

Essay: Deep Timescales of Our Most Urgent Crises

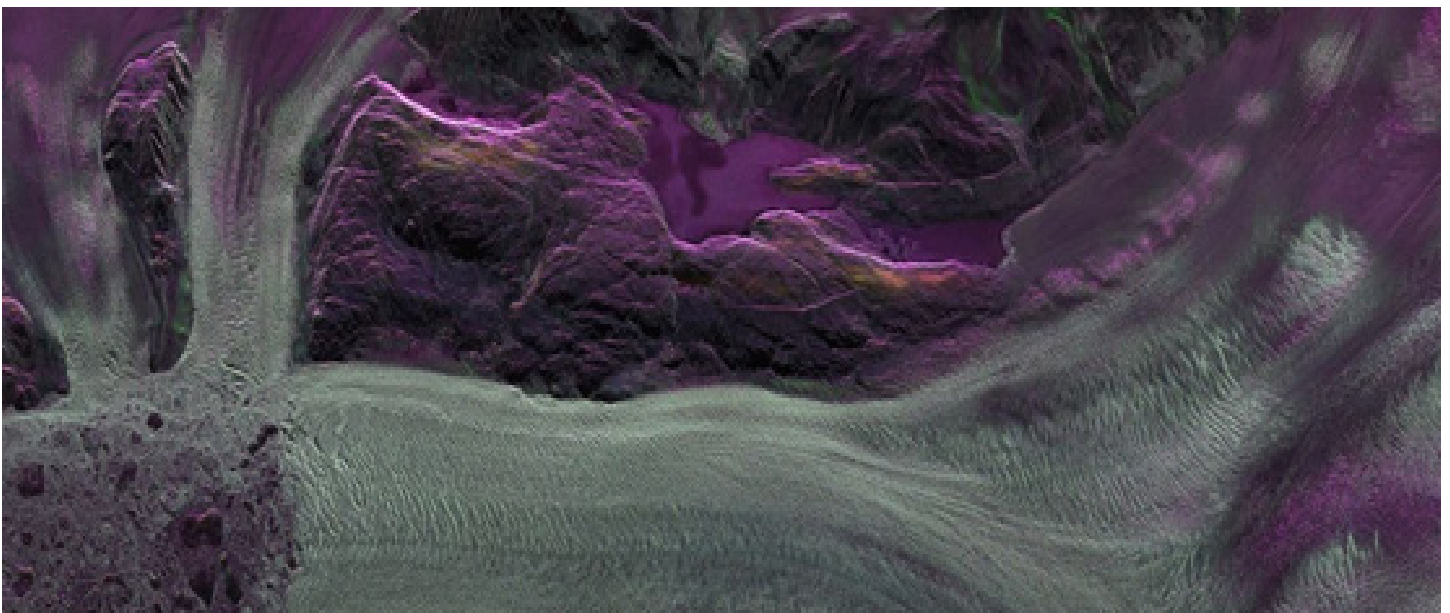
Strelka Magazine

Link: <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/deep-timescales-of-our-most-urgent-crises>

Author: Cristina Parreño Alonso

Date: Aug 17th 2020

The coronavirus crisis is making us aware that the future has always been uncertain and that the present moment is part of planetary time-trajectories and temporal geographies far wider than our cultural narratives. This pandemic calls for humans to start thinking and acting according to much larger timescales to encompass the ecological and geological resources we draw from. It is a call to expand the human temporal sensibilities that are so essential to developing the frameworks, the infrastructures, and the governance strategies capable of acting at the deep timescales of our most urgent crises.



SAR image courtesy of NASA / Ron Muellerschoen

“Time itself is the task.”—Søren Kierkegaard

Beyond the gravity of its consequences and its planetary dimension, what sets the coronavirus pandemic apart in the context of global crises is the magnitude of the actions it has mobilized. Within weeks, the entire planet turned upside-down, with deep restructuring ranging from the scale of the body to the planet. The (by now quotidian) protective gear, social distancing, and stay-at-home orders have radically transformed the way our bodies relate to each other and to the environment.

