

Creativity enters a new time zone

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Nothing about a Greubel Forsey timepiece is simple. Its technology makes a virtue of demented complexity.

Stephen Bayley

What you really, really need is a dual function pusher and tourbillon cage rotating at high angular velocity. Probably with a black ceramic and carbon nano-fibre baseplate. The answer to the old question “What time is it?” may be merely hours and minutes, but the question, “What’s that watch?” demands a more complex response. Involved in the answer are all the subtleties of our relationship with technology and culture.

Apart from sunglasses, there is no mood-altering equipment more effective than a wristwatch. Apart from a super car, there is no clearer indication of wealth, psychological disorder and social ambition, the latter mainly misplaced. For men who disdain necklaces and piercings, the watch is a permissible form of jewellery.

There are three ways to go, each expressive of a spiritual state. To Target for a \$20 Casio F-91W, the very basic quartz digital that has been on sale since 1991. In a gesture that seemed calculated to denounce the crass materialism of his fellow gold-plated Saudis, this model was favoured by Osama bin Laden and has, accordingly, acquired a grisly cult status.

By way of contrast, you could visit a Parisian boutique called Chronopassion at 271 rue Saint-Honoré in the swish first arrondissement. Here, in what is possibly the world’s most extreme watch shop, they will be pleased to sell you a Hublot Minute Repeater – and you must note its very high titanium content – for €292,400 (\$362,400). Chronopassion’s proprietor says, “Each object in the boutique window must captivate, entertain, drive people crazy, even if it appears to be totally useless.” John Ruskin, where are you today?

But there is a middle path, the one favoured by so many of us. This is to choose a classic steel wristwatch of upper-moderate cost, the category Hans Wilsdorf created when he established Montres Rolex SA in Bienne in 1920. A German watchmaker who had become a London entrepreneur, Wilsdorf cleverly anticipated the emerging global luxury market. The name Rolex was chosen because it was pronounceable in all territories, except, perhaps, Japan and China.

Like Omega, Breitling, TAG Heuer and latterly Panerai, Rolex makes a very specific appeal to the professions, often of a rather butch kind. You may have no intention of travelling underwater, but a Rolex Submariner nicely suggests a state of masculine preparedness for any adventure. Omega goes into space, Breitling sells aeronautic-porn, Ulysse Nardin makes you an ocean-racer, TAG Heuer is Steve McQueen and if you choose a Panerai, you may wish to project a winning suggestion that your career path included service in Mussolini’s *marina militare*.

In any civilisation that rises above subsistence, you find what Thorstein Veblen called “conspicuous consumption”. Or, as Bernard Berenson put it, “taste begins when hunger is satisfied”.

Classic wristwatches satisfied a need for imagery, a sort of status Esperanto reaching across language and culture

barriers, for a new class of consumers and world travellers in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. It's an abused term, but a Rolex is truly a "design classic".

However, in response to customers dissatisfied with the functional perfection and aesthetic neutrality of a steel, self-winding Oyster Perpetual, watch design has experienced a very quick revolution. This has not been inspired by new technology, but rather by a new hyper-consumer; the sort who might spend £80 million on a Knightsbridge apartment for their fourth home.

Now that the great majority has access to a reliable and inexpensive digital time source, a small minority seeks the exceptional. Thus, the "art watch", if that's what we can call it, is a refutation of function and a wilful embracing of complexity. To the semantics of excess is added an enslavement to ostentatious redundancy. The art watch may not be for the aesthetically fastidious, but it has taken creativity into a new time zone.

First, the question of size. While almost all other technology in the world is getting smaller, watches are getting bigger. Absurdly so. At the recent Baselworld fair, where watch addicts feed their habit, a Swiss insider said he saw no limit to the enlargement process. Once, a slim wristwatch was a token of sophistication, whereas right now it seems that only the lifting potential of the human forearm restricts growth.

Second, the matter of complexity. The pioneering industrial designer Peter Behrens said, "we have no alternative but to make life more simple and less complicated". A new movement – for once that is exactly the correct term – of watch designers disagrees. Christoph Behling, a London-based, German-educated designer who has created modern classics for TAG Heuer, explains the psychology of extreme complication.

"I love and wear classic watches and chronometers [a watch that meets certain standards of precision], but I have also designed a 10,000th of a second mechanical stopwatch. Absurd? Yes. Not least because your finger can only time up to one fiftieth of a second maximum. Besides, you can get much more accurate electronic chronographs. But trust me, if you have this in your hand you will have an exceptional experience. Press start and the blue hand disappears in a blur with a high-pitched sound that is absolutely mesmerising. And this is achieved by hand-assembled mechanics in the 21st century."

Several new watchmakers have given themselves the same brief: "Astonish me!" In 1995, Urwerk was founded by Felix and Thomas Baumgartner in partnership with designer Martin Frei. By common consent, Urwerk has taken the language of watch design to its most remote extremes. Claiming both a sense of tradition (the "Ur" refers to the Sumerian capital, where timekeeping began) and a commitment to expressive essentials, Urwerk re-conceptualises the display of time. There are no hands or dials; instead, cylinders – reminiscent of the speedometer on a 1957 De Soto – scroll a linear countdown. Attached to your alligator strap is a case of tantalum, a heavy metal that is resistant to all but the most ferocious acids.

Another example, Richard Mille, was founded in 2001. The corporate mission is to have a "strong artistic and architectural dimension". The house motif is thus revelatory architectural windows or picture frames, offering visual access to the excessive mechanics behind the face.

Then there is Greubel Forsey, founded in 2004 and declared to be not simple watchmakers, but *inventeurs horlogers*. Their unique selling point is EWT, or experimental watch technology. So far from keeping things simple, Greubel Forsey's technology makes a virtue of demented complexity.

And the pinnacle of all these brands is Hautlence, created in Neuchatel in 2004. The limited edition HL2 (€224,000) incorporates a tiny chain which rotates the mobile bridge through 60 degrees every hour to compensate for gravity, a refinement not enjoyed by Bin Laden's all-plastic digital.

Significantly, the advanced art watch tends to use conventional technology, even if it is contorted into baroque elaborations. To the hyper-consumer there is something lowering, perhaps, about the electronic, even if the first quartz watch, created by Canada's Bell Labs in 1927, is, in fact, as antique as Rolex.

And in the fields of social modelling and cultural competition, where the art watch plays its role, the spin properties of the cesium atom which give atomic clocks an accuracy true to a few billionths of a second a year can be left on the bench.

Instead, what's really, really needed is self-lubricating beryllium, a sapphire crystal lens and a case made of exotic rare earths all wrapped in a look-at-me-because-I-am-rich design. There is, nonetheless, something touching about this profession of faith in fine materials and mechanical movements. To moan about redundancy, waste and ostentation in the art watch is as pointless as complaining that a Ferrari 458 Italia Spyder is unsuitable for the majority of school runs.

According to Christoph Behling, "watches are our immortal, perfect, alter ego products. They can dive deeper, fly higher, drive faster and tick longer than their owners. As with all great design, they lift our spirits beyond function and need."

Yes. Maybe. That thing on your wrist is not telling the time. It is saying, in a most haunting way, *volat irreparabile tempus*. (Literally: time flies irrevocably.)

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