
Marek Zaleski

A Chiasmatic Present

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DOI:10.18318/td.2024.en.2.3 | ORCID: 0000-0002-9418-4095

Michel de Certeau's foundational text *The Practice of Everyday Life* concludes with a chapter wherein the author adopts as his motto the words of György Lukács on the “anarchy of the chiaroscuro of the everyday,” from his 1909 essay “The Metaphysics of Tragedy.” For Certeau, this anarchic blend is something positive. It produces a fertile response of uncertain and opposing elements that challenge all that is stagnant, formalized, and official (note that the final chapter is specifically titled “The Unspecified”). Today, the agonizing of the everyday perception of the ordinary does not so much announce a promising adventure and is not a form of resistance (as for Certeau), as it is in keeping with the knowledge of the ephemerality of life that makes the everyday so elusive. The literature of high modernism has taken this elusiveness as one of its grand themes. Lukács himself – as Michael Sheringham wrote in his book on the phenomenon of the everyday – was more restrained in this regard. For the future author of *The Theory of the Novel*, the “anarchy of the chiaroscuro of the everyday” is the negative pole in the opposition, in which everyday life contrasts with a higher existence that possesses “form” and “soul”: “life [everyday – M. Z.] is an anarchy of light and darkness:

Marek Zaleski – Professor Emeritus of Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His last book was *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* [Intensity and Related Things], Warsaw, 2021.

nothing is ever fulfilled... nothing ends... nothing ever blossoms into real life [which is – M. Z.] always unreal, always impossible.”¹ Sheringham adds that the opposition between “everyday” life and “real” life appeared in the thinking of Georg Simmel and especially Martin Heidegger, and later in the texts of Henri Lefebvre, which were so crucial to Certeau. We read that Lefebvre was critical of Heidegger’s postponement of the everyday as the domain of the fallen, the inauthentic, the trivial, and the meaningless. For him too, however, the Heideggerian equation of the everyday with temporality itself, and therefore with a mere mode of being, remained in force: for the author of *Being and Time*, everyday life is indeed a way of being with its inevitable dullness, but Dasein gains moments of insight when it can control everyday life, although it can never extinguish it. Both authentic and inauthentic, Dasein has the everyday as its field of existence. If Being is discontinuous and inaccessible, it is because it depends on the everyday, which is the opposite of it. Lefebvre, concludes Sheringham, made this temporal dimension of everyday life – and above all, Heidegger’s distinguished co-existence of the epiphanic and the non-epiphanic in it – the warp of his reflection.

In the last century, the everyday (*le quotidien*) became a routine subject of philosophical and literary reflection. It had already been explored by the Parisian Surrealists and then by the Situationists. At the same time, it also became the focus of anthropologists’ attention: here, especially in France, anthropologists went hand in hand with writers (Sheringham points to the intellectual affinities of Michel de Certeau, Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, Georges Perec, Annie Ernaux, and others). To this French tradition, as if aware of their backwardness, Anglo-Saxon anthropologists have been joining in for nearly twenty years (although, after all, one must remember the work of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Erving Goffman, or Stanley Cavell). Today, they are trying to install themselves even more strongly in this field, inspired by the philosophy of affect. It is worth noting a book published four years ago, *The Anthropology of the Future* by Rebecca Bryant of Utrecht University and Daniel M. Knight of the University of St Andrews. The two authors revise the view of the everyday in its temporal aspect. Traditionally, it is the present, but they find the temporality of the present highly problematic. In their opinion, the view and understanding of the present needs to be revised significantly. On a day-to-day basis, we and the world of things are immersed in the social institutions that influence our lives – everything and everyone exists in various temporal orders that are specific to themselves. Each of us reduces them to the denominator of the present, which – I would add – could be called

1 Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006), 31.

the temporality of the natural attitude. However, as they say, the present is highly “thick,” indeterminate, and unpredictable, often evading the forms we impose on it every time we install ourselves. Lefebvre wrote of this unstable nature: “everyday life protests, rebels in the name of innumerable individual issues and contingencies.”² Kathleen Stewart highlights its deceptive opacity: “rooted in habits and perceptions, in our loves and hates, it can entangle you in something bad or good.”³ As I read in a review of her book from which these two quotes come, “this ease, with which we become involved in something good or bad, makes us think that the unpredictability of the everyday has as its cause the promises and dangers derived from the various anxieties and conflicts that engage us daily. Anxiety marks many of the situations Stewart recounts, and the ‘ordinary’ affect is experienced as a strong ambivalence in which one finds both the familiar and the unfamiliar.”⁴

