
Foreword

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Time for Time: There's No Time, We Have Time

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From amongst the deluge of information incessantly overflowing the internet this immediately stood out – akin to Barthesian *punctum*. A note placed in the tidbits or curiosities section, in a column hoping to intrigue through the reversal of meanings, expectations, or normal behavior, that in the newspapers belonged to the trivia columns (of the “fox shoots hunter” variety) – instantly aroused my interest, drawing attention and proliferating with a cascade of innovative implications.

On November 2, 2023, one of the mainstream news portals, named Interia, published a short movie clip, just shy of fifty seconds, depicting two natives from an indigenous tribe, springing out of the forest wearing nothing more than scant pieces of cloth on their hips, who in a state of utmost agitation run up to a river bank, shout at and threaten some unknown adversary with pikes, clubs, and bows, only to disappear the next moment, just as ghostlike as they appeared, in the thick trees behind them.¹ It seems from the accompanying description that the recording was registered with a mobile phone by a bulldozer operator, who was razing the forest for a planned nickel mine, that is required in the large-scale production of

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1 <https://geekweek.interia.pl/styl-zycia/ciekawostki/news-sceny-jak-z-avatora-operator-buldozera-spotkal-w-dzungli-taj,nld,7124469>, accessed November 22, 2023.

car batteries for electric cars undertaken on a planetary scale. As luck would have it, there are abundant deposits of this metal on the Indonesian island of Halmahera, which is inhabited by the mysterious, reclusive tribe O'Hongana Manyawa.

The tribe's name translates as "the forest people," and rightly so, as they truly lead their lives in deep reverence for the natural environment, for the local fauna and flora, and for the trees in particular. The accompanying commentary of an expert from the Survival International explains that the life of this 300–500 strong tribe is closely connected with trees: from the birth of a child, whose umbilical cord is buried under a newly planted tree, to the moment of death, when the body of the deceased is placed high upon a tree growing in a special cult part of the forest. What is more, the trees themselves are believed to possess souls and are therefore never cut down. This secluded tribe is susceptible to infections, diseases, or other pandemic dangers. It is also completely defenseless in the face of biopolitical threats: the Indonesian authorities have not as yet provided the tribe with the status of an indigenous population. Hence, they do not exist in the legal sense and they can be deprived of their existence at any given time.

Still, there seems to be something more to this story that is easily discernible in the momentary flash lighting up this brief encounter, and which is framed by the previously mentioned comments. It goes beyond a bizarre change of roles: a native man with a pike threatening a professional who is armed with gargantuan, specialist machinery. This is also a dramatic clash of cultures, or maybe primarily a clash of times – of the prehistoric cyclical time of tribal existence and the future-oriented post-historical time of civilizational "progress" that is goal- and possession-oriented, wherein the operator of the monstrous cyborg-like bulldozer resides. The note's headline – "Scenes Straight from *Avatar*" – suggests that in this case it was life that emulated art (movies, virtual reality) and it is indeed hard for a contemporary viewer to shake off such impressions (of the resemblance to one of the initial scenes of the movie). In turn, a reader can rightly be reminded of the scene that was immortalized some 125 years ago by Joseph Conrad, in his description of nearly identical experiences of Marlow travelling up the Congo River into the heart of Africa, and up the river of time towards an encounter with the "prehistoric man," who "was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings [...] we could not understand, because we were too far [...] because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories."²

Though, come to think of it, is it any different nowadays? Can we even imagine what or who was seen by the terrified, but valiantly confrontational, natives when something monstrously frightening was drawing closer, producing growing noises,

2 Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, ed. Cedric Watts (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 139.

killing their sacred forest, depriving them of their world and living space... Because, surely, they could not have thought that these were creatures that resembled them? In any case, we have the opportunity to think about this – and what we have to thank for this is the extraordinary self-possession of an anonymous Indonesian bulldozer driver. If only he hesitated for several seconds, and did not turn on the camera of his mobile phone, then in most probability he would not be able to capture this extraordinary moment... And we would not be able to grasp and deliberate the clash and compression of temporal orders, the remarkable simultaneity of that which is nonsimultaneous, the sudden tectonic shift of the layers of the past, or maybe even their sudden volcanic eruption. If the operator failed to catch this unforeseeable event, then all he would be left with would be some faint trace in memory, an impression of something that could have been a daydream or an illusion.

