'The time is out of joint’: temporality, COVID-19 and graphic medicine

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to theorise the human experiences of time during the lockdown (in the first phase of the pandemic) and the COVID-19 pandemic through the verbo-visual exposition of graphic medicine that combines the medium of comics and healthcare. The event of the pandemic has not only bifurcated our perception of time in terms of a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ but also complicated our awareness and experience of time. Put differently, an epochal transformation caused by pandemics has shifted our temporal experience from the calendar/clock time to a queer time situated outside of formal time-related constructions. The pandemic also implies a dismantling and rearranging of the fundamental structures of time within which human beings interacted with the world. Such a discontinuity in the linear trajectory of chronological time engenders an epistemic and ontological reconfiguration of the very sense of time itself. Through a phenomenological close reading of various sequential comics, single panelled images and graphic medical narratives, this article investigates how visual narratives in the form of comics communicate the passage of time. Categorically speaking, pandemic graphic narratives on time draw attention to stagnation, repetition, acceleration, loss of referentiality and the queerness (strangeness) of pandemic time. The article argues that a shift in the perception of time precipitates an altered spatio-temporal awareness that informs postpandemic discourses and power structures.

‘How did it get so late so soon? Its night before its afternoon. December is here before its June. My goodness how the time has flown. How did it get so late so soon?’

Dr Seuss

SETTING THE SCENE

The COVID-19 pandemic was first identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, and it rapidly spread around the world to create a state of emergency. For many, it has engendered a reality where ‘simultaneous perception of living in an unknown moment and a foretold catastrophe has been coupled’ (Antentas 2020, 3). Given such unprecedented disruption, it is not surprising that it elicited a diverse range of philosophical and literary responses. The pandemic has been variously described as ‘a portal’ (Arundhati Roy), ‘a necropolitics’ (Achille Mbembe), ‘an event’ (Rocco Ronchi), ‘an “epoché” (W J T Mitchell), and as a form of communism within the neoliberal framework (Slavoj Žižek) among others. Mbembe, especially, draws attention to the plight of the vulnerable sections of the society (disabled, aged, racial minorities), who have turned into mere disposable bodies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In another instance, generalising the idea of death during the current pandemic, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben questions why ‘persons we love and human beings in general, should not only die alone – something that had never occurred in history from Antigone until now – but their corpse be incinerated without any burial rites?’ (quoted. in Castrillón and Marchevsky (2021, 6). While Zsuzsa Baross, a Canadian academician, asserts that biopolitical mechanisms have created a state of exception, French Philosopher Latour (2020) calls the current pandemic a ‘dress rehearsal’ which ‘prepares, induces, incites us to prepare for climate change’ (par. 1). Hayles (2021), on the other hand, focuses on the posthumanist implications of viral contagion, which negates human intention and highlights the battle between the evolutionary strategies of complex human beings and the much simpler coronavirus.

GRAPHIC MEDICINE: VISUALISING ILLNESS

Coined in 2007 by Dr Ian Williams, a physician and a comics artist, graphic medicine ‘combines the principles of narrative medicine with an exploration of the visual systems of comic art, interrogating the representation of physical and emotional signs and symptoms within the medium’ (Czerwiec, Ian, and Susan 2015, 1). It shifts the focus from the reductive narratives of medicine, illness, disability, caregiving and being ‘cared for’ by exploring areas that are often ignored, misunderstood and under-represented (Czerwiec, Ian, and Susan 2015, 2). Graphic medicine is ‘the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare’ (Czerwiec, Ian, and Susan 2015, 1). It shifts the focus from the reductive narratives of medicine which prioritises clinical encounters and biomedical evidence to highlight the story of the patient, caregiver and other stakeholders. Furthermore, it offers ‘a more inclusive perspective of medicine, illness, disability, caregiving and being cared for’ by exploring areas that are often ignored, misunderstood and under-represented (Czerwiec, Ian, and Susan 2015, 2). Graphic medicine is also influenced by narrative medicine and the underground comix movement. While Rita Charon’s narrative medicine aims to foreground the patient’s narrative instead of biomedical rationalisation of a medical condition, the underground comix movement prepares, induces, incites us to prepare for climate change’ (par. 1). Hayles (2021), on the other hand, focuses on the posthumanist implications of viral contagion, which negates human intention and highlights the battle between the evolutionary strategies of complex human beings and the much simpler coronavirus.

