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GUEST OBSERVER; A Time for Watches

By CATHLEEN SCHINE FEB. 15, 1987

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THE SOUND IS ALWAYS with me - an insistent, rhythmic series of short happy chirps. Like a loyal, friendly cricket, it follows me wherever I go. I hear it at the opera when I rest my head in my hand. It perches beside my bed, singing as I go to sleep, as I wake up. It is my link to the world, my conscience, a reaffirmation of order and integrity in the face of hideous gaping chaos. It is my watch. My Swatch watch.

The watch was probably invented around 1500 in Germany. Before that? Forget it. People stumbling around in a moody fog of doubt and anticipation, squinting helplessly up at the sun. I'm hungry. But is it lunchtime? Or dinner? Teatime? Or what? Nobody knew. The lucky ones, the ones in the cities, groped along the dusty streets, listening desperately for the chimes of the town's single, giant cuckoo clock high above them.

I've lived without a watch, too. It was horrible. At least, I imagine it must have been, but I was a teen-ager, so I didn't really notice. Wearing a watch in the 60's or the early 70's was a little like joining R.O.T.C. or voting for Richard Nixon. "At this point in time . . ." - those words still make my skin crawl. On the other hand, I mean, people don't write about this much, you know, the people you might expect to, like Norman Podhoretz, critics of the counterculture and all, but in the 60's everyone was

always a little late. R.O.T.C. still holds limited appeal for me, but I do think that a rehabilitation of the wristwatch is long overdue.

First of all, watches are so clever. How do they know what time it is? How do they know? They're so mysteriously sure, smug almost. There is something cosmic about this knowledge. And something reassuring about the small man-made mechanical device on your wrist that shares it with you. The planets hurtle around the sun so that you will know it's 10 o'clock, Saturday morning, time to watch "Pee-Wee's Playhouse."

Now it's true that this is New York, and if we don't wear a watch, we don't have to peer up at large cuckoo clocks. There are people who prefer life without a watch: people who like the adventure, the thrill, people who are ready for Grape Nuts. When they are on time, they say, "I don't know, I just have this sense." When they are late, they say, indignantly, "I wasn't wearing a watch." If they own watches, they treat them badly, using them as cat toys, dropping them down drains and leaving them there. But deep down, they know: the watch will come back to haunt them. Ticktock. The super unclogs the drain weeks later and there it is, working, working - while you slept, while you daydreamed, while you spent all your money at yuppie restaurants.

Watches are loyal. They always come home, like a dog. They trot back from the inner pocket of someone else's freshly laundered denim jacket, draped with wadded Kleenex. People, business associates, call, asking if it is perhaps your watch that has strayed into a manila envelope you sent them.

Watches are the answer to loneliness - a pet so trusting, so indiscriminating, it loves its master simply because he is its master; a pet who could love, well, I don't know, let me see: Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams.

I realize a lot of people find watches oppressive, because, after all, watches are so insistent. And they're not very sensitive to people's feelings. When I got married, my brother gave me a watch with an alarm that played "The Wedding March." It got packed somewhere in a duffle bag when my husband and I went on our honeymoon, and we never found it again. We assumed we'd lost it. Except every once in a while, late, very late at night, it would suddenly begin peeping and squeaking - an eerie, muffled rendition of "The Wedding March" not unlike the tiny man's baffled cries for help in "The Fly."

Haunting? Yes. But now I have a reasonable watch. You never need to wind it. It tells me what date it is. If it sounds like Jiminy Cricket, well it is like Jiminy Cricket:

a brightly dressed, jolly little conscience to remind me that life is not entirely personal, that there is work and there are in-laws, that The New Republic comes only once a week, that life is not just a mass of delicious feelings (anger, fatigue, pleasure, sibling rivalry, hunger) to be enjoyed. You look at your watch and you see necessity, which, let's face it, is a lot better than figuring it's probably bedtime because the cats are hissing and yowling for food again. My watch never yowls for food.

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