

we all agreed that safety was our main priority and that, this being the case, we should descend. Thus resolved, we set off.

We spent the morning trekking through the snow, making good progress, arriving at the reservoir shortly before one o'clock. The snow isn't so bad here and we have stopped for a rest on the banks, looking out across the expanse of turquoise waters, sharing what little remains of our food. There are still a good thirty kilometres separating us from the first signs of civilisation, but the road can't be far off now; once we reach it there's a good chance that we'll be able to hitch a lift along to the first village. Clara hands me a piece of chocolate; I take it and thank her with a nod. Nobody's speaking; each of us is absorbed in our own thoughts. I sit thinking of last night, of the storm, remembering the cavity of warmth and protection we found amongst its forces; but most of all I remember my vision of that mythical beast roaming above the cordillera. There's something about it that resonates deep within me: the formation of the mountains, the comings and goings of the ice, the Russian dolls of patterns and cycles. Yet perhaps what affects me most is none of these: it is that last night, for a split second, for the briefest of moments, I was able to conceive of my life as an infinitesimal interval on the eternal horizon of time; I had imagined the possibility of seeing it from without and at the same time understood the impossibility of ever being able to do so. It was then that I understood our incapacity to apprehend such an eternity from within the confines of our own existence, even though we know it to be there, dark and shadowy, revealed only in patches, in the snatches of light that reach us from the darkness beyond.

We finish up our food and pack up; best keep moving. About halfway round the reservoir we get lucky. A pick-up truck pulls over just after passing us. We climb up onto its bed and the driver moves off. It's a good hour's descent to the nearest village, and we make our way slowly round what remains of the eastern bank of the reservoir, skirting the edge of the cliff that drops down into the icy turquoise waters. A few clouds have begun to form: nothing major, just a few wisps of cirrus against that same boundless cerulean sky. From the back of the truck we watch the now-emerald waters sparkling in the afternoon sun, the snow-capped mountains towering high above in the background.

The pick-up truck turns the corner and the reservoir disappears from sight. Opening up in front of us is the road winding down into the valley, running in parallel to the course of the river as it drops down some two thousand metres. I know now that we'll be safe, and I think the others do too. For the first time since yesterday afternoon, I begin to feel myself relax, anxious to close the distance that lies between me and my apartment in the city, yet reluctant to leave all this behind. 🌿

KENNETH ARAYA is originally from Edinburgh but has lived and worked extensively in Chile.

Images by K. Araya / F. Rojas

Not long ago my sister told me of a moment in our childhood when I picked up a piece of rubbish she had thrown in the woods and explained how long it takes for plastic to decompose in nature. I went on vaguely to assert that I wanted to do something 'like that' when I grew up. Now, as an adult who currently spends more time reading, thinking and writing about 'nature' than I do observing, sleeping or walking outdoors, I think of this statement with a certain degree of fondness (although I am not sure I can quite recall the moment). It is as if I already knew then what I needed to know about life, and everything since has been a detour. The long way round to find out something I always knew. More than anything, it seems like a humorous turn in the road: one of those turns that you only realise makes a circle after you have exhausted yourself traversing a rugged mountain range.

But the detour was not just a distraction. What I didn't know, and couldn't know as a child, was that what I intuitively felt I wanted to work with was being assaulted by the culture I grew up within. That the defilement was not just the physical degradation of nature's integrity but an ideological assault which was already infiltrating my language and my mind. An attack which expresses itself culturally as estrangement and separation from that which we call nature, which is to say our own rooted selves. It denies us the source of our deep belonging while offering only simulacra in its place. The veil created by the story that we are beings separate from something called nature – a story propped up by the very words we use to tell it – is like a stage backdrop painted in the colours of loss. It is a hyper-realistic scenography, one that too easily lets us forget that it is a theatrical property.

This story is showing irreversible cracks which we can peer through. But taking the steps towards these dreary tears in the fabric of our world to examine what's behind the stage is not simple. The process of discovering a black hole in my culture, seeing into its dark heart, and discovering that deep levels of abuse and violence underpin the world I live in has been sorrowful. It is also an experience I am beginning to see as the first steps towards recovering the joy I felt as a child kicking about in the woods. The act of rejoicing in the nature that remains may contain the seeds of a culture which can again belong to the planet. The deep sorrow we feel at the continuing impoverishment of the fabric of life is an injury which it is our generational task to accept and heal. And we can only heal the wounds by simultaneously reclaiming joy as our rightful inheritance as creatures of the Earth.

When we come full circle in some part of our lives there is a moment where we can clearly see that we have arrived at the same point we were at

Reflections on building a new time culture – in conversation with Jay Griffiths

JEPPE DYRENDOM GRAUGAARD

before. We can ignore this and continue walking around in circles, or we can use this moment to set out on a different course. Re-prioritise. The rediscovery of my childish sentiment about nature has been one such moment. But I have found that there is no way back to the long afternoons playing in the forest; I have become over-educated and indebted in the meantime. If I want to follow my childhood dream I have to start from where I have ended up, and look for ways to live more in tune with nature in the midst of a broken culture.

