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Terr[a]fying Theories

A Conversation that Never Took Place

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0. Foreword

I have written this text within the context of my Master's thesis, where a research objective has been constructed to begin making sense of cataclysmic occurrences, in the form of disasters, crises and catastrophes. In order to engage with this objective, I've used my position as a remote observer of disastrous events to draw upon a number of discourses, that serve to theorise the temporality of high-impact events in relation to the various media employed in their representation. As a specific means of studying these abstract entanglements, within this work I've taken some initial steps into a process of questioning forms which disasters can take, I've engineered a context in which to perform my research and fabricated an output in the form of a speculative fiction compiling multiple discourses on the loops and leaps of a disastrous space-time. Within this thesis I shall refer to this speculative fiction as *A Conversation that Never Took Place*.

Throughout the following pages, I will attempt to articulate, describe and speculate on a complex feeling accessed through remote perceptions of cyclical crises. This feeling, contextualised throughout the following pages as being "terrified", has been implicit to my research and my individual reflections for the last few years; a latent affect amounting to a low-level anxiety which constantly tends towards the belief that 'bad things' are about to happen. Perhaps this catastrophic fatalism is an underlying result of my upbringing within the post-soviet landscape of a late 90's Romania, wherein the challenge of articulating affirmative futures is something that almost universally affects socio-political expression. As much as I'm aware that this pessimism renders a specifically warped view of the world and its affordances, I cannot help but return to the belief that the certain scarcity of futures to look forward to is a matter of concern across many disciplines, demographics, denominations and so on. Whether it pertains to political dissent, environmental activism, historical disenfranchisement or the recent viral tensions of social withdrawal, the act of envisioning the future is stunted by ungraspable complexities. And, in turn, the challenges of articulating it become apparent. Nevertheless, this feeling is certainly not ameliorated by observing the course of recent disastrous events from a distance, either through media coverage, or through social exchanges, or by feeling the shockwave of their impact with a varying delay.

The multiple interests present within this thesis are an exploration of a radical form of pessimism, together with the desire to generate a type of speculative discourse around the research of high-impact, undesirable events. My shifting position throughout the development of this work has allowed me to experiment with ranging notions of (physical-) remoteness, (technological-) mediation and (editorial-) agency in relation to the disaster's abstraction, while maintaining a revisable, speculative pessimism as a

driving force. This thesis describes the methods I've devised, on one hand to engage with the conceptual complexities of disastrous events, and on another to create a specific context for collectively theorising their abstract nature. With a concern for the temporality, representation and experience of the disaster, a conversation broke out towards the question: 'What does it mean to witness the disaster from its margins?'

1. Introduction

Inasmuch as the disaster is thought, it is nondisastrous thought, thought of the outside. We have no access to the outside, but the outside has always already touched us in the head, for it is precipitous. The disaster, that which disestablishes itself—disestablishment without destruction's penalty. The disaster comes back; it would always be the disaster after the disaster—a silent, harmless return whereby it dissimulates itself. Dissimulation, effect of disaster.

(Blanchot 1995, p. 6)

The disaster, the crisis, the catastrophe—this enumeration of three terms pertaining to the same semantic field will constitute a thematic concern of the more or less fictional dialectic unfolding throughout this text. Before continuing further, I would like to specify the manner in which I distinguish between the various meanings of each term and, consequently, the manner in which I will employ them below. Firstly, it is important to note that this set of words is primarily considered in regards to their original significance, as indicated by their etymologies¹:

disaster (n.)

"anything that befalls of ruinous or distressing nature; any unfortunate event," especially a sudden or great misfortune, 1590s, from French *désastre* (1560s), from Italian *disastro*, literally "ill-starred," from *dis-*, here merely pejorative, equivalent to English *mis-* "ill" (see *dis-*) + *astro* "star, planet," from Latin *astrum*, from Greek *astron* "star" (from PIE root **ster-* (2) "star").

The sense is astrological, of a calamity blamed on an unfavorable position of a planet, and "star" here is probably meant in the astrological sense of "destiny, fortune, fate." Compare Medieval Latin *astrum sinistrum* "misfortune," literally "unlucky star," and English *ill-starred*.

crisis (n.)

early 15c., *crise*, *crisis*, "decisive point in the progress of a disease," also "vitaly important or decisive state of things, point at which change must come, for better

¹ Etymological definitions sourced from www.etymonline.com (<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=disaster>, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=crisis>, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=catastrophe>)

or worse," from Latinized form of Greek krisis "turning point in a disease, that change which indicates recovery or death" (used as such by Hippocrates and Galen), literally "judgment, result of a trial, selection," from krinein "to separate, decide, judge," from PIE root *krei- "to sieve," thus "discriminate, distinguish." Transferred non-medical sense is 1620s in English.

catastrophe (n.)