Humans have proven themselves capable of undertaking unprecedented planetary transformations in a very short period of time. But the impressive scale of these actions remains in contrast to the pervasive state of paralysis that surrounds other current planetary crises. Climate change, for instance, has long called for measures on such a scale. Its desperate shout-outs, however, do not seem to have resonated at the frequencies required to trigger the scale of mobilization that is so urgently needed.

The coronavirus pandemic has powerfully demonstrated that time-awareness instigates action. Immersed in an urgent sense of total endangerment, humans' time-perceptual system is well qualified not only to understand but also to mentally inhabit the timescales at which this crisis operates. Our time-genes can resonate with this crisis tempo: “We act now, or we die now.”

Climate change, on the other hand, dwells within timescales that are not naturally accessible to the human intellect, and this is precisely what incapacitates us to mobilize and take immediate radical action. Humans' natural time-perceptual system is not attuned to the temporal scales of “We act now, or the consequences will last for millennia.”

The paradox is that today, for the first time in our 200,000 years of existence, humans are operating at the geological timescales of the Earth. Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen has proposed that humans have become a geological force because we now change the Earth's systems more than all non-human processes combined. Today, humans perform profound interventions that affect planetary deep temporal scales while holding onto inaptly shallow views of their implications in time. It is this limited time-literacy that keeps us alienated, not only from the Earth but also from the deep-time consequences of our own actions.

As far back as the nineteenth century, Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov claimed that restoring a sense of brotherhood and kinship implies the overcoming of human alienation. This was not limited to social alienation; he talked about alienation from each other, but also from nature and from time itself. Today, more than ever, the overcoming of human alienation necessarily implies completely transforming our relationship with time, radically expanding humans' time awareness and intuition, and deeply understanding and taking responsibility for our profound involvement in the deep past, present, and future of the Earth. It implies a paradigmatic shift in time-perception, one that accounts for factors such as anthropogenic climate change or the spread of nuclear waste and non-biodegradable materials in the crust of the Earth, all of which will last for thousands of years into the future.

In a recent essay for The New York Times, Michiko Kakutani claimed that “Among the many casualties of COVID-19 is our perception of time. Without jobs or classes, weekdays and weekends blur into one long Möbius strip of time (...). Unable to make plans (...), we are forced to live in a continuous present. And yet, some days we feel we’ve been transported to a world imagined in a futuristic novel (...).” If, as in Einstein’s famous quote, “in the midst of every crisis lies a great opportunity,” what lies in the midst of this pandemic is precisely the shaking of our perception of time. In another Times piece, “In Search of Time Lost and Newly Found,” Parul Sehgal brought up the hazy quality of time during this crisis, and quoted Jamaica Kincaid comparing it to a version of an afterlife: “It’s as if we are dead and somehow have been given the unheard-of opportunity to see the life we lived, the way we lived it.”

By forcing upon us new ways of experiencing time, while providing a new vantage point “to see the life we lived,” the coronavirus crisis is estranging us from the limited time frames under which we have been relating to the environment. The potential here is a sort of awakening produced by new expanded time-sensibilities where our accustomed time frames are reflected back to us as dysfunctional. Surprisingly, a new and deadly planetary pathogen could be revealing in its wake several deeply entrenched human time-perceptual pathologies.

In 1987, author Frank White coined the term “Overview Effect” to describe the cognitive shift in awareness that results from the experience of viewing the Earth from orbit or from the moon. “This experience profoundly affects space travelers’ worldviews—their perceptions of (...) our planet, and their understanding of the future.” Analogously the coronavirus pandemic invokes multiple and heterogeneous temporal scales—from short-term immediate survival to long-term existential questions raised by illness and death at planetary scales; from the short-term impact of shutdowns at a personal level to the long-term consequences of a global recession or the even longer-term implications of the reduction of CO2 emissions for Planet Earth. By being exposed simultaneously to those short and long time lenses, we are inadvertently taking a lesson in time literacy. The coronavirus crisis is producing in many a sort of “Overview Effect” from the Earth, wherefrom we—like space travelers—are able to transform and expand our understanding of time.