To cite: Venkatesan S, Joshi IA. Med Humanit 2022;0:1–7. doi:10.1136/medhum-2021-012357
Cancer (2006), Ken Dahl’s Monsters (2009), Sarah Leavitt’s Tangles: A Story About Alzheimer’s, My Mother, and Me (2010), Georgia Webber’s Dumb: Living Without a Voice (2018), and Susan McLeod’s Dying for Attention: A Graphic Memoir of Nursing Home Care (2021). In recent years, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has enhanced the scope of graphic medicine as various comics, cartoons, posters and gifs, among others, have proliferated in the traditional (print) and non-traditional (online) platforms.

The verbo-visual nature of comics ‘holds particular value as a narrative form because the interplay between its hybrid elements – words and pictures – exceeds the sum of their parts to produce a uniquely cogent medium, capable of articulating complex and multilayered concepts’ (Williams 2014, 64). Green and Myers (2010) similarly contend that comics ‘powerful visual messages convey immediate visceral understanding in ways that conventional texts cannot’ (574). The show-and-tell aspect of comics, as observed by Chute (2016), further helps graphic medicine to portray the ‘complicated experiences accurately - in both words and pictures alike, and in the spaces of meaning between them’ (Chute 2017, 244). Graphic medicine’s sociocultural approach to illness is explicated through verbo-visual metaphors and iconography that involves formal elements such as colour, line, word balloons and page layout, among others. Put together, comic engagement makes narratives of illness and disability more accessible, intelligible and engaging to the general populace.

THE NEW NORMAL

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped a new normal which is characterised by a transformation of ‘undeniable pivots of human life such as professional identity, economic subsistence, work and family organisation, children’s education management; imposing a radical revision of the traditional ways, practices and skills used to manage them’ (Frontiers Media S.A 2022). Historically, the term has been used in the context of the post great war world (new normal after the first and the second World Wars), the 1990s dot-com bubble (new normal after technological development), the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, and the 2012 economic slowdown of China, among others. Presently, the new normal following the ongoing coronavirus pandemic includes precautionary measures to prevent contagion and a general sociocultural re-engineering of all precepts that construct human life. The (gradual) reorientation of our sense of time is one of the features of the new normal and the focal point of the present study. That is, the event of the pandemics has not only bifurcated our perception of time in terms of a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ but also complicated our awareness and experience of time.

This essay aims to theorise the human experiences of time during the COVID-19 lockdown through close reading various sequential comics, single panelled images and graphic medical narratives. In particular, the research focuses on the treatment of temporality in three comic artists, namely Jesse Lambert, Claudia Matosa and Gemma Correll. Though their orientation, style and practice are different, these artists deftly capture the passage and experience of time outside of formal time-related constructions. Taking these cues, the article examines different modes of temporal experience vis-à-vis loss of referentiality, directionality, alienation, stagnation, acceleration and queering of time in the select visual narratives.

CONTEXTUALISING TIME

As a fundamental human preoccupation, temporalisation demonstrates the impulse of human beings to encompass infinity within a morphology of cognizable units. Put differently, in the quest to concretise an abstract idea, human beings invented various time-keeping methods and machines that ‘allowed urban, industrial societies in particular to develop complex socio-cultural practices based on a linear understanding of time as a series of precisely measurable units’ (El Refaie 2012, 96). Here time is framed as a linear and a unidirectional movement towards a foreseeable future. However, such ideation, though useful, leads to ‘single-stranded descriptions or typifications, rather than to a theoretical examination of basic socio-cultural processes through which temporality is constructed’ (Munn 1992, 93). The conventional methods of timekeeping trigger ‘formulac responses to time and temporal logics (which) produce emotional and even physical responses to different kinds of time’ (Halberstam 2005, 7). Such a standpoint does not take into account how ‘specific situations in which we find ourselves can have an impact on our time perceptions’ (El Refaie 2012, 96). The human experience of time is based on perception (chronoception) and on its ‘lived’ quality, or what is generically called experiential/subjective time. Experiential time ‘corresponds to one’s feeling about time, that is, the conscious judgment of the speed of the passage of time’ (Droit-Volet et al. 2020, 2). Accordingly, while one second would be experienced as an indeterminable length, an entire lifetime would be realised as a single moment, image or utterance by the same logic. Here, the embodied subject experiences and perceives the complex and multifaceted nature of time. Sébastien Conard and Tom Lambeens highlight the tension between linear time and experiential time thus:

