

Ghostly pasts and postponed futures: The disorder of time during the corona pandemic

Memory Studies

2021, Vol. 14(6) 1401–1413

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/117506980211054015

journals.sagepub.com/home/mss**Siobhan Kattago** 

University of Tartu, Estonia

Abstract

Since the first lockdown in March 2020, time seems to have slowed to a continuous present tense. The Greek language has three words to express different experiences of time: *aion*, *chronos* and *kairos*. If *aion* is the boundless and limbo-like time of eternity, *chronos* represents chronological, sequential, and linear time. *Kairos*, however, signifies the rupture of ordinary time with the opportune moment, epiphany and redemption, revolution, and most broadly, crisis and emergency. This paper argues that the pandemic is impacting how individuals perceive time in two ways: first, as a distortion of time in which individuals are caught between linear time (*chronos*) and rupture (*kairos*) invoking the state of emergency and second, as an extended present that blurs the passing of chronological time with its seeming eternity (*aion*). As a result of the perceived suspension of ordinary time, temporal understandings of the future are postponed, while the past hovers like a ghost over the present.

Keywords

Covid-19, crisis, ghosts, presentism, Spanish flu, time

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go

They do not move.–Samuel Beckett (1954), *Waiting for Godot*

Living during the corona pandemic exposes the fragility of human interaction and the manifold ways in which time is experienced. The passing of chronological time is framed by the imposition of restrictions followed by their incremental loosening and tightening. Each day begins with a litany of numbers – from the rates of infection and number of deaths to amounts of individuals who

Corresponding author:

Siobhan Kattago, University of Tartu, 50090 Tartu, Estonia.

Email: siobhan.kattago@ut.ee

have been vaccinated. Since the first lockdown in March 2020, time seems to have slowed to a continuous present tense. Long-term plans to see loved ones, to attend live events, go to work, school, a library, church, museum, concert, a restaurant, or bar have been indefinitely postponed. As weeks extended into months and years, the gap has expanded between the temporal dimension of past and future. Indeed, the very idea of the future tense as a state of intention and anticipation has become deeply uncertain. While philosophers and poets have written about the enigma of time, the physicist, Carlo Rovelli captures its strange familiarity:

I stop and do nothing. Nothing happens, I am thinking about nothing. I listen to the passing of time. This is time, familiar and intimate. We are taken by it. The rush of seconds, hours, years that hurls us towards life then drags us towards nothingness. . . We inhabit time as fish live in water. Our being is being in time. Its solemn music nurtures us, opens the world to us, troubles us, frightens and lulls us. The universe unfolds into the future, dragged by time, and exists according to the order of time. (Rovelli, 2019: 1)

What do we mean by ‘the order of time’, and how is the pandemic changing our understanding of the modalities of past, present, and future? If, for Martin Heidegger, time is the very horizon of human understanding, Henri Bergson reflected on the difference between objective measurable time and the duration of lived subjective time. My question, however, is a more modest one. Given that the Greek language has three words to express different experiences of time: *aion*, *chronos* and *kairos*, how might they help us to understand the pandemic? If *aion* is the boundless and limbo-like duration of eternity, *chronos* represents chronological, sequential, and linear time. *Kairos*, however, signifies the rupture of ordinary time with the opportune moment, epiphany, redemption, revolution, and most broadly, crisis and emergency. This paper argues that the pandemic is impacting how individuals perceive time in two ways: first, as a distortion of time in which individuals are caught between linear time (*chronos*) and rupture (*kairos*) invoking the state of emergency and second, as an extended present that blurs the passing of chronological time with its seeming eternity (*aion*). As a result of the perceived suspension of ordinary time during the pandemic, temporal understandings of the future are postponed, while the past hovers like a ghost over the present.

Lockdown: caught between *chronos* and *kairos*

The pandemic distorts ordinary understandings of time by closing the geographical perimeters of public space for social distancing, the wearing of masks and the regulation of when one might leave the private realm of one’s home, region, or country. The proclamation of a pandemic by the WHO in March 2020 invoked the suspension of ordinary time and the cyclical, even fated return of the plague as crisis. Unlike the extraordinary circumstances of war, the viral enemy is invisible, at once everywhere and nowhere.

With the first lockdown, chronological time was ruptured as life literally ground to a halt. Caught between the ordinary rhythms of time and the state of emergency, temporal structures of going to work, school, kindergarten or of travelling somewhere to visit someone simply stopped. The order of time suddenly became an issue as durations of time seemed to shift.¹ As Hartmut Rosa underscored, the pandemic is accelerating existing trends of digitalization and technological change while decelerating familiar patterns of life. ‘It looks like some gigantic brakes have been put on the incessant wheels of production, movement and acceleration’ (Rosa, 2020). By limiting human interaction and travel, lockdowns disrupt the boundaries between home and work, private and public. However, while changes in the contours of space can be physically demarcated by closing shopping centres, offices, schools, playgrounds, theatres, museums, bars and restaurants, the disturbance of time imposed by lockdowns is not immediately visible. Instead, lockdowns reach

deeply into the grammar of how time is articulated by distorting the familiar verb tenses of past, present, and future.