This means piecing together new uses for matter and mind. If it takes four hundred years for a plastic bottle to biodegrade, then we had better find some good uses for it. Likewise, we have quite a lot of mental constructs that are in need of new meanings. The language we speak is replete with words that distance 'us' from something we call 'nature'. We talk of 'wildlife' and the 'environment'. We need to find ways of relating to the living world that doesn't transform us into Consumers and that doesn't reduce our sensual participation into Experience. Ways of seeing the world in terms of its inherent interconnectedness. Ways of walking through the woods that don't leave behind a trail of litter.

The time it takes for plastic to decompose is a fact powerful enough to stop children littering. In the same way, we need to introduce more concepts strong enough to bring reverence, respect and care into our relationship with the natural world. Understanding the timescales not just of the impacts of our pollution but of the ecologies we live within can be a way to deepen our relationships with the others of nature. In late 2011 a series of conversations led me and my friend Morten Svenstrup, who had been my companion in the woods of childhood, to explore why time had seemingly been speeding up in the course of the last few years. And this brought us into a widening dialogue about how understanding the timescales of the various beings and things we encounter can become a way of tuning into the world around us.

We called this dialogue *time culture* because it is a shared exploration of how understanding the life cycles inherent in our surroundings can provide a foundation for a culture that moves beyond seeing humans and nature as separate.



Around the time this conversation took off, Morten was writing his thesis *Time, Art, and Society*, in which he explores the insight that when we engage with an artwork, we pay attention in a way we don't always do with other objects. The composition of an art piece, its inherent timing, cannot be forced to fit whatever our personal sense of time may be. Being a cellist, he was very aware that if we want to really engage with music, we have to surrender our immediate sense of time and listen. The question arose: what happens if we take the kind of attention we bring to bear on a painting, a symphony or a poem into our everyday surroundings and listen to the inherent time of our neighbourhood, a nearby woodland, or our own bodies?

Doing this, we encounter an astonishing diversity of timescales which make a mockery of the idea that there is such a thing as a singular, universal, abstract Time. The present is made up of a multiplicity of lifetimes, and getting past our personal view and tuning into what can perhaps best be described as a symphonic view of time, we immediately acquire a sense of the richness of life. By sidestepping our notion of time as something that is outside ourselves and independent of us, we see that everything has its own time,

an *Eigenzeit*. This can work as an antidote to the speed that marks a society driven by principles of efficiency and growth. It is a practice which begins with noticing the world around us, paying attention and becoming present – but which leads to a deeper understanding and connection with the places we inhabit. Because once we become aware that the ‘environment’ is not something that exists solely as a backdrop to what plays out on human timescales, we hear that everything also speaks its own language.

In the course of our dialogue around time culture we have encountered a large number of people who are probing similar questions. One author whose lucid writings have been a huge inspiration is Jay Griffiths. Her book *Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time* is a kind of manifesto, which probably contains all the wisdom and insight ever needed for shifting our understanding of time (I don’t think I need to say that I can’t recommend it enough). So when I met her last year at Uncivilisation, the Dark Mountain festival in Hampshire, I was happy to find that Jay was willing to engage in an improvised interview about time. I was particularly interested in her conception of ‘wild time’ as a way of understanding the diversity of timescales around us. This conversation touches on some of the problems with equating time with the clock, and points to how deeply embedded this notion is in our language and culture.



Jeppe Dyrendom Graugaard: *The time culture project started because my friend noticed that we tend to look at art in a different way than other objects. It’s not necessarily right that it is so, but there seems to be an acceptance that when we stand in front of an art piece we give it a level of attention that we don’t always give other things in our surroundings. So he proposes that we can learn something from art and the attention we pay to time and the different temporalities in an art piece. If we bring that attention to the surrounding world, and especially to the time of the Earth, to its seasons, years, and all of the earthly cycles, we might learn something about how we can deal with abstract, networked, industrial timescapes which are causing such destruction of the natural world.*

Jay Griffiths: That’s right, because it’s saying that there is not one time: there is not such a thing as *the* time, there are times, plural. And also that the mind has different times. That the human mind has moments of enormous attention and concentration that may last in measured duration for quite short amounts of time, but has a longer kind of time shadow, which is what happens if you look at a painting that you are really struck by. You may only actually be there in front of it for five minutes, but the intensity of the mind’s experiences has a greater psychological duration.

The other thing that I’d say about that, in terms of wild time, is that to me the best definition of what is *wild* is what is *self-willed*. In early Teutonic and Norse languages the root of ‘wild’ is in ‘will’, something wild is self-willed, uncontrollable: the will and the wild are connected right from the beginning. And so you could almost say that when something is allowed to live fully in its own time it is in a wild time, as in a self-willed time. So that’s the time, for instance, that crops take to grow in their own time and not the force-

fed time of industrial agriculture. And it is what people talk about as ‘mountain time’: it has its own self-willed time and, crucially, an integrity which is different from the self-willed time of something else.