This objectifying approach to time expresses a rationalistic worldview that sees the universe as a determined and closed entity: the universe as a clock. Interiority is then divided into points; it is made linear, extensive (as opposed to intensive) and measurable. We trade what is dynamic for what is static and we objectify what was originally subjective (95).

The French philosopher Henri Bergson examines psychic time vis-à-vis calendar-clock time in Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness (1889). Here he criticises the standardisation of time, which assumes ‘a succession of separate, discrete, spatial constructions – just like seeing a film’ (Phipps 2021). In so doing, he deconstructs the idiosyncratic formulations of time and offers a different form of temporal engagement. Bergson contends that man gives ‘a mechanical explanation of a fact and then substitute[s] the explanation for the fact itself’ (quoted. in Phipps 2021), which in turn erases the possibility of alternate modes of experiencing time (for instance, stagnation and acceleration). Furthermore, Bergson argues that the ‘mechanistic time of science’ distorts one’s perception of time by superimposing spatial concepts onto it. Instead, Bergson designates experiential time as ‘real duration’ or durée réelle, as time ‘is a single, indivisible entity, made up of an accumulation of individual moments each of which carries within it the entire flow of the past’ (El Refaie 2012, 96).

PANDEMIC TIME

Any chronic or acute illness disrupts normative realisation of time. Miller 2022, for instance, who was diagnosed with stage 3B metastatic lung cancer in 2011 in her blog project titled ‘My Multifocal Life,’ describes how cancer disrupts the ordinary divisions of time and severs—however illusory—the past from the
The pandemic creates a vortex of time within which human beings are plagued by the frightening unpredictability of the event and its repercussions. If not stagnation, it surely engenders a sense of intense hypervelocity (acceleration) where movements blur and coalesce together in a seamless pattern. However, it is a sense of intense hypervelocity (acceleration) where movements blur and coalesce together in a seamless pattern. Consequently, pandemics create anxiety regarding an insecure past and apocalyptic futures and about a fragmented present dominated by disjunction and uncertainty. Also, pandemic time is unevenly distributed as different stakeholders marked by socioeconomic status, race, gender and geography experience time differently. That is, the pandemic accommodates multiple temporal strands to coexist and, at times, overlap. While time, for instance, was experienced by the healthcare professionals in an accelerated way because of their significant role in contagion control and management, it was realised as a flattened event by ordinary individuals. Non-healthcare workers, on the other hand, who maintained critical infrastructure and services, such as grocery store employees, police officers and firefighters, negotiated their temporal experience by reconciling the strangeness of pandemic time with the mundane nature of their jobs to tackle emergencies.

COMICS AND TEMPORALITY

The medium of comics is protean in that it actualises time as both static and fluid. The simultaneous ideation of time as frozen (capturing a moment) and in motion (chronicling a series of actions) is one of comics' most fundamental and productive contradictions. A single image in a comic might contain several micronarratives, which not only 'contain many moments tangled up together' but also has 'a possible duration that each reader can unfold personally' (Conard and Lambeens 2012, 105). While the comic artist and theorist Scott McCloud focuses on the linearity of comic narration and hence, forward-moving time, Thierry Groensteen illustrates the networked relationality of comic panels to delineate how time is irregular, disruptive and recursive. As a predominantly visual medium, comics map the reader's attention to various images despite their chronological positioning. While in a purely literary work, the reader is bound by the linear, chronological movement of the text, the comic reader has the freedom to pursue work in multiple ways. In various instances, the comic artist oscillates between the past, present and future events and draws parallels by deliberately disrupting the chronology of action time. Furthermore, by making use of stylistic and formal devices, which Groensteen calls 'the spatiotopy of comics', comic artists 'evoke a feeling of time, rather than a precise measurement of it' (99). Additionally, comics depict temporal development in spatial terms by condensing events into panels, images and texts. McCloud (1993) also demonstrates how the size, shape, number of panels and style of frame line, among others, delineate and express time in comics. Comic affordances such as gesture, position, speed lines, among others, are also instrumental in conveying duration within a panel.