The acceleration of time that occurs in the digital world jars with the deceleration of the pace of everyday life during lockdown. Rising case numbers and the unprecedented development of vaccines contrast with the monotony and, at times, welcome slowness of time during the pandemic:

With its rapid spread, corona paradoxically leaves the world in both a paralyzed and frenzied “now”, with little time for future-thinking or attention paid to those outside the narrow emergency-frames of collective (usually national) identity – such as, for example, the refugees on Europe’s borders (Erl, 2020a: 863).

The coronavirus is disordering how we perceive the duration of chronological and sequential time. Such disorder is acutely felt as the physical space of the world shrinks into the private realm and life increasingly moves online.

While *chronos* indicates ‘the quantity of duration’ or the age of a person, object, or epoch, *kairos* is concerned with ‘the qualitative character of time’ in a specific instance (Smith, 1969: 1). Time understood as *kairos* denotes a rupture or break in the ordinary and chronological time of *chronos*. From the Sophists, *kairos* indicates the opportune moment during a speech in which to make one’s argument. In Judaism and Christianity, *kairos* is the time of action, a turning point or moment of epiphany, akin to a miracle and new beginning.

The Greek word for crisis, *krisis*, like *kairos*, indicates a moment that breaks through and suspends ordinary time. However, although *kairos* is an opportune, even existential moment of action, the root meaning of crisis is to separate or cut (*krino*). In medicine, crisis indicates the point when illness overtakes the healthy body. Likewise, in politics, crisis designates when the body politic reaches a heightened state of emergency. As Reinhart Koselleck underscores:

Crisis belongs among the fundamental concepts, that is to say, irreplaceable concepts, of the Greek language. Derived from *krino*, to cut, to select, to decide, to judge; by extension, to measure, to quarrel, to fight – “crisis” aimed at a definitive, irrevocable decision. (Koselleck, 2002: 237).

Francois Hartog also underscores how crisis is connected to the necessity to judge a particular situation – whether as a doctor or politician. Crisis, like *kairos*, is rooted in a rupture of the order of time requiring a judgement on how to act (Hartog, 2020a).²

Walter Benjamin argues that crisis is like Messianic time, *nunc stans* or a moment standing outside of ordinary time. ‘History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*)’ (Benjamin, 1968: 261). By extension, for Hannah Arendt, the time of the now indicates a new beginning as natality and *initium*. If a new beginning is manifest most profoundly in the act of giving birth; politically, a new beginning coincides with the creation of a new polity or a revolution. As Arendt underscores, the present is a gap in the continuum of time between past and future. ‘The gap, I suspect, is not a modern phenomenon, it is perhaps not even a historical datum but is coeval with the existence of man on earth’ (Arendt, 1993: 13). Both *kairos* and crisis indicate a turning point, Messianic now or *Jetztzeit* as the moment of existential decision. Whether one reads Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Arendt, Benjamin, Tillich, Schmitt or Agamben, the moment of decision emerges from a heightened ‘time of the now’ that is perceived to exist outside of chronological time. While *kairos* may open the opportunity for existential change, crisis indicates a state of emergency. Both, however, call for judgement, action and decision.

For Koselleck, crisis represents a rupture in temporality that alters the very layers of historical time. A crisis is an exceptional moment that occurs within what is otherwise perceived as

ordinary chronological time. ‘It was a concept that always posited a temporal dimension, which, parsed in modern terms, actually implied a theory of time’ (Koselleck, 2002: 237). The temporality of past and future cannot coincide. Instead, as Koselleck suggests, the past is a space of experience (*Erfahrungsraum*) that is qualitatively different from the future. Experiences that have taken place in the past are gone while leaving conscious and unconscious traces in the present. As the horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*), the future is open to possible dreams, fears, and the anticipation of something new. ‘Evidently, the categories of “experience” and “expectation” claim a higher, or perhaps the highest, degree of generality, but they also claim an indispensable application. Here they resemble, as historical categories, those of time and space’ (Koselleck, 1985: 269).

The imposition of states of emergency has reinforced the enormous biopolitical power of the nation-state with the implementation of lockdowns, closing of borders, schools, childcare, public institutions, travel and flight restrictions, curfews, mandatory testing on entry, procurement of PPE, and vaccination rollouts. And yet, although the pandemic demonstrates the sovereignty of states in the name of national public health, it is also a simultaneous experience shared unevenly across the globe.³ Indeed, it is the all-encompassing prevalence of the media, especially social media and the Internet that frame the corona pandemic as a crisis of time most profoundly.