Earthrise. Photo courtesy of NASA

Indeed, the coronavirus crisis has brought about, for some of us, a series of instances where the more familiar ways of experiencing time overlap with radically new ones. The confluence of these often antagonistic time-perceptions has produced initial disorienting sentiments followed up by unexpected moments of realization. Regardless of what each of us realizes individually, one thing is revealed to all: the notion that even if/when things go back to normal, it will never be the same normal, as the things that we have seen will never return to being unseen again.

As geological actors, we must push these perceptual breakthroughs further if we are to develop the time literacy demanded by the greater, more permanent challenge of becoming true planetary stewards.

Uncertain Future / Eternal Present

The future has become an overall societal goal. Always obsessed with what is coming next, we have been operating under the false impression that we can foresee and fully control the future. The coronavirus pandemic has thrown many of us into a state of disorientation, laden with uncertainties. Unable to foresee an end to this pandemic, while harboring a strong feeling that the near future will be drastically different from the present, we experience a constriction of time. With a past that is no longer familiar and a day-to-day experience that does not include the future, our time horizons become shorter, to the point where the present is all there is.

Past of No-return

Coined by philosopher Glenn Albrecht in 2005, solastalgia describes a form of existential distress caused by environmental change. Albrecht described it as “the homesickness you have when you are still at home.” The experience of solastalgia—usually related to more localized events such as volcanic eruptions, drought, or destructive mining techniques—has become more extensive during the coronavirus pandemic. Confined to the boundaries of our own homes, we come to realize that what we initially thought was an exceptional state might indefinitely change reality as we have known it. We are then invaded by the paradoxical feeling of being homesick while sick of being at home.

Hour-Lilies

We live in an age where time has become the scarcest resource of all. We try to save as much of it as possible, and we feel there is never enough of it. In Michael Ende’s novel *Momo: Or the Curious Story About the Time Thieves and the Child Who Returned the People’s Stolen Time*, the Men in Grey steal the time (hour-lilies) from the humans’ hearts, making people terribly sick and the city sterile, devoid of all things considered to be time-wasting, such as joy, art, and love. Professor Hora saves humans from this pathological condition by stopping time. In a frozen world where no one can move, only Momo is granted one hour-lily to sneak into the Timesaving Bank and release all the frozen hour-lilies, which, by flying back to the hearts of the people, restore humans’ sense of time and love for the things that really matter in life. Just as in *Momo*, the coronavirus crisis has generated a sense that time has stopped. But (for those of us fortunate enough to be able to keep our jobs while in quarantine), the long period of tedious frozen time during this pandemic has been, simultaneously, one fresh hour-lily to be spent on those things that cannot be rushed. Many have taken time to reconnect with family—weekly phone calls to relatives have turned into daily video-chat sessions; with friends—even those who had not seen each other for a long time have mutually granted generous doses of time; and with the community—we have witnessed beautiful acts of generosity that have made many of us believe in humanity again.