1530s, "reversal of what is expected" (especially a fatal turning point in a drama, the winding up of the plot), from Latin catastropha, from Greek katastrophe "an overturning; a sudden end," from katastrephein "to overturn, turn down, trample on; to come to an end," from kata "down" (see cata-) + strephein "turn" (from PIE root *streb(h)- "to wind, turn"). Extension to "sudden disaster" is first recorded 1748.

For the purposes of elaborating *Terrafying Theories*, the universality and scope embodied by the term 'disaster' is the main reason for its frequent appearance as an all-encompassing notion within this thesis. But more specifically, the events brought upon both cosmically and tellurically by the "unlucky star" (dis- + -aster) seem to be particularly prone to unfolding over vast scales of space and time. This makes the disaster and its manifestations exceptionally difficult to comprehend, especially if the technology at hand is our own limit to cognition. The term 'crisis' on the other hand, although particularly interesting for its origin as a telltale temporal hook within the progress of an illness, is mainly used here for its ability to demand decisive action. The crisis manifests explicitly just enough for its signals to be picked up and processed, recorded and assessed, so as to be able to engage with it at the level of crisis management. The catastrophe, a sudden burst through the fabric of the foreseeable, is significant to the thematic range of this text because of its ability to swiftly undo a moment. The catastrophe irreversibly twists space and time in the blink of an eye and leaves behind a ruined landscape. Thus, I would like to propose the terms 'disaster', 'crisis' and 'catastrophe', in this particular order, as a descending scale of temporality, but also as an ascending scale of phenomenological intensity.

As they are mentioned throughout this thesis, each of the three terms can be contextualised through the aforementioned semantic relations. By reading through the terrafying theories posed in the first chapter and the three cases of 'events' examined in their elaboration, one might construe that an occurrence such as a deteriorating climate is more likely to be referred to as a disaster. While the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is often evoked as a crisis. And finally, the recent explosion within the Port of Beirut is primarily described as a catastrophe. However, these terms will also be used liberally at times, especially for the sake of *A Conversation that Never Took Place* and the methods

employed therein. Or in other words, the second chapter of this thesis is concerned with the synthesis of these terms, their adjacent theoretical frameworks and the non-linear discourse which erupted around them. As a brief account of what this text aims to explore, the feeling of being terrafied—through the mediated experience of the disaster, the crisis and the catastrophe—is instrumentalised as a passage towards an abstract and philosophical approach to ‘bad things’ happening. An approach which strives to be a polyvocal contribution towards identifying the media that the disaster utilises.

The Brink

There is something looming over the horizon. It's difficult to distinguish what exactly it is, and it seems to be even more difficult to place it in space and time. It appears to be distant but it makes itself perceptible as a hunch, a gut feeling, a staggering and horrific intuition. Such foreknowledge induces a pervasive feeling and seizes its subjects into a constant state of being 'terrafied'.

terrafying - /'tɛrɒfɪɪŋ/
adjective

1. descriptive of a planetary-scale sensation of fear and terror;
2. a type of affect which constitutes a collective consciousness faced with the panic of increasing uncertainty;

origin: terra + terrifying.

Being terrafied is a feeling similar to a worldly melancholy or *Weltschmerz*, through a paralysing angst and a grandiose scale. It is enhanced by the inability to grasp the complexity and velocity of present day phenomena. Taking the form of a seemingly harmless pun, feeling terrafied comes with the promise of a paradoxical punchline: constantly being on the brink of a disaster which fails to arrive.

Feeling terrafied in anticipation is a manner of establishing a direct link to the disaster's pre-occurring nature. This does not entail any means of predicting the disaster. Rather an understanding of this type of human affect as a node through which the disaster filters its data. A number of questions arise. What is a disaster? What, when and where is its brink? What does it mean to foresee, experience and remember a disaster?