QUEERING OF TIME

To quote El Refae (2012), 'In both everyday discourses and conventional structuralist narrative theory, time is commonly conceptualised as something regular, linear, and measurable, but our actual experience of temporality is much more complex than that' (8). Any discontinuity in the linear trajectory of chronological time engenders an epistemic and ontological reconfiguration of our (non)sense of time. As it turns out, the pandemic formulation of everyday time illustrates the 'idiomatic experience of subjective time, with its irregularities, circularities, overlaps, and gaps' (94). The 'queerness' embedded in such conceptualisation challenges dominant temporal constructs and, through subversion, highlights the strangeness of experiential time. 'Queer time', a term introduced by Judith Halberstam in In a Queer Time and Place (2005), delineates how time operates differently for the queer community (LGTBQIA2S+). However, in this article, 'queer time' is posited as a non-normative and disruptive experience of temporality. The Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dali illustrates ‘queer time’ in his iconic image of the limp/soft watch in a painting titled ‘The Persistence of Memory’. Deemed as the symbolic visual equivalent of Albert Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, ‘The Persistence of Memory’ conveys the unfixed and lucid nature of time and the ironic necessity to track with ‘as crude a gadget as a pocket watch’ (Shabi 2021). The art, inspired by something as mundane as melting cheese, forces its ‘viewers to encounter something indescribable, undefinable, (and) unknowable’ through ‘dreamlike scenes’ (EmptyEasel, Com 2022).

Borrowing from Dali’s ‘melting clock’, the New York-based comic artist Jesse Lambert in his ‘COVID-19 Dawn’ illustrates how time has ‘lost its edges’ (figure 1). Published as one of the chapters in COVID-19 Chronicles: A Comics Anthology, the comic details our morphed realities and relates individual experiences of the new normal to the collective unconscious by highlighting the virus’s permeability and its impact on our sense of time. Words like ‘uncertain’, ‘changing’, ‘facing reality’, ‘frightening’, ‘adapt’, ‘death toll’ (Boileau and Johnson 2021, 18–21), among others, convey the artist’s perturbation and apprehension as clearly as his neat, densely packed images. Further, the image captures the affective aspect of Dali’s melting clock through a creative appropriation of the painting and infusing it with various layers of meaning. Lambert’s superimposition of Dali’s visual metaphor in the context of COVID-19 invokes surrealistic ideation of the moment that externalises the internal landscape of the COVID-19 sufferers. Additionally, the use of ‘strange’ and ‘surreal’ (Boileau and Johnson 2021, 18–21) signifies ‘the turning of what is homey into something unheimlich—uncanny in this German-substitute sense’ (Spivak 2003, 74). In so doing,
the panel emphasises the defamiliarising shift from an intelligible and a rational vision of time to a queer one by employing hyper-realistic, quasi-mystic and dream-like scenes.

The clock/watch, as a physical embodiment and correspondent of time, exists in a dimension where our senses can directly perceive it. Further, the object ontology and the materiality of a clock/watch engender and reinforce an illusion that humans can measure and quantify time. In contrast, soft watches represent temporal malleability and liveness, which produce a queering effect. Consequently, the panel’s Dali-esque imagery illustrates the fundamental unintelligibility of time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the image of the clock melting away even as it is firmly grasped within the artist’s hand signifies the limits of human agency and control, leading to negative affective responses like confusion, fear and anxiety that intensify when the human subject perceives himself as an object acted on by the elements. Therefore, while the prepandemic lifeworld was firmly regulated by time, the postpandemic existence acknowledges the meaninglessness of temporal constructs and, in turn, vindicates queer time.