It is time to return to Bryant and Knight’s thesis: in the “thick” present, past and future exist in a complex, ambiguous relationship, and anthropologists should investigate how these temporalities relate to each other in everyday life. Their interference constantly occupies our consciousness and prompts us to act – or, on the contrary, not to act. It is, therefore, worthwhile for anthropology to make them the object of its institutional scrutiny – both its practice and its theory – because such an approach can lead to essential recognitions. It is difficult to deny this, although the intuition itself is not new: Oswald Spengler wrote that the conflict and asynchrony of temporality, in which its institutions function within a civilization, leads to a crisis of that civilization. Crisis, however, is an ambiguous concept,⁵ and the broadband present offers an opportunity for the encounter and osmosis of different dimensions of temporality, allowing for an invigorating restructuring of the symbolic field of everyday life – this is the understanding of temporal asynchronies advocated by the authors of this book.

What is the novelty of Bryant and Knight’s proposal? A change of perspective: while today it is clear to historians, social scientists, and scholars of

2 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, vol. 2 (Paris: L’Arche, 1961), 69. Quoted in Natalya Lusty, “Every Kind of Everyday,” *Cultural Studies Review* 15 (1) 2009: 202, accessed August 14, 2023, https://www.academia.edu/76082082/Every_Kind_of_Everyday_Book_Review.

3 Kirsten Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 106. Quoted in Lusty, “Every Kind of Everyday,” 205.

4 Lusty, “Every Kind of Everyday.”

5 See Edmond Radar, “Crisis and Civilisation,” *Diogenes* 34 (135) (1986). Quoted in <https://doi.org/10.1177/039219218603413503>, accessed April 15, 2023.

memory studies that the past is the obvious legacy of the present and, at the same time, its minefield, Bryant and Knight insist that in the shaping and understanding of the present, the mythologized “now” – the fetish of modernity – our orientation towards the future plays a more significant role and is more important than hitherto thought in the social sciences and anthropology. The authors point out that until recently, the future was of little interest to anthropologists and social scientists. The past and the present, yes. Anthropology was primarily interested in issues and institutions that ensured the continuity of tradition and culture. There were two dominant temporal approaches to the field of research, usually described in anthropology textbooks as diachronic and synchronic. The focus was on the present and the past-present relationship. The last three decades have brought research into nationalism, collective memory, social transformation, and post-socialist nostalgia. While this has generated interest in the “homogeneous time” of the nation and the constitution of “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson), in how the national past is constituted, and in how nations “remember” (here the authors cite the work of Paul Connerton in 1989, John R. Gillis in 1994, Pierre Nora in 1989, and the reissue of Maurice Halbwachs’ classic work in 1992), little has been concerned with the national or collective future.

Furthermore, even though creating a new model of state or society is a future-oriented project, scholars focusing on the temporality of the processes described here have yet to address the relationship between the collective past and the envisaged future, say Bryant and Knight. What they do not write about is that the puzzling abandonment of the futural perspective in the 1990s was primarily due to the consequences of the disavowal of the “grand narratives” of history as a teleological project. Thinking in terms of grandiose projects in the service of progress and its ideologies discredited itself as politically scrambled. Teleological narratives were criticized for the messianic eschatology inscribed in them (Marxism, for instance) or considered exhausted (cf. Francis Fukuyama and the “end of history” he proclaimed). Paradoxically, the idea of globalism also contributed to the abandonment of reflection on the future. As Marc Augé wrote in 2004, “the ideology of globalism consists in rejecting history and proclaiming its end. Related to this is the rejection of any history that is in any way directed and that is becoming. It is almost as if control of space implies control of time.”⁶ After all, nothing “historical” will happen anymore. There is no more “becoming” in the former sense. We will only have to deal with the repetition of pattern and language. In a global space subjected to the control of the media, governed by turbo-capitalism,

6 Marc Augé, “Key Informants on the History of Anthropology: An Itinerary,” *Ethnos* 69 (4) (2004): 549, accessed February 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184042000302353>.

making history is simply the efficient management of a planetary enterprise. According to Bryant and Knight, the future emerged as a promising field of research after 2000, when the “war on terror” and the global financial crisis and its aftermath left many people worldwide unable to predict the next day. Coupled with a growing literature on risk and finance, climate change, and the catastrophe of the Anthropocene, it became clear that any return to the past remained directly linked to an uncertain future.