Temporarily closed: caught between *chronos* and *aion*

If the proclamation of a lockdown accompanying states of emergency leads to the sudden closing of public spaces and borders; once places are closed, time slows to a seemingly endless period of waiting. The condition of being ‘temporarily closed’ underscores the indeterminacy of the duration of time. To be temporarily closed links the re-opening of public spaces with the decision of the government in tandem with public health to end a lockdown. Being ‘temporarily closed’ expresses the uncertainty of the pandemic as time shifts between the sequential time of *chronos* and the timelessness of *aion*. Schools and stores can re-open until another wave of infection emerges. Temporary closure slides into the sense of an eternal or endless pandemic. When familiar places are temporarily closed, much of ordinary life comes to a slow standstill. While lockdown is rooted in crisis and the state of emergency, temporary closure evokes the eternity of timelessness. Moreover, the deceleration of everyday life during the pandemic fosters the sense that the future is fading from the horizon as time shifts into a continuous present tense.

When most activities are temporally closed, it is as if we are stranded between *chronos* as chronological time and *aion* as eternity. With the pandemic, everyday patterns of life increasingly exemplify what François Hartog has defined as the regime of presentism. The antithesis to futurism, the experience of time as presentism denotes the temporal duration of a continuous present tense. Presentism is ‘the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of the unending now’ (Hartog, 2015: xv).

Regimes of historicity denote how individuals experience time, as discreet verb tenses and modes of past, present and future. As Hartog underscores, historicity rather than temporality denotes the peculiar condition of human existence in time. Historicity entails ‘the human being’s self-awareness as a historical being’ (Hartog, 2015: xv). If the past structured the ancient regime of historicity, after the French Revolution, the future as teleological progress increasingly structured time in the modern regime of historicity. Hartog, however, argues that with the collapse of communism in 1989, there has been a shift away from the modern time regime focusing on the future to that of presentism. Drawing on Tocqueville, Arendt and Koselleck, who argue that the future

rather than the past structures modern understandings of time, Hartog goes one step further. With the end of the cold war, neither the past nor the future illuminate the present. Instead, the present, as a tract of chronological time has morphed into an expansive instant. 'Today, enlightenment has its source in the present, and the present alone. To this extent – and this extent only – there is neither past nor future nor historical time.' (Hartog, 2015: 203).

Similar to Pierre Nora's insights on the important role of national commemoration in the twentieth century, Hartog's presentism is accompanied by a feverish desire to collect, represent, exhibit, and archive the past. 'Modern memory is first of all archival' (Nora, 1996: 8). Indeed, the desire to preserve traces of the past has increased with the acceleration of time and digitalization of archives. '*Acceleration of history*: the metaphor needs to be unpacked. Things tumble with increasing rapidity into an irretrievable past. They vanish from sight, or so it is generally believed. The equilibrium between the present and the past is disrupted' (Nora, 1996: 1).

And yet, the presentist sense of time did not simply emerge after the fall of communism. Instead, as Patrick Hutton argues, it is linked with earlier trends of globalization, technological advances and the politics of memory which challenge traditional narratives of historical progress and national identity. 'The past as carried forward in modern traditions was losing the force of its once defining meaning. The notion of destiny gave way to one of uncertainty about what the future may hold' (Hutton, 2016: 171). The fall of communism was a turning point in how geopolitical relations were understood. The cold war, as a period of time, ended with the break-up of the Soviet Union. However, such hesitancy towards the future is part of a longer crisis of temporality linked to the impoverishment of political utopias and the recognition of the catastrophic power unleashed by the invention of the atom bomb, the Holocaust, and the Gulag. The desire to preserve cultural heritage from the past dovetails with the imperative to preserve the planet from biological destruction.

Most interestingly, Hutton traces the roots of presentism back to Michel Foucault's genealogy. The historian does not only assess phenomena in light of its original context, but rather from the standpoint of the present:

Foucault reversed the interpretive process. Rather than search for the sources of language, he preferred to plot the genealogical descent of modes of discourse backward from the present age in order to appreciate its discontinuities revealed in disruptive and unexpected meanings encountered along the way. (Hutton, 2021)

If privileging the past provided a solid origin for the present, privileging the future granted chronological time a progressive direction forward. However, once past and future recede and become untethered from the present, one remains floating in a continuous present sense. For Hutton (2021), presentism is characterized by a hesitation or even pessimism towards the past, the eclipse of Eurocentrism, revolution in media technologies and the acceleration of time.

The Internet and 24 hour news media provide a sense that one is present at events both near and far. With social media, online platforms and new media, we are simultaneously connected to one another while witnessing events in real time. And yet, despite technological advances, the temporary closure of public places means that we are disconnected from interacting with one another in the familiar patterns of talking, walking, or sharing a meal. Simultaneously isolated at home while logging onto work, school or family zoom calls, the order of time and shared common world has shifted before our very eyes. If Christian linear time moved from past to future, with the pandemic, many feel isolated and stranded in a timeless present tense. 'All in all, the Christian order of time retained a certain malleability, which allowed present, past, and future to be articulated against a background of eternity' (Hartog, 2015: 62). Instead of contrasting eternity with a Christian order of time that moves forward, time during the pandemic seems bereft of movement.