STAGNATION AND ACCELERATION

The quintessential surrealist temporality and the queerness of time are made possible by temporal acceleration and stagnation. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that ‘every crisis is a moment of temporal unification and simplification, of condensation, and of social contradictions’ (Antentas 2020, 3). If the monotony of routine life precipitates an alternate experience of time as static, then the sameness that spans days, weeks, months and years has induced a sense of acceleration. The superimposition of our traditional timekeeping methods (calendar/clock) on a ‘still’ time triggers an acceleration and highlights the simultaneous movements of temporalisation. Consequently, we reach a state of what the Sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls, ‘frenetic standstill’ where movement in itself is a form of inertia as nothing fundamentally changes even though nothing stays the same. Such meditation of the movement of time (or the lack of it) is the central theme of Claudia Matosa’s ‘The Passage of Time’. Published in The Lockdown Lowdown: Graphic Narratives for Viral Times (volume 1), the comics enunciate how temporal movement is ‘a sensitive index of emotional experience felt in the present moment and of its variations as a function of life conditions’ (Droit-Volet et al. 2020, 2). Matosa’s comics also complicate the idea of temporalisation by suggesting that ‘[w]e exist with and in a world because our existence and the world are both grounded in the movement of temporalization’ (Cheah 2016, 111). The artist accomplishes this by incorporating images that outline the natural course of life from birth till the inception of the pandemic, where traditional conventions of time were upended. The neatly drawn image infused with primary colours such as red and blue incorporates three significant elements: the clock, the calendar pages and a supine figure on the couch. Though the overall feel, style and colour of the panel convey a sense of tranquility and placidity, a closer look reveals underlying tension between stagnation and acceleration.

The ‘simultaneous but asynchronous times’ of the pandemic are encapsulated in the moments of stillness and hypervelocity, which form ‘an internal polyphony made of superimposed temporalities and layers of velocities’ (Szendy 2021). Stagnation and acceleration, the two extreme speed differentials of time, are depicted by Matosa through various verbo-visual elements. The stagnation encapsulated in ‘All days look the same’ is offset by the acceleration engendered in ‘And some days feel like an entire month’ (Matosa 2021, 13). The arrow marks, denoting a clock’s forward and backward motion, also emphasise the distortions in how one simultaneously experiences time. Interestingly, the clock features two blue hands that symbolise physical hands and four red hands that metaphorically denote the passage of time. Additionally, the levitating pages of the calendar represent hypervelocity as much as they indicate stillness. In so doing, the panel illustrates a ‘world at a standstill because it goes faster than itself’ (Szendy 2021).

The Portugal-based artist draws attention to the sudden change in our experience of time by emphasising ‘the absence of relevant events (as a consequence, also to prolong time)’ and ‘the monotonous once-again-ness of everyday life’ (Schneider 2010, 53). Monotony is represented by Matosa’s protagonist, who lies on a sofa, head hanging down and vacantly staring into space. The apparent stillness of the immobile body problematises temporality by representing ‘it in the image of rational activity’ (Cheah 2016, 112). Although ‘activity’ connotes regenerative energy directed towards a particular purpose, the pandemic has reduced it to a repetitive action. French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in The Everyday and Everydayness (1987) observes an essential difference between two types of repetition: ‘the repetition of cycles and rhythms (days, seasons, desire and fulfilment, life and death) and the linear repetition of gestures of work and consumption’ (Schneider 2010, 53). The latter mode of repetition captures the monotony of everyday routine that entails activities like eating, sleeping, working, sanitising, obsessing over social media platforms and agonising over the COVID-related statistics (such as variants, death toll, vaccination slots), among others. Over time, this has produced a sense of boredom which ‘has to do with the irritating feeling of emptiness and lack of stimulation aroused by standardised routines and repetitive habits that emerge in modern daily life, introducing a new temporal relation where time is emptied of meaning’ (42). Matosa’s feeling of boredom is reproduced through her posture. Further, the image of the calendar pages aimlessly suspended in the air conveys the incomprehensibility of a time which expands

Figure 1 Lambert, Jesse. ‘COVID-19 Dawn’. COVID-19 Chronicles: A Comics Anthology by Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson, Graphic Mundi, 2021, pp. 19 (reproduced with permission from author).
and contracts repeatedly. Conversely, it also serves as a metaphor for the sheer non-passibility of time.