By grace of this rare occurrence yet another frame of time is being activated: it is a time of a privileged sudden moment, which diligently, without forewarning, pulls us out of the everyday temporal routines, and which we somewhat habitually allow to pass us by. If we only manage to catch such a chance at the instant at which it occurs, then we will probably get the feeling that we were able to sensually, physically touch time as it was happening and which – we might assume – could change our lives or at least reveal some important truth. This is the very experience of temporaneity of which Augustine of Hippo said that it “lacks spatial extent,”³ and which Manuel Castells named “timeless time.”⁴

Here a special way of experiencing the present moment comes into play; one which comes from the future, even though it has nothing to do with realizing the chronological order. This is not Chronos but Kairos. It is a kind of gift, a stroke of luck, the grasping of an opportune moment. It is a time which we neither possess nor manage, but one which we enter with passionate passivity, taking part in whatever it brings us. What is symptomatic is that this distinctive time has not only a broad historical background and rich symbolism – active from the very beginnings of the European cultural tradition – but that it is currently growing in significance – what is attested to by, among others, the writer Olga Tokarczuk, historian François Hartog, and philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

Tokarczuk dedicates an interesting passage to this type of time in her essay about the tender narrator, reminding us of its godly personification as “the god of chance, of the fleeting moment, of preposterous possibility, which is open for all but the briefest of times, and which must be grasped without any hesitation (by the fringe!), so that it does not flee [...], a decisive instance that changes everything.”

3 Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 267.

4 Manuel Castells, “The Edge of Forever: Timeless Time,” chapter 7, in *The Rise of the Network Society* (New York: Wiley, 2011).

And she goes on to add: “for me Kairos is the deity of eccentricity,” whose lair is – according to the Nobel laureate – literature, which “is a challenge to the conformism and hypocrisy, it is a kairotic act of courage, of seizing the moment and of changing the course of destiny.”⁵ In turn, Hartog places this type of time within the history of Christian Europe and of the evolving temporal regimes (though he remembers its Greek roots), where the three strands of Chronos, Kairos, and Krisis intertwine. Kairos, for Hartog, offers the possibility of recognizing the decisive moment (either perilous or favorable, in individual or collective life), but the chance will be granted us only if we manage to be “on time,” if in the passing “now” we will be capable of opening ourselves to the unexpected.⁶

Likewise, Giorgio Agamben recalls in his recent note – dated September 23, 2023 and titled “On What Is Coming,” published in his internet opinion column *Una voce* – the kairotic time as our contemporary “time on time.” In his interpretation this is, etymologically, neither chronological future, nor the passing present. It is something that is coming, getting closer (he explains that the Greek noun found in the gospels, *eggizo*, points to something that is at arm’s length, that can almost be touched). Agamben notices that:

Closeness is not the measure of time but its transformation [...]. Such unmeasurable but always close time was called Kairos by the Greeks, who differentiated it from Chronos, and they depicted it in the form of a child that comes out to greet us, running with wings at its feet, and which can only be caught by the fringe dangling above its forehead. Hence, the Latin scholars called this *occasio*: a fleeting chance offered by things: if you catch it, it is yours, but if it escapes, even mighty Jove himself cannot not regain it.

Agamben goes on to generalize this insight:

And this is exactly what is at the heart of our lives, our thinking, and of politics: to be able to foresee the signs of what is coming, and what is no longer time, but a mere chance to fathom what is pertinent and immediate, what requires decisive gestures or actions. True politics is exactly the sphere of such concern, of presaging that what is coming.⁷

5 Olga Tokarczuk, *Czuły narrator* [The tender narrator] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2020), 2425.

6 See François Hartog, *Chronos: The West Confronts Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). Here, I merely refer to the analysis presented by Justyna Tabaszewska in “Teraźniejszość w natarciu?” [The present on the offensive], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2023).

7 Giorgio Agamben, “Su cio che si avvicina,” accessed November 22, 2023, <https://www.quodlibet.it/una-voce-giorgio-agamben>. I am grateful to professor Francesca Fornari for directing me to this address.

Therefore, the hand of the bulldozer operator registering the sudden encounter on a mobile phone was, so to speak, an instrument of this kairotic time. It is hard to disagree with Agamben's diagnosis that it is neither the future, nor the present in its standard understanding, but something different – a premonition of the coming, of the approach, emergence, and realization of an event in light of which, as it turns out, things seem different, and it itself gives us something to think about and understand; it has something important to tell us. The internet surfer allowing himself to be led on a journey by kairotic directions, can initially be rightly shocked by the extraordinary occurrence of this unforeseeable event. Here, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, on our planet, there not only exist enclaves of time that came to a standstill at a prehistoric phase, but, unexpectedly, prehistoric man can be looked right in the eye (though by means of a recording made from a distance of several yards by the Indonesian operator). That is, almost right in the eye, as this is directness mediated by specialized technological instruments that assist our senses, and, furthermore, by film and literature with their overlaying framework of anachronistic meaning and anthropological presuppositions and biases.

Mieke Bal argued already some time ago, in her theory of preposterous critique,⁸ that this kind of anachronism is inherent to our knowledge and gaze. We cannot suspend our contemporary understanding and the presently developed competences of our senses, to open ourselves to the actual directness of contact with that which is prior or different, which is not contaminated by the input of retroactive meanings. We therefore perceive through what is latter, superficial, technologically encumbered, but the significance of the fact or event grows upon these histories (as Bruno Schulz would say), revealing previously unseen dimensions. Nonetheless, our experience can still remain authentic and valuable – which is confirmed by participants of historical reconstructions or of interactive museum spaces (and, according to anthropologists of time, it is senseless to argue to the contrary).