Ghostly pasts and postponed futures

Chronos, *kairos* and *aion* are woven together in different durations depending on the country's rate of infection and governmental policy. The pandemic is amplifying technological advances as individuals experience their presence in the world as avatars on screens who watch, speak, listen, chat and post messages. Presentism is the long-term consequence of moving in and out of lockdown with the temporary closure of familiar patterns of daily life. During the pandemic, the present feels like a long and exhausting crisis that overlaps with a limbo-like sense of eternity. The overwhelming sentiment lingering in the background is uncertainty. One either navigates exposure to other people in the infectious settings of hospitals, public transportation, service industries and public spaces, or is instructed to self-isolate and conduct their life remotely from home.

Our ghostly selves

As Hartog (2020b) notes, it was precisely during the pandemic that people 'came to embrace our new digital condition'. Although meetings, school and digital communications have migrated online, the absence of others in public spaces induces the nostalgic longing for our past lives. The presence of others through distant learning or remote offices remains distant and remote. Forced to retreat inward to mimic the office, classroom, stage, concert or conference hall, our lives are mediated through flickering screens of webinars and zoom meetings. 'We could follow every moment, happening everywhere. We could see everything, feel everything, be present at everything. *Only our physical presence was missing*' (my emphasis, Hartog, 2020b). With instantaneous information and seamless communication, chronological time blurs into one of timeless digitalization. The familiar separation of work and home, of online and off, blurs with the diminishing of human contact over digital presence.

The loss of the physical presence of other people renders individuals into ghosts who long for, and at times mourn their past lives, while ghostly shadows of our corona selves converse with one another through digitally mediated séances. In seeing photographs of ourselves without masks or recalling the freedom to travel and congregate in public spaces, the gap between past and present seems enormous. The metaphor of the ghost indicates the uncanny presence of that which is absent. Rooted in the past, ghosts interrupt the ordinary flow of chronological time. Ghostly traces of the past, as Derrida underscores, point to a different temporality in which ordinary time is suspended and disjointed (Derrida, 1994). However, it is not only time that is out of joint during the pandemic, familiar patterns of everyday life are out of balance. As Masha Gessen (2020) underscored, we are not simply nostalgic for old patterns of human interaction, but acutely aware of the absence of being with others in the world. 'Our conversations revolve around absences. We talk about ways in which we don't see people'. The longer the pandemic continues with its suspension of time and restrictions of public space, the more our behaviour becomes ghost-like, as we recall our past lives while shimmering, fading, and flickering on digital Ouija boards.

At the most basic and concrete level, the coronavirus makes individuals aware of our mortality. 'What this epidemic is really doing is putting in front of our eyes something that we usually prefer not to look at: the brevity and fragility of our life' (Rovelli, 2020). Accustomed to filing our calendars with future projects, work-related events, family and social occasions, the expanded present of the pandemic is marked by the death of others, fear of illness and finitude. Doom scrolling, monitoring daily death tolls, reading countless articles about covid symptoms and possible mutations heightens the awareness of our mortality.

For Hans Ruin, a central aspect of being human is learning how to live with the presence of the dead. 'There is no social space entirely outside the shared space with the dead. To learn to live is

to learn to inhabit this space in a responsible way. Life is a life after, as inheritance, ancestry, legacy, and fate' (Ruin, 2019: 201). Covid-19 places a 'shared space with the dead' into the very centre of life during the pandemic. Covid has shattered the shared space between the living and the dead with enforced solitary death, restricted access of loved ones to hospitals and limited visitations to the elderly in care homes. The coronavirus brings individuals face to face with the existential predicament of living with the dead. 'There is a peculiar *being with* the dead that determines human existence down to its basic condition and sense of self' (Ruin, 2019: 3). Daily death tolls remind individuals of the magnitude of death and of the inequalities that the pandemic reveals. Likewise, the restructuring of hospitals to accommodate covid patients, postponing of non-covid treatment, appropriate age for vaccination, loosening of restrictions centre on biopolitical questions of life and death. Indeed, as Ruin writes: 'To be historical is to live with the dead' (Ruin, 2019: 9).

The ghost of the pale rider: 'millions of discreet, private tragedies'

Not only is the chronological order of time disrupted by the pandemic with the blurring of chronological time, crisis, and eternity, but it reinforces older ideas about the cyclical nature of time. The ghostly presence of the Spanish flu is the closest comparison to the covid pandemic. As the most recent global epidemic, both Covid-19 and the Spanish flu invoke the cyclical return of the pale rider of pestilence. Although the coronavirus is novel and digital technology has enabled interaction with other people in an unprecedented way, pandemics are not new. Like the cyclical time of the seasons that occurs within linear, sequential time, covid-19 reminds one of the cyclical nature of pandemics. 'Pandemics are no surprises coming out of the blue' as Astrid Erll (2020a) reminds us, 'but recurring events' (p. 864). The pandemic invokes the cyclical repetition of previous plagues that either strike without warning or whose warnings were ignored.