(D)EVOLUTION WITH TIME: TEMPORAL REFUGEES

Rigid meaning-making processes construct human life and history in terms of the past, present and future. Such a neat temporalisation is ‘the basis of the three fundamental characteristics of our worldly existence: (being) for-the-sake-of-itself, being thrown (into the world), and in-order-to’ (Cheah 2016, 111). Within such a framework, man’s existence is based and measured on what he was in the past, how he has changed in the present and how he will evolve in the future. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has modified ‘the nature of presentism, since our extended and endless present has been abruptly invaded both by the past (the confinement and the virus evoke[s] situations that we associate with the great pandemics of the past) and by the future (which suddenly appears in the form of an abyss and a catastrophe to come’) (Antenats 2020, 2). Consequently, the loss of intrinsic referentiality has transformed human beings into temporal refugees.

Gemma Correll, a cartoonist, writer and illustrator from the UK, in her single panelled Instagram comics titled ‘My Pandemic Devolution’, (figure 2) engages with time on an evolutionary scale. The theory of evolution, formulated by Charles Darwin in On the Origin of Species (1859), ‘describes how organisms evolve over generations through the inheritance of physical or behavioural traits’ (Than and Taylor 2021). Accordingly, the organisms adapt to their environment, survive and pass on their traits to their offspring, who continue to inhabit the earth. Darwin also proposed that ‘over time, the traits that allow species to survive and reproduce will become more frequent in the population and the population will change, or evolve’ (Than and Taylor 2021).

However, in imagining a ‘devolution’ (evolutionary degeneration), the cartoonist implies a backward movement of time in a manner that not only enmeshes the past and the present but also problematises the postpandemic future. As such, a different time scale is of relevance for evolution. Unlike the individual realisation of time, which is finite, subjective and experiential, evolutionary time is the time of nature, processual, and more importantly, supported by thousands of years (scale) impacting the time of all humankind. The panel coloured in varied shades of red mirrors the artist’s world by singularly delineating ‘devolution’ in a succession of comic representations. Here the comics mimics and subverts the theory of evolution, which is premised on a gradual change over generations to draw attention to the distorted self-image of the artist herself. In this, ‘the judgement of the passage of time can be seen as a mirror of the subjective experience of one’s internal state’ and not as a direct physical transformation (Droit-Volet et al. 2020, 2). Conversely, the post-pandemic devolution can be identified as evolutionary as man sheds the appendages like feet, hands, and later torso, which are no longer used. In so doing, Correll inscribes her experience of temporality during the COVID-19 pandemic by illustrating an advanced stage of physical dissolution. For instance, the artist places versions of herself in a linear progression to create a graph that traces this so-called ‘devolution’ from ‘me’ to ‘meh’.

Accordingly, the fully erect biped metamorphoses into a bug-like creature reminding of Kafka’s protagonist Gregor Samsa in The Metamorphosis. While Kafka engages such a refashioning using grotesque, Correll’s work demonstrates a more light-hearted metaphor that traces this so-called ‘devolution’ from ‘me’ to ‘meh’. The reproduction of an experience entails a ‘degree of reinterpretation and reconfiguration of the past (or the present) through the filter of memory’ (El Refaie 2012, 98). However, memory in itself is a ‘highly complex and self-referential system of selection and interpretation in which constant choices are being made, mostly at a subconscious level, about which information to retain and which to discard’ (99). The complexity of replication through memory is compounded during a pandemic owing to the progressive blurring of time, making commemoration based on memory extremely challenging. Additionally, temporal stagnation emphasises the forgettability of day-to-day events and induces a sense of temporal vacuity and sameness. In a single-panelled Instagram cartoon titled ‘December 26 – January 1’, (figure 3) Correll expresses her sense of disorientation by highlighting the breakdown of traditional temporal constructs. The image
concisely captures the pandemic-induced confusion and a sense of panic through Correll’s distinctive artistic style (bold lines, use of red and white colours, visual economy).

