a timekeeper. Each minute shown or spoken is the exact local time of the viewers.

In 2011 I watched some hours of *The Clock* at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), which co-owns a copy with the National Gallery of Canada. I did not, as we said in college days, “pull an all-nighter” and see it all. Fortunately, the MFA again will be showing it from September 17 to January 29, 2017, regularly opening the gallery all night long, and I intend to be there. I had hoped that people attending the 2017 “Horology in Art” NAWCC Symposium would be able to watch *The Clock*, but this could not be arranged.

Marclay mined a century of film for his material. A team ferreted out the clips, and then he labored for three years to edit and weave his audiovisual collage. Because I am an avid movie watcher, I recognized many of the iconic movies and famous actors but not many others who are more obscure. No index or guidebook is provided, but a list someday may be available.

Of course, London’s Big Ben makes many appearances, as it has in decades of movies and television shows. In a scene from the 2006 movie *V for Vendetta*, a dystopian political thriller, it explodes.

A more complete description of *The Clock* is cited among the sources in its wikipedia.com post. Clips are synchronized to the times of day, with the action reflecting events that normally would take place in the morning, afternoon, evening, and night. Marclay kept this project a secret, because he worried that others would create their own versions once they heard about



Image from Christian Marclay's *The Clock*

the idea. He probably was right; for some years I have been pausing movies on my TV to snap screenshots of clocks, although my collection would take only a few minutes to run through.

At another museum, I viewed an earlier Marclay video, *Telephones*, released in 1995. Just seven and a half minutes long and composed exclusively of clips from Hollywood movies, it is equally mesmerizing as it stitches scenes of characters talking on the phone. However, 24 hours of *The Clock*—or whatever portions you are able to watch in one sitting—will be an ultimate “Horology in Art” experience.

About the Author

Bob Frishman has repaired, restored, collected, sold, and researched antique timekeepers since 1980. His business, Bell-Time Clocks, is based in Andover, MA. He lectures regularly about the history, science, and culture of mechanical timekeeping and has authored many articles for the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*.

He is an NAWCC Fellow, chair of the Ward Franchillon Time Symposium Committee, and a freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers. He can be reached via www.bell-time.com.