The cyclical return of pandemics invokes fatalism and a sense of doomed destiny. However, unlike war which engages the distinction between friend and enemy, pandemics turn friends and family into invisible carriers of illness. In mythical and religious worldviews, plagues are part of the human condition, whether perceived as punishment or inexplicable fate. While individuals adapt to new patterns of life that are suspended from ordinary time, we are reminded of the cyclical time of pandemics by reference to an event that has been conspicuously absent from collective memory; namely, the Spanish flu. Laura Spinney underscores in her book, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*, that there has been a 'collective forgetting of the greatest massacre of the twentieth century' (Spinney, 2017: 4).

Overshadowed by memories of two world wars, the Spanish flu is remembered differently from other major events of the twentieth century. While by no means forgotten, the cultural memory of the Spanish flu pales in comparison to commemorations of world war and the Holocaust.⁴ Suggesting that a 'rootless historicity' emerged after World War I, Henri Rousso (2016: 83), like Arendt and Benjamin, argues for the unprecedented nature of the political catastrophes of the twentieth century. Unlike war, genocide and deportation, the Spanish flu was a global event that lacked a state actor. There are no tombs of the unknown or cenotaphs to the pandemic commemorating the 50–100 million who died from 1918 to 1922. Instead as Spinney notes: 'The Spanish flu is remembered personally, not collectively. Not as a historical disaster, but as *millions of discrete, private tragedies*' (my emphasis) (2017: 4). Like Terence Ranger, she argues that the Spanish flu lacked a clear narrative structure of beginning, middle and end. If wars have victors, plagues only have the vanquished and the dead. Indeed, if wars have a compelling linear structure, the story of pandemics is blurry and diffuse. Unlike war, which has a distinct enemy, the viral enemy (then and now) is invisible. One does not know who may be infected or if we may inadvertently infect someone else. 'Wars and plagues are remembered differently. Collective memories for many seem to be born

instantly, fully formed – though subject, of course, to endless embellishment and massage – and then to fade over time’ (Spinney, 2017: 290).

Renewed interest in the history of the Spanish flu accompanied the centennial in 2018 with museum exhibits, books, and articles. Nonetheless although scientists and epidemiologists warned about an impending pandemic comparable to that of 1918, the Spanish flu does not have the same presence in cultural memory as other events in the early twentieth century. Instead, it hovers like a ghost among the many extraordinary events shared by ‘the lost generation’ of the 1920s. The paucity of literature and commemorative exhibitions about the Spanish flu pales in comparison to the enormity of reflection on war and genocide. Indeed, the ghostly presence of the Spanish flu supports Maurice Halbwachs’ argument that collective memory is framed by groups and limited by the generation to which one belongs. It is almost as if the Spanish flu quickly dissolved into the past. ‘There are events, unique in their kind, that alter group life. But they also dissolve into a series of images traversing the individual consciousness’ (Halbwachs, 1980: 58). Although the Spanish flu is represented in art and literature, it as if the pandemic dissolved into thin air.

Compared with commemorations to World War I (1914–1918) and the Russian Revolution (1917), there are markedly fewer commemorations and museum exhibits representing its enormous impact on the world. Poetically represented in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, Katherine Mansfield’s *Pale Rider, Pale Horse*, WB Yeats’ ‘The Second Coming’, T S Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, the Spanish flu was expressed as ‘discreet, private tragedies’ that lacked large-scale agency. They express the shell shock of a generation framed by world war, pandemic, political unrest, economic crisis and profound displacement. Writing about the similarities between then and now, Elizabeth Outka underscores the overwhelming presence of death that frames how individuals experience time during a pandemic. ‘The continued sense of living death, of an experience that marks us with its shadow, echoes even after a pandemic passes’ (Outka, 2020b).

Frames of grievability and archival memory

In reflecting on modernist literature, Outka (2020a) asks ‘why the First World War dominates the cultural memory of the modernist era, rather than the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic, even though the pandemic killed far more people’. Influenced by Judith Butler’s *Frames of War*, she argues that grievability framed how the Spanish flu was remembered in the 20th century. Moreover, grievability is currently shaping how individuals think about and react to covid-19. ‘The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality’ (Butler, 2010: xiii). Because of the frame of war, World War I deaths were mourned while obscuring death from the Spanish flu. ‘The war was what seemed real, and war deaths were what seemed important. Flu deaths were difficult to spin into stories of victory or needful sacrifices’ (Outka, 2020a). Then and now, media screens frame how the pandemic is recorded and whose death is deemed grievable.