Moreover, social media constantly catapult the past into the future, putting the immediate future in the spotlight as the anticipated present and eagerly dealing with the “past future.” This term, introduced by Brian Massumi, does not appear in the two authors’ book, although they deal differently with the temporality module it describes. The past future, as Justyna Tabaszewska, who has been using the concept in her research for several years, puts it, “is a vision of the future that was anticipated at some point but never realized,” and today it often recurs in our disputes about the present and the future.⁷ In this sense, our present is chiasmatic: it forms a space of mutual entanglement between the past and future. Alternatively, to put it another way, the phenomena belonging to it are “preposterous” in nature: they are figures of dual belonging and are borderline. That is the way Tabaszewska understands it:

The Angelus Novus of our time is turning towards the future, but the momentum of history pushes it into the past: into the past of past futures, their promises and threats, and into a past realistically experienced, which is continually reconstructed by the present experience of subordination to what Massumi describes as a circular, self-induced future. Recasting the researcher’s words slightly: we are currently living in the shadows of various circularly reproducing and, at the same time, contradictory futures, which force us to reconstruct the past in such a way that we do not lose our elementary sense of the meaning and continuity of time.⁸

So it is: not only does the past project the future, but the future “colonizes and revises the past” and is “hostage to current affective politics.”⁹ Moreover, the unrealized future becomes real because its present effects are real. Bryant and Knight advocate precisely the teleological view of temporality operating in the philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Heidegger and the proponents

7 Justyna Tabaszewska, *Pamięć afektywna. Dynamika polskiej pamięci po roku 1989* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Mikołaja Kopernika, 2022), 24. If not stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish are translated by the author of this article.

8 *Ibid.*, 34.

9 *Ibid.*, 27.

of speculative realism. Following Theodore Schatzki, they recognize that time and space are intertwined in our everyday “bundles of practices” that have a future purpose – practices that are rooted in and have consequences in the material world. This ontology is reminiscent of Bruno Latour’s network model of reality, but the authors find it appropriate to refer to the American philosopher’s concept. The bundles of practices form a space-time that they call the “teleoaffective structure” of the present, a structure that, while goal-oriented, is also affective. For Schatzki, such a structure is a series of standardized and hierarchically ordered goals, projects, and tasks linked to normative emotions and moods.¹⁰

In other words, the impatience with which, on a sunny day, I wait for the washing machine to finish its work, or the irritation I feel when living next to some endless construction site, the anxiety over an impending dead-line – these are all teleoaffects triggered by our orientation towards specific goals within bundles of practice.¹¹

Tele-affects determine the tensions within the heterochrony that is the present. They can be individual, but they can also be collective (“this is not the Poland we wanted,” to refer to an indigenous affect). They can be our private worldview and those suggested by various institutions and agencies. Bryant and Knight, writing about the presence of the future in the present, distinguish the orientations active in this regard and, at the same time, the “teleoaffective structures”: anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, hope, and destiny. In their book, these are heuristically distinguished, but on a day-to-day basis, they coexist and are intertwined. Daily, they say, we live on a thick and porous threshold between past and future, and the horizon of expectation seen from this threshold, which defines our knowledge of the future, shapes the perception of the familiarity of everyday life. On this threshold, which is a heterochrony, the “magic of the future” happens, they say, invoking Debora Battaglia. Our semi-scientific, semi-magical understanding of the future can give us a sense of stability in the present. However, it can also disrupt the present by presenting it as uncertain and lacking prospects. While this understanding can motivate us to act, such as emigrating, it can engender melancholy and resignation. For instance, a remote threat, such as an impending ecological calamity, can cause the present to stretch

10 Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019), 18.

11 *Ibid.*, 18.

out interminably before us and take on an eerie, apocalyptic quality. Exploring the temporal dynamism and possible stagnation of such orientations, the authors argue for an anthropology that considers the teleologies of our lives and actions and charts a new future for the discipline.

