The Underside of Time

Laura Denning

‘Pandemics and the spectre of eco-apocalypse don’t signal the end of all worlds or times but merely of the world as presently constituted; there is always the vital question of what comes after.’[1] The Present as a future archaeological past is, currently, often identified as the Anthropocene. This contested term, however, continues to calibrate our human-scale perception of time as central to deep pasts and deep futures. This poem-film draws upon a recent collaboration with paleo-archaeologist Suzi Richer, to question that calibration, and to consider ‘change’ within these massive scales. Some of the questions that surfaced were: How can we un-map, backwards? What is revealed in the shift from the polar view to the equatorial view? What stories might evolve as companions in a changing world? What can we do with furrows, spores, apertures and spikes? Could hydrophobic materials adapt back towards their origins? Do humans just need to get over themselves? Could metals become future pollinators? How would oxidisation fold into future fertility narratives? And so forth.

Timefullness, says Marcia Bjornerud, references literacy in relation to the longer view. She says ‘We need a poly-temporal worldview to embrace the overlapping rates of change that our world runs on, especially the huge, powerful changes that are mostly invisible to us’. The Underside of Time is an evocation of these insights, realized through visual and sonic metaphor. The short film and subsequent poem is situated long after 6th or even the 9th mass extinction, and offers a speculative and fictional account of how OUR present is a future archaeological past, asking what a poly-temporal world view might offer, in terms of how we live and what we leave behind, in a post-pandemic world.

The Underside of Time

It’s Over
Get over it
Get Over Yourself
Humans are Zero
Gone, Nada, Zilch
Disappeared
Here, on the Underside of Time
Just Ice and Stardust
Carried in the wind.

Traces of you
(Just the ruins really)
Pock the fringes of this planet still.
You were always building
Then unbuilding
Further and further away from yourself
You scared the weather
You scared the birds
But you’re just zero now.

Careful Now
Do you suppose that the
Underside of Time
Is a place?
That can be known?
Mapped? Somewhere?
On the inside of
Yourself?
You? Surrounded by your own detritus.

Careful Now
Time moves on
Without you
But this isn’t History
History is a human thing
The world breathes without you
Time and History
Are set free.

Your detritus pollinates other possibilities
Form and Function adapt
Earth’s secrets
Seeding new stars
Shooting.

Shot
Submerged
Tempests hurl
All this matter
(That doesn’t matter)
But still
Reaching out.

Reaching across multiverses
Weaving myths of connection
Spectacular Tentacular
Temporal acrobatics
That you will never see.

Death Star
Killing everything
Chasing the shiny new
Extracting pasts
Sinking in your own discharge
Always with strings attached
You tried to compress time
But you merely killed time
Without you
There is just
The Underside of Time.

There were jungles everywhere
Before the extractions
There were diamonds dancing on veils of silver
Before the Deluge
But the light faded
Leaving nothing but
The Underside of Time.

Notes
1. Taken directly from the CFP for Pandemic Imaginaries 2020.

Recipient of the inaugural scholarship in Environmental Humanities at Bath Spa University, Laura Denning has recently successfully defended her PhD thesis “Hydrofeminism: bodies, spaces, practices”. This practice-led research positioned art practice within experimental geography in order to open up the registers within which art might operate, and to foreground the environmental and ecological focus of her art practice. Using Hydrofeminism as a trigger to generate speculative artworks, all of which attracted Arts Council England funding, Laura is now developing new works as proposals for post-doctoral opportunities that have an arts/science crossover. These works explore transcorporeals in relation to temporal shifts – including the moment, and extending to considerations of deep time. Laura is the recipient of a number of awards and commissions and her work has featured in a number of publications.