The ghostly black and white images of people from the last century in masks waiting and witnessing illness are hauntingly like contemporary images of the coronavirus. As Astrid Erll (2020b) argues, in searching for patterns in history, the Spanish flu was suddenly ‘transformed from a remnant in the dusty archive to an active, widespread and vibrant memory’. The Spanish flu has not only become a ‘vibrant memory’; it hovers like a ghost that haunts how we understand and experience the corona pandemic. With the ghostly presence of plagues past, the Spanish flu reminds individuals of the cyclical nature of epidemics and challenges the perception of time as a straight line moving from the past to the future through the present.

As the covid pandemic intensifies the present tense as an extended now, the recent past seems to curiously detach from the present. While pre-pandemic patterns of life in the future are deferred and postponed, the past is a space of experience to be remembered, commemorated, archived, and represented. Echoing Hartog and Rousso's reflections on presentism, Aleida Assmann writes about the transformation of Western conceptions of time in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. 'Today we are witnessing a "continental shift" in the structure of Western temporality: While the future has lost much of its luminosity, the past has more and more invaded our consciousness' (Assmann, 2013: 41). Drawing on Koselleck's distinction between the past as a space of experience and the future as a horizon of expectation, the modern time regime progresses through ruptures and paradigm shifts. Assmann links the acceleration of change with growing uncertainty, disenchantment and the musealization of the past. As past events are narrated and represented, the museum and the archive expand in importance as portals to the past with the digitalization of information on the world wide web.

The disruption between past and present is visible in the digital archives that opened simultaneously in various institutions dedicated to preserving different aspects of the coronavirus pandemic. In many ways, the vast and impressive resources of digital archives attest to Pierre Nora's critique of the obsessive desire to collect everything for posterity:

The fear that everything is on the verge of disappearing, coupled with anxiety about the precise significance of the present and uncertainty about the future, invests even the humblest testimony, the most modest vestige, with the dignity of being potentially memorable. (Nora, 1996: 8)

In January 2020, the US National Library of Medicine launched a web archive on the very day that the WHO declared the illness as a 'public health emergency of international concern' (Spinney, 2020). Museums, governmental agencies, and scientific institutions are collecting social media posts and websites dedicated to Covid-19.⁵ Instant digital archives confirm how the presentist regime of historicity focuses on the immediacy of the instant:

In our media age, the present obeys an economy in which events are constantly produced and consumed, previously through radio and now through television and other media. But additionally the present, in the very moment of its occurrence, seeks to view itself as *already history, already past*. (my emphasis, Hartog, 2015: 114)

In creating digital databases and collections, Covid archivists approach the pandemic as an event to be preserved and recorded for the future. It is as if Covid-19 is 'already history, already past'. Unlike previous plagues, the coronavirus is the first globally shared pandemic that is experienced via digital platforms and 24 hour news. As Erll (2020a) underscores:

What the Spanish Flu lacked (a consciously created archive in the first place) is exactly what Corona is characterized by: It is the first digitally witnessed pandemic, a test case for the making of global memory in the new media ecology. (p. 867)

Future postponed: 'is it tomorrow yet?'

The pandemic is disrupting the order of time by invoking cyclical repetition of pestilence, states of emergency and the ghostly suspension of time. Living in an expansive present tense, the gap between past and future seems to widen. While our pre-pandemic lives and the Spanish flu haunt the present, the future shimmers like a mirage on the distant horizon. The future tense expresses

events that have not yet occurred with various distances and speeds of approach. As a verb, the future tense indicates the probability of an action as not yet, later, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Unlike the past, the future indicates an imagined horizon of expectation for experiences that have not yet happened. It is full of promises, new beginnings, hopes, fears and expectations. Given that schools, places of work, public spaces and family visits have been temporarily closed, then re-opened and may close again, the open horizon of the future seems to recede farther back from the present.

Reflecting on the similarities between literature written about the Spanish flu and reactions to Covid-19, Outka (2020b) writes: 'One's reality doesn't simply shift in a pandemic; it becomes radically uncertain—indeed, uncertainty is the reality'. Time during the pandemic vacillates between crisis and the surreal monotony of an endless now. What is missing is the duration of meaningful chronological time. If the presentism of the pandemic exemplifies how we are caught between chronological time and limbo-like eternity, it is the future that is most precarious, not only for individual projects but, more pressingly, on a collective and planetary level. Preoccupation with the present as the predominate order of time leads to the diminishing of the future as a promise towards the pessimistic realization of its apocalyptic nature. For Hartog, with the acceleration of time, we are caught in a present that seems to go nowhere:

Today's presentism can thus be experienced as emancipation or enclosure: ever greater speed and mobility or living from hand to mouth in a *stagnating present*. Not to forget a further aspect of our present: that the future is perceived as a threat not a promise. The future is a time of disasters, and ones we have, moreover, brought upon ourselves. (My emphasis, Hartog, 2015: xviii)

The immediate future is threatened by new variants of the coronavirus, economic insecurity, and the global problem of climate change. Indeed, as Hartog (2020b) remarked: 'Pandemics and health crises of this nature are as old as humanity . . . But with COVID, this pandemic stems from humanity's deteriorating relationship with nature'. The limbo-like feeling of living in an expanded present is not only distorting perceptions of the past but curtailing our ability to face collective challenges in the future.