If we accept anthropology's relation to the present, and thus to the temporality considered fundamental to the history and development of the discipline, new attention to the future certainly implies a new kind of anthropology. It involves a reorientation of the discipline: from being to becoming, from structure to action, from the status quo of social institutions to hopes, planning, practices, and actions that project what is yet to come.¹²

David Graeber, the author of *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, writes his books guided, as he says, by the principle that “anthropologists have so far described the world; the point is to change it.”¹³ Bryant and Knight agree. The chapter on anticipation justifies their position and shows how the future compels us to act today. The word “anticipation” needs to convey what anticipation is. Anticipation is more than expectation or foresight, which is imagining the future: it has a causal dimension; it is an intervention in the present, bringing the future into the present. Our expectation of something or prediction in anticipation is concretized in the present action. In the chapter on anticipation, the authors reconstruct the philosophical thinking that maintains that the present is pregnant with both the past and future. They cite Saint Augustine, who says that the present is the threshold at which the future passes into the past; Edmund Husserl, for whom the act of consciousness has a retentional/protentional character; Martin Heidegger's thinking, where the future awakens the present and gives it meaning. Anticipation pervades our actions in everyday life, as the lyrics of popular songs tell us every day. In collective life, it is linked to specific moments of an uncertain or threatening future when a particularly affective dimension of time manifests itself, often requiring collective action (the authors locate such reactions in times of war, natural disaster, famine, etc.). For our experience of the future in the present, the notion of a liminal “threshold of anticipation” rather than a transcendent “horizon of expectation” seems more appropriate to them. The threshold of anticipation “implies both the

¹² Ibid., 192.

¹³ Mark Thwaite, *David Graeber Interview with ReadySteady Book*, September 17, 2011. Quoted after <https://libcom.org/article/david-graeber-interview-readysteadybook>, accessed February 11, 2023.

proximity of the future and the idea of potentially crossing it.”¹⁴ The liminal temporality of the “threshold of expectation” implies a radical reorientation of the present. An example is the time of war and the apocalyptic time increasingly leaking into our present.

The authors of *The Anthropology of the Future* draw on their ethnographic research on the Eastern Mediterranean to illustrate the emergence of future studies as a field of anthropology. The region’s financial turmoil, mass migration, climate change, and political instability are causing a historical and temporal awareness shift. Nevertheless, they emphasize that they are using examples from the region to see some existing research on the history, historicity, tradition, and the past through a lens oriented towards the future and not necessarily the immediate one. They also set their lens like a telescope at a further distance: anthropologists have taken an interest in our fears and what was, until recently, considered to belong to the realm of fantasy or speculation. Space exploration and encounters with extraterrestrial life have long been the subjects of futuristic visions, but anthropology has recently become increasingly interested in space as a significant area of study. Numerous scholars are exploring humanity’s technological and ethical limitations and advocating for a shift in our spatial and temporal horizons, urging us to consider a future beyond the confines of planets and species. All speculation about the future alters our perception of Earth’s future and blurs the distinction between nature and culture. Concern about the end of our future is growing. The authors refer to Hirokazu Miyazaki’s work on reconceptualizing the present through the lens of the end of human time. In the study of philosophical anthropology practiced today, it is not only the near, everyday, and historical present that is beginning to be perceived and structured futuristically: this is also starting to happen with that seen on a planetary scale and now increasingly seen in post-humanist terms, analyzed, as Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, in terms of “inhumanly vast timescales of deep history.”¹⁵ Chakrabarty’s name does not appear in *The Anthropology of the Future*, and nor are Bryant and Knight’s names to be found in Chakrabarty’s book *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. However, his thinking represents an application of the research project presented in Bryant and Knight’s book. Chakrabarty claims that we are situated “on the cusp of the global and what may be called ‘the planetary,’”¹⁶ which will prove crucial to our species’ future. He argues for replacing our current historical

14 Bryant and Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future*, 35.

15 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in Planetary Age* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021), 4.