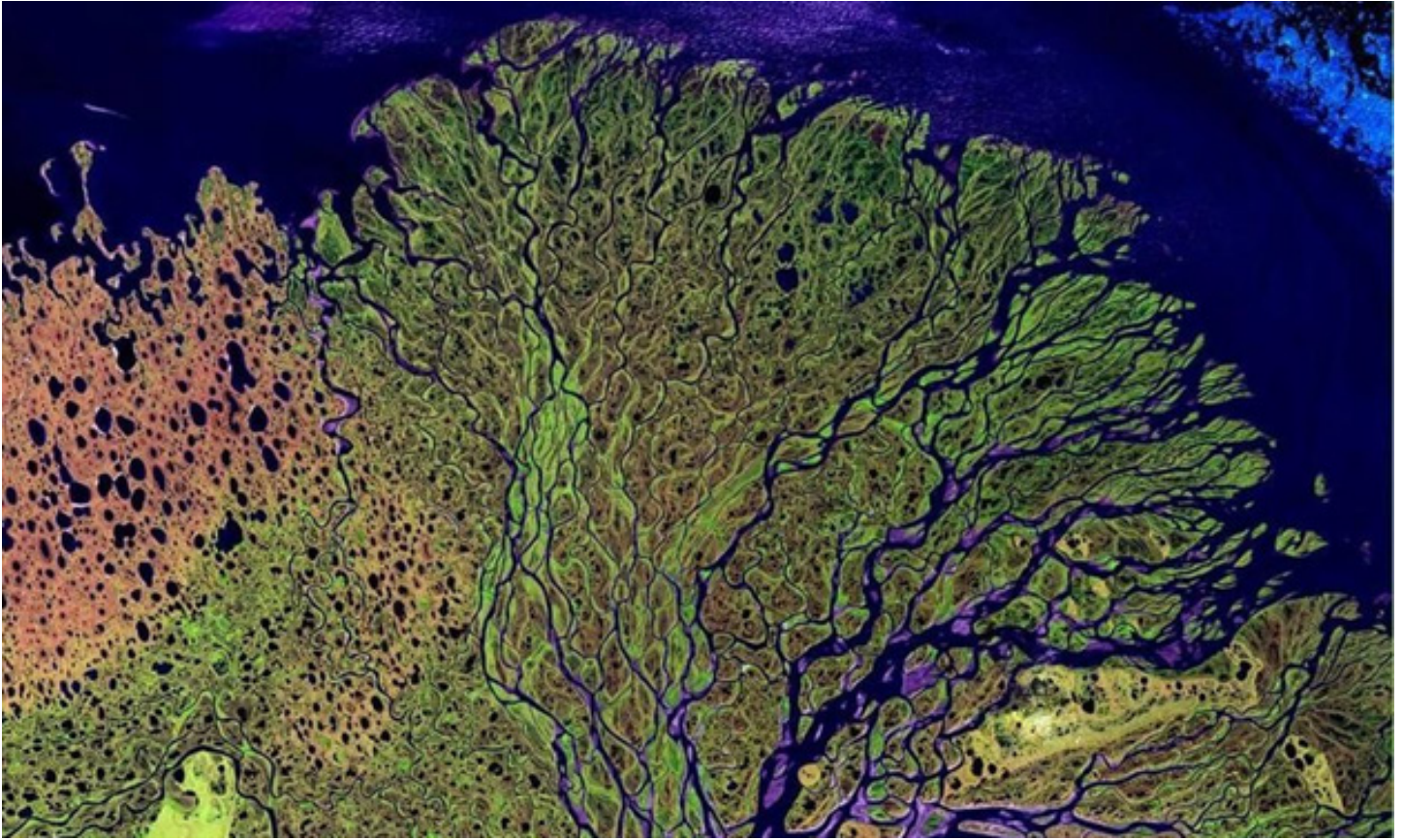


Image courtesy of NASA

Heterochronic Times

History, the tool most commonly used to account for time, is usually presented as a series of accumulated facts that are written down to assert a rectilinear unity of time. The current crisis is challenging this assertion. In 1875, German embryologist Ernst Haeckel coined the term heterochrony to describe deviations in the “traditional time” of the body. In *Modernism and Time Machines*, author Charles M. Tung explained how “Heterochrony reveals that our corporeal present is not the culmination of a progressive and uniform linear time.” The notion of heterochrony suggests the co-existence of multiple and irregular time-trajectories that converge into poly-temporal assemblages. It suggests that the heterogeneous present is not a point in time, but instead is the intersection of a multiplicity of variably deep and diverse timelines.