The Elaboration of Terrafying Theories

In order to pointedly address the questions mentioned above, regarding the disaster's ontology and spatio-temporality, a sense-making mechanism must be devised. One that allows for abstraction and, to a varying degree, remoteness to both the disaster's anterior and eventual nucleus. To begin thinking about disasters as variables, without a specific instance in mind, might entail the exercise of placing a cat in a box. As goes the story of *Schrodinger's Cat*, a series of conditions were devised for which a closed box containing a live cat and a bottle of poison could point to the equal probability of the cat being simultaneously dead and alive, after spending enough time within. Because the box limits sensorial perceptibility to the cat's vital state, one can only assume, by relying on probabilistic models, that the cat both is and isn't. Schrodinger's cat, therefore, exemplifies the degree of probability operating prior to and during a potential disaster. It is this contextualised mechanism that I will refer to as 'disastrous variables'.

In the case of *Terrafying Theories*, the disaster and its impact have induced a feeling of being terrafied, and have thus been contextualised through a particular range of theoretical concepts. Most notably, the disaster as variable has been conceptually considered according to Timothy Morton's notion of hyperobjects and his criteria of temporal undulation, phasing, viscosity, nonlocality and interobjectivity (Morton, 2014). The 'disastrous variables' mentioned above could be described according to the same criteria which Morton sets for hyperobjects. The spatio-temporal ambiguity of hyperobjects, just as with Schrodinger's Cat, generates multiple potentials for 'bad things' to occur. The catalysts of these events are, similarly to hyperobjects, massively dispersed over time and space. For Morton, then, a hyperobject is the temporally and spatially intensified sum of all its parts. The parts being 'objects'. Morton calls into existence the concept of hyperobjects in order to elucidate the complexity of studying vastly dispersed objects over space and time that aren't visibly accessible, but are undoubtedly linked. Or as Morton himself likes to exemplify it: 'Things like: not just a Styrofoam cup or two, but all the Styrofoam on Earth, ever.' (Morton, 2015, para. 1). Morton's analysis of ecological hyperobjects plays an important role in conceptualising the disaster within a temporally twisted space of possibility, mainly through an inability to see hyperobjects, and still devising ways of studying their impact. Correspondingly, the inability to see the disaster's timeline leading up to the rupturing event, generates an impetus of devising ways of studying their unruly unfolding.

Such a paradox is indicative of how a disaster can be theorised before the moment of its overt manifestation, the explicit impact of a catastrophic event. However, equating the disaster to a set of hyperobjects should not happen as an exercise in hindsight, so as to do away with the complexity of such an occurrence. Thus it can only serve as a

philosophical framework prior to the disaster exemplifying itself, making its way into our cognitive abilities and our sensorial perceptions. Considering the precursive nature of the disaster in advance of its impact, as something laying beyond human perception, is a means of acknowledging and consolidating an intuitive form of angst towards its advent. The fear of what is yet to come and the inability of grasping, being terrafied is a kind of prescience that allows one to think with the disaster, rather than a doomsaying tactic, or a desire for pre-emption. It is a type of thinking that places the disaster, in all its complexity and its shifting forms, at the heart of all processes that escape phenomenological classification.

2. Terrafying Theories: Scales of Mediated Impact

*Let me introduce the word "hypertext"***** to mean a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper. It may contain summaries, or maps of its contents and their interrelations; it may contain annotations, additions and footnotes from scholars who have examined it. Let me suggest that such an object and system, properly designed and administered, could have great potential for education, increasing the student's range of choices, his sense of freedom, his motivation, and his intellectual grasp*****. Such a system could grow indefinitely, gradually including more and more of the world's written knowledge. However, its internal file structure would have to be built to accept growth, change and complex informational arrangements. The ELF is such a file structure.*

(Nelson, 1965)

Before spiraling downwards into the practice of theorising the elusive nature of disasters, I shall briefly touch upon the entangled frames of reference which have allowed for disastrous thinking to emerge. Similar to the construction of the fictive adjective 'terrafying', the act of etymologically deconstructing and shuffling words will be consistently employed within this text to generate the a series of puns and portmanteaus necessary for the elaboration of *Terrafying Theories*. As much as the terms concocted within this text serve as a tongue-in-cheek means of linguistically making sense of the disaster, they also tie into my longer-term desire to utilise the modularity of language to create neologisms that contribute to particular discourses. First and foremost, the prefix 'hyper'-² will be a helpful connotative attachment to the notion of the disaster, signifying its use within this text as an abstract variable as well as its all-encompassing and deeply entangled motions.