16 *Ibid.*, 3.

experience of time with the planetary experience. Specifically, the conclusion of the preface to his book appears significant in this regard:

We can then say that as humans, we presently live in two different kinds of “now-time” (or what they call *Jetztzeit* in German) simultaneously: in our awareness of ourselves, the “now” of human history has become entangled with the long “now” of geological and biological timescales, something that has never happened before in the history of humanity.¹⁷

Our understanding of time, as explored by phenomenologists, is only sometimes in line with the evolutionary and geological chronologies. Until now, these two forms of chronology have remained out of synchrony. However, it is now crucial to synchronize them, as it has become a matter of life and death:

We need to connect deep and recorded histories and put geological time and the biological time of evolution in conversation with the time of human history and experience. [...] The crisis at the planetary level percolates into our everyday life in mediated forms, and one could argue that it even issues in part from decisions we make in everyday life (such as flying, eating meat, or using fossil fuel energy in other ways).¹⁸

Chakrabarty’s book is an example of new thinking about the present and the future and an ethical manifesto. Will a catastrophic scenario be averted? The future increasingly haunts our present. When I read that this July was the hottest month in the planet’s history, I began to wonder about the desirability of what I was doing. It is obvious today – although still not for everyone – that the temporality of our future tense is increasingly becoming a temporality enshrined in the *futurum perfectum*, a module of the future antecedent tense. However, its realization appears unlikely despite not being widely recognized. As Lecia Rosenthal says in *The Mourning Modernism* – a book about modernity in mourning for itself – the future anterior is the temporality proper to the projected future of an event, located in a future later than a future that has already taken place before. It is temporality pregnant with its paradoxicality, anticipating the future as a completed interval of time: accomplished because it is completed and located in the past. It becomes the future-as-the past. At the same time, the future anterior requires no end to the future *tout court*: there is always a future necessary concerning which the future anterior will

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 7; 8.

already be past. Anticipating two futures: the future as past and the future from which this future is already perceived as past, the future anterior opens up the future and closes it down. Derrida, Rosenthal adds, sees this paradox as the foundation of the archivist's founding gesture: the existence of the archive anticipates the future, but also simultaneously terminates it:

Anticipation opens to the future, but at the same time, it neutralizes it. It reduces, presentifies, transforms into memory [*en mémoire*], into the future anterior, and, therefore, into a memory [*en souvenir*], that which announces tomorrow as still to come. A single movement extends the opening of the future, and by the same token, by way of what I would call a horizon effect, it closes the future off, giving us the impression that "this has already happened." I am so ready to welcome the new, which I know I will be able to keep, capture, and archive, that it is as if it had already happened and as if nothing will ever happen again. Thus, the impression of "No future" is paradoxically linked to a more significant opening, an indetermina-tion, a wide-openness, chaos, a chasm: anything can happen, but it has already happened.¹⁹

Our future is potentiality; that is obvious. Potentiality is the possibility with which the future is equipped, if it is to be the future of the past or now virtually present in everyday life. As Bryant and Knight write, Aristotle observed that when one eliminates potentiality, only the actual remains, so the future becomes something impossible. Potentiality gives meaning to the idea of the future, so it makes the future possible; it also allows us to think about what exists for us in the present and, at the same time, remains absent from it. It allows the present to be something other than just reality. Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Brian Massumi describe the latently present potentiality dormant in the present as the realm of virtuality, real but not actual.²⁰ Potentiality as a futural temporal orientation, similar to anticipation, permeates our everyday life and allows us to get out of the chalk circle of what is factual. Nevertheless, as Giorgio Agamben notes, and Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight cite, potentiality is what it is because it may not happen, either.

19 Jacques Derrida, "Phonographies: Meaning – from Heritage to Horizon," in *Echographies of Television, with Bernard Stiegler*, trans. Jennifer J. Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 105–106. Quoted after Lecia L. Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism. Literature, Catastrophe and the Politics of Consolation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 25.

20 Bryant and Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future*, 107.

It is positivity and negativity, potency and impotence, the possibility of being or not being: “the future also includes its absence.”²¹ Derrida wrote his praise of the archive when the idea of potentiality leaned towards the pole of positivity. Today, it is heading in the opposite direction. If we realize an optimistic scenario, our world will continue. However, the “horizon effect” now forces us to anticipate an end signifying the reign of victorious facticity (once eagerly portrayed as a “cold” necessity, and today, for us, increasingly hot, haunting us from the future as the specter of global warming, which will paradoxically extinguish the present of Dasein). Furthermore, an archive may be left in space, but no archivist will be left.

Abstract

Marek Zaleski

INSTITUTE OF LITERARY RESEARCH OF THE POLISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES (WARSAW)

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This article advocates the usefulness of the research categories and proposals presented in Rebeca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight’s book *The Anthropology of the Future* (2019), in describing the challenges and threats we face in the future.

Keywords

anthropology, everyday, present, teleoaffect, temporality

²¹ Ibid., 125.