In many ways, Andreas Huyssen's reflection on memory, media, and time at the end of the 20th century resonate with how the pandemic engenders an uncertain and postponed future. As he wrote in the 1990s, hesitancy towards the future coupled with changes in media technology affect the very structure of how we perceive temporality. Indeed, obsessive interest in memory is a consequence of the acceleration of time, amnesia, and hesitancy towards the future:

But the borders between the real world and its construction in information systems are of course fluid and porous. The more we live with new technologies of communication and information cyber-space, the more our sense of temporality will be affected. (Huyssen, 1995: 9).

Huyssen's attention to how the media structure time and Hartog's emphasis on the present complement the uncertainty and deferred consequences of what Ulrich Beck called 'risk society'. With the publication of *Risk Society* in 1986, the same year as the nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl, Beck characterized late modernity as a series of global risks of our own making. His attention to the global nature of manufactured risks can be aptly applied to the Covid-19 pandemic (Tooze, 2020). 'In other words: the time bomb is ticking. In this sense risks signify a future which is to be prevented' (Beck, 1992 (1986) 33). Like Hartog, Beck emphasized how a preoccupation with the present fails to consider the consequences of global warming and the destruction of the planet.

Hence large-scale risks that are part of everyday life in the late 20th and 21st century defer the consequences of ecological and technological risks to a receding horizon of an undefined future.

The state of being temporarily closed is accompanied by the difficulty to make concrete plans in the future. Indeed, the ordinary use of future tenses and adverbs indicating concrete plans has been indefinitely suspended. Adverbs such as ‘soon’ or tracts of time such as ‘in a few months’ have shifted into ones of ‘at some point’ or ‘in the near future’. With the pandemic, the future has literally been put on hold. It is as if the future tense has shifted out of chronological time into a parallel universe.

Time remains, as Carlo Rovelli writes, a mystery. ‘The secret of time lies in this slippage that we feel on our pulse, viscerally, in the enigma of memory, in anxiety of the future’ (Rovelli, 2019: 19). The distortion of time during the pandemic is expressed in the blurring of chronological time with eternity and the rupture of crisis. Aptly captured in the title of Ivan Krastev’s (2020) book, *Is it Tomorrow Yet? Paradoxes of the Pandemic*, we are caught waiting for the moment when time moves forward in a recognizable chronological order. We wonder when tomorrow will be different from today. We long for the day when the future will no longer be postponed, for when we might be able to answer Vladimir’s question in *Waiting for Godot*, ‘Well, shall we go?’ by not only answering as remote avatars in the imperative: ‘Yes, let’s go’, but by moving into the future tense.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Andrey Gavrilin, Patrick Hutton, Francisco Martinez, Jeffrey Olick, Johanna Söderholm, Hanna Teichler and the two anonymous reviewers of *Memory Studies* for their helpful feedback and suggestions for improvement.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research for the writing of this article was supported by the European Regional Development Fund (TK 145, Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies).

ORCID iD

Siobhan Kattago  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0093-4447>

Notes

1. For compelling articles on time, memory and the past that are linked to the pandemic, see the special issue, *Memory Worlds: Reframing Time and the Past*, *Memory Studies* edited by Johanna Vollmeyer, Francisco Ferrándiz and Marije Hristova, vol 13 (5) October 2020.
2. See Hartog’s recently published book *Chronos*. ‘Alors que krisis met l’accent sur l’acte même de juger, Kairos s’attache à la rupture temporelle que l’accompagne’. (While crisis emphasizes the act of judgement, Kairos attaches to the temporal rupture which accompanies it).
3. If Giorgio Agamben viewed lockdowns as states of exception in the face of a manufactured crisis, other philosophers underscored the gravity of the crisis by emphasizing the primacy of public health. For the controversy surrounding Agamben’s argument in February 2020 that the pandemic was a manufactured crisis and rationale to impose the state of exception, see his article, ‘The Invention of an Epidemic’ in *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 26 February 2020, as well as responses by Nancy, Benvenuto and Esposito. <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/> For the reprinting of the original controversy and a wider discussion of the state of exception during the pandemic, see Castrillon and Marchevsky (2021).
4. For example, the pandemic is not even mentioned in Eric Hobsbawm’s *Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991*, which otherwise narrates twentieth century history between the twin poles of

progress and catastrophe. It is also absent from Henry Rousso's reflections on twentieth century consciousness of catastrophic events in *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present and the Contemporary*.