The desire to establish a context for the elaboration of *Terrafying Theories* is perhaps similar to Ted Nelson's ambition upon describing the affordances of an Extensive and Linkable Format (ELF) within computation at the time, except it involves far more wishful thinking. His subtly utopian inflection in regards to the social potential of hypertextual implementations has surely generated and accelerated the development of networked dynamics to producing, storing and accessing information within a computational

² hyper-

word-forming element meaning "over, above, beyond," and often implying "exceedingly, to excess," from Greek hyper (prep. and adv.) "over, beyond, overmuch, above measure," from PIE root *uper "over."

framework. In the paragraph following the quote above, he refers to ‘a browsable or vari-sequenced movie’—or hyperfilm—as a desirable form of hypermedia to be explored further, so as to intervene upon the fixed linearity of previous media.

However, the disaster also allows for the coupling of prefixes such as ‘hyper-’ to its phenomenological complexity. And sadly, a movie on the disaster, however browsable or vari-sequenced, won’t suffice. Although it does provide the grounds for tremendous cinematic fictions of both human perseverance and ephemerality. The capricious disposition of the disaster implies that it cannot be represented solely through cultural and fictional tropes, as is the case with films whose plot revolves around instances of zombie apocalypse, nuclear fallout, or natural disaster. In addition to its manifestations as a cultural object, I would like to propose that the statistical measurability of disasters along with a speculative approach to their elusive phenomenology can serve as the grounds for a conceptual observatory of some sort, which aims to survey the disastrous variable. With this in mind, the degree to which the disaster unfolds through overt manifestations constitutes the human ability to make sense of it. Thus the forms of the disaster's representation resulting from this sense-making process (i.e. journalistic coverage, statistical data, apocalyptic fictions) is what can be established as a hypermedia resource of undesirable events, through which to document and study their nature.

Impact as Hypermedia

If the precursive forms of the disaster operate as abstract variables, and feeling terrified is a way to potentially tap into its nature by way of affect and anticipation, then the disaster's impact appears as the moment in which it begins to lend itself to human perception, making itself apparent. If the complex and varying entanglements lying at the basis of disasters allows us to think of them as hyperobjects, then what is perceived and recorded as their impact could be theorised as the disaster's hypermedia. Both the adequacies of the prefix ‘hyper-’ and the semantic plurality of the root term ‘-media’³ are

³ medium - / 'mi di əm /
noun; plural - *media*

1. a middle state or condition; mean.
2. something intermediate in nature or degree.
3. an intervening substance, as air, through which a force acts or an effect is produced.
4. the element that is the natural habitat of an organism.
5. surrounding objects, conditions, or influences; environment.
6. an intervening agency, means, or instrument by which something is conveyed or accomplished: Words are a medium of expression.
7. one of the means or channels of general communication, information, or entertainment in society, as newspapers, radio, or television.
8. Biology. the substance in which specimens are displayed or preserved.

used to designate an unevenly distributed experience of the disaster, while also allowing for a further classification of its impact through linguistic deconstructions, and thus into multiple areas of consideration. In my development of these terrifying theories, I have considered a series of three dimensions in regards to potential scales of impact as remotely perceived. The wordplay lying at the base of each classification forcefully insinuates itself as a visible recurrence of “-media-” within a temporal progression of intensity.

Three scales of disaster space-time, concomitantly unraveling back and forth between intermittent bursts. The first scale is an *immediate* one, in which the catastrophe is perceived suddenly through its overt moment of impact. The second scale is *intermediate*, wherein the expression of impact is distributed within space and time through the disaster's embodiment of a crisis. The third and final scale of disaster is *ultramediate*, an overarching catastrophic phenomenon which unfolds over centuries. Since I mean to exemplify the phenomenological complexities inherent to each scale, let's take into consideration three events that are still haunting the current year, at the time of writing this thesis, of 2021. The year 2020, as varying measures of disaster, has arguably been unfolding through scales pertaining to three disparate but overlapping occurrences. The references to the multiple forms of media through which the progression of events is depicted in the case of these occurrences are a proposal to a consideration of disastrous hypermedia, wherein phenomenological complexity makes its way through straight-forward visualisations of impact.

9. Also called culture medium. Bacteriology. a liquid or solidified nutrient material suitable for the cultivation of microorganisms.

10. a person through whom the spirits of the dead are alleged to be able to contact the living.

11. Fine Arts.

1. Painting. a liquid with which pigments are mixed.

2. the material or technique with which an artist works:the medium of watercolor.

12. a size of printing paper, 18½ × 23½ inches (47 × 60 centimeters) in England, 18 × 23 to 19 × 25 inches (46 × 58 to 48 × 64 centimeters) in America.