Hunkered down in our own homes during this pandemic, many of us have turned to art to overcome a downhearted sense of isolation. Art unlocks the heterochrony that enables us to travel in time and space in search of connectedness. Through literature, for instance, we come into contact with people in distant cultures and eras who lived through similar events. Works like Lloyd and Dorothy Mooté’s *The Great Plague*, John M. Barry’s *The Great Influenza*, or Boccaccio’s *Decameron* transport us to other remote times and bring us close to the lives and stories of people who experienced the plague that afflicted London in 1664, those who suffered the 1919 flu pandemic, or those who lived in Italy around 1348, when quarantines were deployed for the first time. The grievous sense of separation produced during this pandemic makes us especially receptive to what literature has to offer, to those deep feelings of connectedness across cultures and generations.

Other forms of art—including poetry, theater, music, ballet, and opera (some of them in their digital versions)—have in their own ways brought us closer to others. On Easter Sunday, the Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli live-streamed a concert from an empty Duomo Cathedral in Milan. Witnessing this event on the screens of our devices, some of us experienced one of the most powerful experiences of connectedness while being alone at home. The sound of his marvelous voice and the image of his fragile yet powerful human figure standing alone, framed by the magnificent architecture of the Duomo, produced in many of us a deep feeling of being connected to the world. The screens of the 28 million people who saw the concert that day alternated between views of the Duomo and heartbreaking images of some of the most beautiful cities completely deserted and devoid of life. All of the people missing from the streets of those cities were instead right there, with Andrea Bocelli, listening to “Music for Hope,” being together in being alone.

Art during this pandemic has triggered in some the experiential realization that we all come into this world alone, that we leave this world alone, and that it is precisely in that aloneness that we are deeply connected across time zones and centuries. The coronavirus pandemic has induced an absolute rupture in traditional time. It has incited us to connect across time and space, to experience time as multidirectional and our body as poly-temporal.

Shadowtime

The Bureau of Linguistical Reality—a participatory artwork focused on creating new language to better understand the new realities emerging out of climate change—defines shadowtime as “a parallel timescale that follows one around throughout the day-to-day experience of regular time.” Shadowtime—used to describe a new temporal experience induced by anthropocenic events—is developing new forms of expression during the coronavirus pandemic. During this crisis, we experience shadowtime when short-term personal fears co-exist with deep existential planetary concerns; when those universal concerns turn our plans for life into obsolete and unimportant endeavors; when our perception of the planet’s temporal scale radically expands as we come to realize that viruses have populated the planet for over 1.5 billion years; and when simultaneously, the scale of the Earth is dwarfed in light of the rapid speed at which a newly discovered pathogen has reached every single corner of the planet.

Shadowtime enlarges the frame of human experience by deepening the segment of historical time that we occupy. In shadowtime, the present is not a point in a time-trajectory, but rather it is a moment at which vastly different deep and shallow time-trajectories intersect. The experience of shadowtime connects us with a plurality of heterogeneous pasts and with the deep future of our planet. In shadowtime, we begin to acquire time-consciousness and we start to integrate our human actions with the planetary timescales at which they really operate.

It’s About Time

The coronavirus crisis is making us aware that the future has always been uncertain; that the present is all we have; that the past will never come back; that we were always alone and, in that aloneness, deeply connected with each other across time and space; that human connections and the very things that really matter in life thrive in time; and that the present moment is part of planetary time-trajectories and temporal geographies far wider than our cultural narratives.

This pandemic has shaken our ground and is asking us to rebuild stronger foundations. This is a time of self-reflection, but also a call for action; a call for humans to start thinking and acting according to much larger timescales that encompass the ecological and geological resources we draw from; a call to expand the human temporal sensibilities that are so essential in developing the frameworks, the infrastructures, and the governance strategies capable of acting at the deep timescales of our most urgent crises.