5. For example, see the Social Science Research Council website on covid-19 and the social sciences: <https://covid19research.ssrc.org>, in particular their crowdsourced coronavirus syllabus for future research: https://covid19research.ssrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Coronavirus-syllabus_20201019.pdf. Soon after the pandemic was declared, De Gruyter published a humanities pamphlet with 13 perspectives on the coronavirus: https://blog.degruyter.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DG_13perspectives_humanities.pdf. The Victoria and Albert Museum has one of the most prominent online archives with Pandemic Objects: Digital Archives: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/pandemic-objects-digital-archive>. For an overview of prominent museums that are collecting and documenting the pandemic see Charlotte Coates' article, 'How and Why Museums are Collecting Covid-19 Stories', Blooloop, 27 May 2020. <https://blooloop.com/museum/in-depth/museums-documenting-pandemic/>

References

- Arendt H (1993 [1968]) *Between past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin.
- Assmann A (2013) Transformations of the modern time regime. In: Lorenz C and Bevernage B (eds) *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 39-56.
- Beck U (1992 [1986]) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (trans. M Ritter). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Beckett S (1954) *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press.
- Benjamin W (1968) Theses on the philosophy of time. In: Arendt H (ed.) *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin: Essays and Reflections* (trans. H Zohn). New York: Schocken Books, pp. 253-264.
- Butler J (2010) *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London and New York: Verso.
- Castrillon F and Marchevsky T (2021) *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics and Society*. Abington: Routledge.
- Derrida J (1994) *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (trans. P Kamuf). London and New York: Verso.
- Erl A (2020a) Afterword: memory worlds in times of corona. *Memory Studies* 13(5): 861-874.
- Erl A (2020b) Will corona become part of collective memory? *DeGruyter Conversations*, 23 July. Available at: <https://blog.degruyter.com/will-covid-19-become-part-of-collective-memory/> (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Gessen M (2020) The political consequences of loneliness and isolation during the pandemic. *The New Yorker*, 5 May. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-political-consequences-of-loneliness-and-isolation-during-the-pandemic> (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Halbwachs M (1980 [1959]) *The Collective Memory* (trans. FJ Ditter and VY Ditter). New York: Harper and Row.
- Hartog F (2015) *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (trans. S Brown). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hartog F (2020a) *Chronos: L'Occident aux prises avec le temps*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Hartog F in conversation with Warner B (2020b) It's not your Imagination – the pandemic has thoroughly upended our relationship to time. *Fortune*, 12 July. Available at: <https://fortune.com/2020/07/12/work-from-home-coronavirus-time-distortion/> (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Hutton PH (2016) *The Memory Phenomenon in Contemporary Historical Writing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Hutton PH (2021) Presentism. *Encyclopedia.com*. Available at: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/presentism> (accessed 9 April 2021).
- Huysen A (1995) *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Koselleck R (1985) *Future's past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (trans. K Tribe). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Koselleck R (2002) *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (trans. TS Presner et al.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Krastev I (2020) *Is It Tomorrow Yet? Paradoxes of the Pandemic*. London: Penguin.
- Nora P (1996) General introduction. Between memory and history. In: Nora, P and Kritzman, L (eds) *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*, vol. 1 (trans. A Goldhammer). New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1-20.
- Outka E (2020a) Grievability, COVID-19, and the modernist pandemic, modernism/ modernity. 21 May. Available at: <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/outka-grievability-covid> (accessed 2 April 2021).
- Outka E (2020b) How pandemics seep into literature. *Paris Review*, 8 April. Available at: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/04/08/how-pandemics-seep-into-literature/> (accessed 2 April 2021).
- Rosa H (2020) *Symposium: Social World and Pandemic* (ed. A Bittencourt and M Hoelz). Available at: <https://blogbvps.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/hartmut-rosa.pdf>
- Rouso H (2016) *The Latest Catastrophe. History, the Present, the Contemporary* (trans. JM Todd). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rovelli C (2019) *The Order of Time* (trans. E Segre and S Carnell). London: Penguin.
- Rovelli C (2020) Coronavirus reminds us we're like leaves in the autumn wind, not masters of the universe. 20 April. Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/wellbeing/carlo-rovelli-coronavirus-italy-life-death-psychology-419679> (accessed 7 April 2021).
- Ruin H (2019) *Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Smith JE (1969) Time, times and the 'right time': Chronos and Kairos. *The Monist* 53(1): 1–13.
- Spinney L (2017) *Pale Rider. The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*. London: Vintage.
- Spinney L (2020) What are Covid archivists keeping for tomorrow's historians? *Nature*, 17 December. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-03554-0> (accessed 2 April 2021).
- Tooze A (2020) The Sociologist who could save us from the Coronavirus. *Foreign Policy*, 1 August. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/01/the-sociologist-who-could-save-us-from-coronavirus/> (accessed 9 April 2021).

Author biography

Siobhan Kattago is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Tartu in Estonia. Her publications include: *Encountering the Past within the Present: Modern Experiences of Time* (2019), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies* (editor, 2015) and *Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe: The Persistence of the Past* (2012).