If ‘memory mingles with every new experience: we do not simply record, inevitably we mingle every observation with memories’ (Conard and Lambeens 2012, 97). Such being the case, Correll’s articulations emerge from a place of deep reflection. Plagued by her inability to answer seemingly simple questions, the protagonist is suspended in a state of confusion and despair. Various questions imprison and confine the protagonist in a space where she is seen grinding her teeth and trembling in a state of panic. Though the narrator looks severely distressed, she, nevertheless, utters various orientational questions: ‘What day is it?’, ‘What time is it?’ to existential ones like ‘Who am I?’ and more tellingly, ‘What is time?’ (figure 3). This moment of reflection and questioning protracts over 7 days, as conveyed in the panel heading. Here, time is perceived, experienced and documented simultaneously as a single moment and also as a duration. Though it is a singular experience of Correll, the panel also captures humankind’s general bewilderment and disquietude regarding the pandemic. Therefore, ‘What is going on?’ is as much a question as it is an exclamation for everyone impacted by the pandemics. Temporal constructs are crucial for measuring time and are also instrumental in providing a larger framework within which one acts. In this context, Correll’s ‘What am I supposed to be doing?’ is a particularly poignant question as it demonstrates how temporal disjunction restricts human agency over everyday actions. Elsewhere Matosa in ‘The Passage of Time’ contends that the blurred quality of time renders human action insignificant. She insists that simple acts that previously provided us with a sense of fulfilment have lost all meaning as they are homogenised and routinised, leading to gradual forgetting. And hence, Matosa articulates thus, ‘And you don’t remember when you had that delicious meal’, ‘Was it today?’, ‘Was it a week ago?’ (12).

As a fundamental aspect of time, ‘[t]emporalization simultaneously maintains our existence and connects it to a world’ (Cheah 2016, 111). However, when such temporal constructs disintegrate, as it happens in/during the pandemic, it directly impacts how humans orient themselves in the world. ‘December 26 – January 1’ engages explicitly with such issues as it also presents the affective and experiential aspects of temporal disjunction in an attempt to reappraise the present. The persistent self-questioning in the comics reveals how the protagonist cannot form a sense of identification with her own seemingly meaningless experience of pandemic time. As a result, the narrator is alienated both from time and a sense of her ‘self’ and ends up posing philosophically loaded questions such as, ‘What is time?’ and ‘Who am I?’. Put together, the comics elucidate the loss of orientation, referentiality, directionality, and pandemic-induced alienation and helplessness.

CODA

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our sense of lived time in radical and unprecedented ways. Traditional time-keeping devices such as calendars and clocks that measure time and give it a rhythmic form gave way to the complex economy of experiential time during the pandemic. Notably, the feeling of boredom and anxiety has structured pandemic time in terms of stagnation and acceleration, respectively. Further, the perceived expansion of a moment and the contraction of years into an emotional impression puts pressure on the homogenising tendencies of time. Such a discontinuity and fundamentally irrevocable change in the linear trajectory of chronological time also engenders epistemic and ontological ruptures. The strangeness associated with the current and different modes of time finds fuller expression in graphic medicine. Graphic medicine through utilising various affordances of the comics medium portrays acceleration, stagnation, boredom and uncertainty regarding past and future as temporal features of the pandemic. While Lambert in his ‘COVID-19 Dawn’ delineates queer aspects of the pandemic time through the image of a melting clock, Matosa in ‘The Passage of Time’ illustrates the simultaneous lengthening and shortening of lived time. Again, Correll in ‘My Pandemic Devolution’ demonstrates the very dismantling of temporality through illustrating devolution of human beings as opposed to centuries of evolution. In ‘December 26 – January 1’, she also communicates the loss of memory by foregrounding the loss of referentiality and unintelligibility of the present times. To conclude, these comics demonstrate the unreliability of the dominant structures around time and convey the simultaneous and multiple reiterations of time based on subjective experiences and memory. In so doing, these graphic medical narratives deftly map the pandemic-induced temporal landscape and its consequent epistemic and ontological ruptures in provocative ways.

Contributors

The manuscript has been revised to address the reviewer comments, which are appended alongside our responses to this letter. The revision has been developed in consultation with the coauthor, and the coauthor has given approval to the final form of the revision. Both the authors have equally contributed to the paper.

Funding

The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests

None declared.

Patient and public involvement

Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, or conduct, or reporting, or dissemination plans of this research.

Patient consent for publication

Not applicable.

Ethics approval

This study does not involve human participants.

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

No data are available.

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NOTES

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