This anachronistic shaping of the contours of the past (according to our present desires, needs, sensitivities, and knowledge) clashes with an opposing process: with the tectonic movements of the past, revealing figures, who akin to ghosts and specters, demand justice, sending directions and warnings our way. It could be argued that Derridean spectral ontology deconstructed our, somewhat too loose, anachronistic rule over the past and memory, leading us into a reality reminiscent of the world of Shakespearian plays – which suddenly became also our world. In *Henry IV* Glyndŵr boasts before Hotspur that he "can call spirits from the vasty deep," which is met with a sharp retort: "Why, so can I, or so can any man; / But will they come

8 See Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

when you do call for them?"⁹ Our world, just as that of Shakespeare, is filled with specters and ghosts of the past, which nonetheless have no intention to obey the living nor serve the contemporary. They appear when and where they will, taking us into their possession: they drag us into their matters; they force us to settle the score of harms, misdeeds, and abusive advantage; they call on us to reflect, to gain critical insight, to look at ourselves with fresh eyes...

This is what the recording allows us to experience. Two native inhabitants of the island appear akin to ghosts from our past, compelling us to realize that the very same threats posed to their way of life by our contemporary industrial civilization – destruction of environment, pandemics, approaching climate disaster, violence, biological devastation – are also in store for the rest of us, and they are just now starting to take form before our eyes. Resorting to biblical language, we can say that first we see them "face to face," and then, from a distance, we begin to see ourselves in them, though not clearly, but "in a mirror, darkly." And, finally, when we try to take a fresh look at the "human place in the cosmos" (as it was once put by Max Scheler), we begin to identify with them, to feel as they feel. In the compulsive fear of the Other, of higher intelligence and foreign civilizations, we start to feel as spiritually impoverished natives: primitive in our knowledge, comically combative, sometimes happy and sometimes threatened; the indigenous inhabitants of a small planetary island somewhere in the faraway reaches of the universe.

In this whirlwind of times, brought to our attention by the sudden appearance in the light of the flash of the two natives, different temporal orders clash, intermingle, and compete; an almost perfect rose of the winds of history is found here: the cyclical and chronological, kairotic and retroactive, spectro-ontological and contemporary times (to name but a few) – rousing ever mightier sounds of the tectonic shifts of the past and the growing grumblings of a threatening future. And in the eye of this storm lays the motionless and timeless pattern of fate: a momentary "perception of reality [...] a joyous shock of the certainty that this is real. That there is some higher sense to this world, that I partake in an existence that can never be taken away from me."¹⁰ I quote here two sentences from Jan Józef Szczepański's short story "Japońskie kwiaty" [Japanese flowers], because it evokes similar feelings. Szczepański tries to convey his experience of the present moment overflowing with meaning, reminiscing of his childhood fascination with small, dried plant "capsules," which when submerged in water turn out to be blossoming multi-colored flowers that wither and fall apart in the next instance.

9 William Shakespeare, *The History of Henry the Fourth*, act 3, scene 1, lines 50–52. Quoted after *The New Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. Gary Taylor et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

10 Jan Józef Szczepański, "Japońskie kwiaty," in *Autograf* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1979), 22–23.

In turn, what I attempted here is to narrate my own experience of a brief internet event that resonates with comparable ambivalence to that of the not much longer-lasting theater of animated Japanese flowers (or blooming teas). Just as that which from the outside seems to be no more than a sudden flash of exploding and disappearing present, viewed from the inside is the whole of our life. It is a hard earned ability or sense, this radical switching between the two points of view. Many years ago, Wisława Szymborska proved to have mastered it in one of her better-known poems, "W rzece Heraklita" [In Heraclitus's river], though I am not so certain that it was necessarily noticed by its readers. The poet suggests that it is not so much so that we cannot twice enter the same river – the river of the present (as St. Augustine argued: there is no other time than the present one; and if this were not enough, it passes so quickly...) – but rather that we cannot, in fact, ever escape its current.

In this all-encompassing river of the present we find ourselves with all that exists, the human and non-human, alive and dead; at the same instance, it is also within us, in our body and in our mind, in everything we do or want. It turns out that what from the outside seems a cascade of momentary events, from the inside is felt as our continuously flowing existence within the liquid contemporaneity. Of course, I have no idea what the natives on the other side of the river – which also turned into a river of time – could have thought, imagined, or felt. They stood like "two visions." But anyone can see, by activating this event, that they lived at that moment at the height of their emotional lives, deeply moved and terrified by the closeness of the danger that is coming, and that is surely capable of obliterating the entirety of their lives. That is, of the short and only time that we are ever given.

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Abstract

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Time for Time: There's No Time, We Got Time

A short film online showing an encounter between an Indonesian bulldozer operator and two natives of an indigenous tribe on the island of Halmahera initiates a reflection on the clash and collision of the many times in which we live and reasons for the increasing importance of modern temporal consciousness.

Keywords

collision of the many times in which we live: cyclical and chronological, kairotic and retroactive, hauntological and the present