JDG: *Yes. I work within the environmental sciences and have come into thinking about time from an ecology-sustainability angle, and I’ve really struggled with the concept of sustainability. To make it mean something. If anything, I think it is what Wendell Berry said in his Jefferson Lecture this year: the challenge of sustainability really is to re-discover cultural cycles and a sense of time that maps onto the Earth’s time with all of its different temporalities. And so with time culture we are interested in exploring what that process actually entails.*

There is a quality of attention that we need to bring to the world and how we look at the world. But seeing that we live in this abstract network time which is instantaneous and where communication travels near the speed of light, we easily end up with our attention fragmented and diffused. So, how can we come back to refocusing our attention? In your book Pip Pip you suggest that we need to come back to a sense of wild time. What can we do to make that change?

JG: I think some of it is implicit in what you were saying – that it is attention to, and respect for, the otherness of time. That happens when good parents try to adjust to the time of their child, in the self-evidently kind parenting where a mother or father notices what the child needs at different times and responds to it. But also that sense of attention can be apparent in a wider way, beyond the personal. That sense of respect – for a system to be sustainable – has to include not countermanding the life cycle of crops with a regime of force-feeding. Or, for example, the treatment of cattle and chickens, where a lifetime which should last a much longer time is foreshortened. I don’t just mean because they are killed: it is actually that their lifetime is squashed by manipulating their lives in order to compress their time so it fits the industrial human feeding system.

In a sense, you could say that the opposite of wild time is the industrial model – but it is also the brutality of capitalism, in the sense that capitalism at its worst disrespects workers’ time and disrespects the time of the materials that it is using. There is a film called *Last Train Home*, directed by Lixin Fan, which is absolutely heartbreaking, about Chinese workers in the textile factories who work so hard all year around except for the Chinese New Year, when they can go home and spend time with their families. And what’s heartbreaking about this is the social disjunction as a result of all this time which they spend away from home, working in order to make money for their families, for their children who are left in rural villages. The children suffer because they don’t have their parents with them for most of the time and the parents suffer because the work is so abhorrent and inhuman. There is this sense that their lifetimes have been stolen from them. So industrial time is theft of the idea of time and the integrity of the tree, the time of the mountain, but it is also a very brutal theft of lifetime at the cutting edge of capitalism.

JDG: *In my research I explore the narrative of the Dark Mountain Project and it seems to me that time and narrative go hand-in-*

hand, in the way that industrial time is tied up with a progressive, linear narrative of the world...

JG: And also the story that later is always better. This post-Enlightenment society despises the past so intensely in its fixation on the idea of progress, and what it doesn't ask is *whose* progress is being created and at whose expense? Because what a lot of indigenous people are saying is 'We are being sacrificed for this thing that you call progress.' You know, it's the progress of a minority of people and it is bought at the expense of the majority. But this is ignored in the narrative of progress, which has become so powerful that if you try to argue that there is anything good about the past, it immediately puts you in an intellectually embarrassed position because it's *de rigueur* to think the future is automatically more positive than the past. The intellectual laziness that some people use is a form of 'past-ism'. Like when people say 'We've moved on since then' or 'You can't turn the clock back' and all these things which are meant to disparage other and older ways of thinking, which are often kinder.

They're very brutal lines of argument which completely dismiss the past. In all of human history I cannot think of any society which has such contempt and disdain for the past. And actually it's really peculiar - our society is really peculiar in many ways. Throughout all of the years of the existence of humanity there has been a sense that there is wisdom in the past, there is experience in the past, there is beauty in the past, and it is actually really weird and slightly insane to have a society which has this prejudiced and disdainful attitude towards the past.




What I am finding as our conversation about time thickens, is that recognising the diversity of time is also a way of connecting with the wellspring of joy. I suspect this has to do with what Jay says about wisdom, experience and beauty residing in the deep layers of the past. Wresting our attention from the flurry of information that is hurled at us through

fibre-optic communication and turning it towards the depths of time is not just about engaging new ways of seeing and honing the life-skills we need to live fully in the context of a digital world. It is also a way of finding joy in the places we live in, whether they are urban or rural. Surrendering and accepting what is, and figuring out what we want to hold onto and what we can let go of. For me, it has been a way of opening up a space for change. I recently wrote:

'We risk becoming immune to the eternal if we surrender to the demands on our attention that digital time puts on us. The fragmentation of attention diminishes the quality of our presence, and we are never fully in one place. Without attention we are lost. What distracts attention kills our potential to be free.

'This is why resisting the progressive notion of time as linear, singular and above all *placeless* is profoundly political. It is about power. Tuning into the timescapes of the other allows us to dissolve the separation that modern life requires of us. That is what is meant by that beautiful metaphor "thinking like a mountain". By thinking like a mountain we open the possibility of becoming other.'

As I draw another circle and this writing is coming to its close, I am walking with my sister in the woods. It is inside us as we are inside it: we wouldn't be the same brother and sister without the forest. It tells me that it is time to bend the circle in a new direction. 

JEPPE GRAUGAARD is currently writing his doctoral thesis on grassroots innovation and The Dark Mountain Project. To find out more about this and other of his writings and doings, visit www.patternwhichconnects.com. You can take part in the dialogue around time culture on www.time-culture.net where you can also read or download the pamphlet *Towards a New Time Culture – Conceptual and Perceptual Tools* which discusses some of the ideas introduced here in more detail.