

Tuomas Nevanlinna:
ON THE IMAGE OF TIME; ON THE TIME OF THE IMAGE

I

Philosophers rarely agree about anything. And yet there is one subject about which they seem to be very much in accord: time is a devilishly difficult topic. They are equally unanimous in quoting the Church Father Saint Augustine here: "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know."

The customary way to think about time – or not to think about it – is as follows: time is a succession of "now-moments", something that can be fittingly illustrated by drawing a line "----->". On that line the past is represented first, on the left, then closer to the middle is the present, and last comes the future pointed to by the arrow.

We have learned to see this mode of depiction as being "intuitive", even though, on closer inspection, it is anything but self-evident.

Is it really axiomatic that the future is "in front of us"? Francine Patterson, who taught Koko the gorilla, who specializes in sign language, says that this respect-evoking creature signs the past in front and the future behind – perhaps because past events that are significant to her are known, and can therefore be, as it were, seen.

And is it self-evident that the past comes "first"? Just think of next Wednesday. Is it not first the future, then the present, and finally the past?

According to Martin Heidegger, the custom of thinking about time in now-moments is a consequence of setting up the present as the model for time, at the expense of the past and the future. This approach reflects and fuels the idea that eternal matters are of greater significance than transient ones: eternity is true presence, one perpetual now-moment, presence without end.

Nevertheless, the dimensions of time are always intertwined together. Just think, for instance, of the strange temporality of human habits and customs. A habit is formed in the past and determines our behaviour in the present, but always also points to a tendency to act the same way in the future.

The past is a part of the present. We are still living amid the possibilities for thought that emerged in the past. If we think that critique is more important than the sacred, we are still living in the time of the Enlightenment. Those, meanwhile, in whose life Christ is present, are living under an experience horizon opened up by the early apostles.

The future acts in the present. "The essence of time is care," as Heidegger might have put it. Nowness is simultaneously a reaction to answers put forward in the past and an attempt to answer the questions that the future throws at us. Nowness is pregnant with the unfulfilled potential of the past; it is the virtual presence of the future.

II

The notion of time as a continuum of now-moments has paradoxically also always included an emphasis on how impermanent and fleeting that "now" is – when we try to catch hold of it, it has already gone.

Perhaps for this reason people have found pleasure in the way that photography really can capture some bygone now-moment as it is. But isn't it actually the opposite that is the case? The special quality of the photograph, as I see it, lies in the fact that it shows us a moment that never was. I have never appeared in anyone's eyes in just the way that I appear in a photograph taken of me. The human gaze is a continuum, a photograph is a sample shot.

But, for that very reason, a photograph really can capture something of my being – by saying something about me, a bit like a slip of the tongue says something about my unconscious intentions. A photograph in no way faithfully reproduces the way we experience time, but rudely severs and shatters it. It is precisely here that are concealed the photograph's simultaneously fascinating and frightening potentials.

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I have always thought of photographs, all of them, as being unavoidably sad. Especially old photographs. But: photographs are always old.

We might think that a photograph is a means of remembering – the older the picture in question the more striking it is. Photographs are a part of a storable archive, which helps us to recall to mind a forgotten event and to authenticate it. But, often, the situation being remembered was inconsequential – it was summer, we were sitting on the veranda, we were drinking coffee, we had just been playing Trivial Pursuit.

More quintessential is the melancholic second stage linked to this experience: when faced with a photograph, we remember, above all, that we have forgotten and that we will always forget. When faced with a photograph, we remember that we forget.

In melancholy we do not perhaps so much mourn for a lost object, as that we will one day lose that object. That is, an old picture reminds the viewer that he, she, you, me, will also be forgotten. The experience of time inevitably includes the experience of ephemerality. We cannot humanly think of or experience time as a pure abstraction, but rather, ephemerality and the melancholy it induces are part of the human experience of time. Melancholy is not grief, because in grief we grieve for some specific loss, such as, for example, the death of someone close. It is a kind of undirected grief, a pain about the past and future in general. Melancholy is the experience of time as such.

A restored painting makes a lost splendour momentarily vividly present, but a repaired photograph only further strengthens the experience of transience that it produces.

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