13. Chiefly British. a size of drawing or writing paper, 17½ × 22 inches (44 × 56 centimeters).

14. Also called medium strip .Midland U.S. median strip.

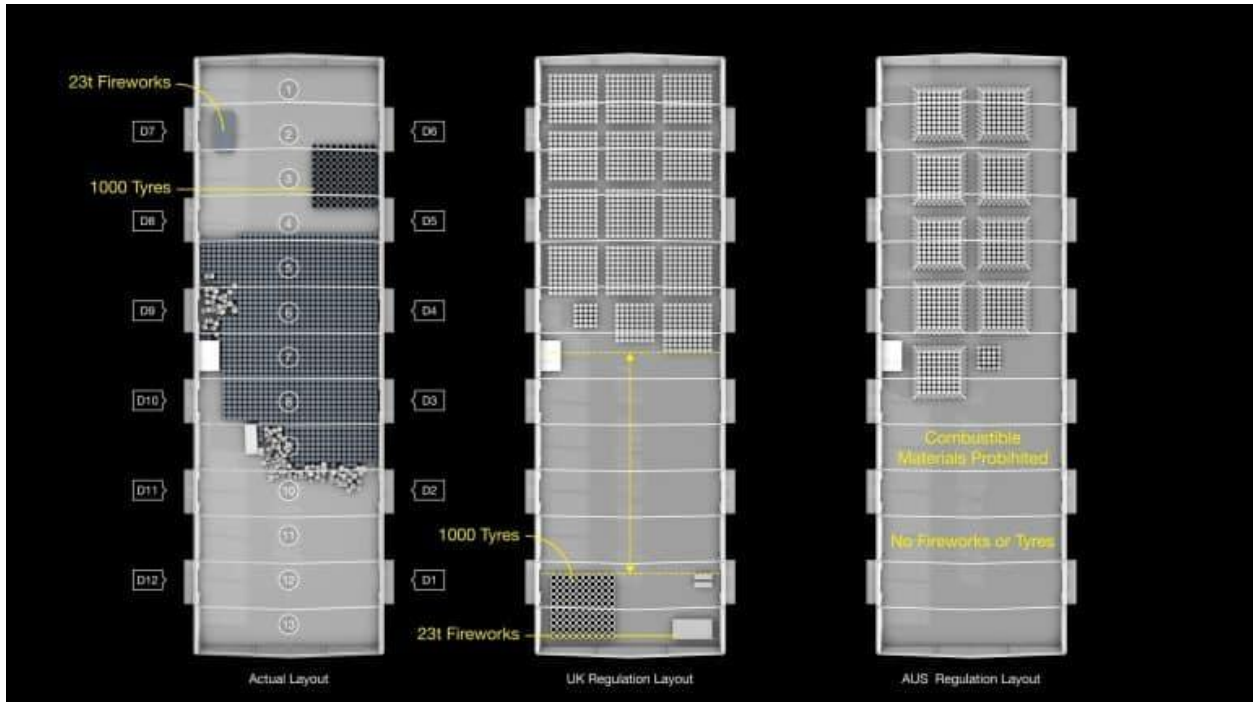
15. in medium, Movies, Television. with the principal actors in the middle distance:The scene was shot in medium.

The im-*media*-te disaster



(2020)

The Beirut explosion on August 4th of 2020 is a significant record of a disaster's multiplicity. The blast seemed sudden, but the ramifications had been at work for a while. At 17:55 local time, smoke started rising from a warehouse at the heart of the Beirut Port. Witnesses to this signal were able to see the progression of the fire from multiple locations throughout the city. First, heavy smoke rising through the roof of the warehouse, its color increasingly dark. Shortly after, an initial explosion caused by the large amount of fireworks stored in the warehouse, flickers of light through the dense smoke clouds. The amateur video footage which surfaced as a result of that initial smoke sighting began to unknowingly document what would be later classified as one of the strongest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded. The impact was simultaneously felt regardless of proximity to the blast radius. The firefighter in front of the warehouse, the civilian capturing the scene on their smartphone from a high-rise across town, somebody in a neighboring country feeling the ground shake under their feet. But also the Lebanese expat who experiences it indirectly, through horrific news coverage and the family they might still have in Beirut. Starting from the nucleus, through the blast radius, past its far-reaching seismic signature, crossing into digital networks, and arriving at the broken heart of the one witnessing everything from the margins.



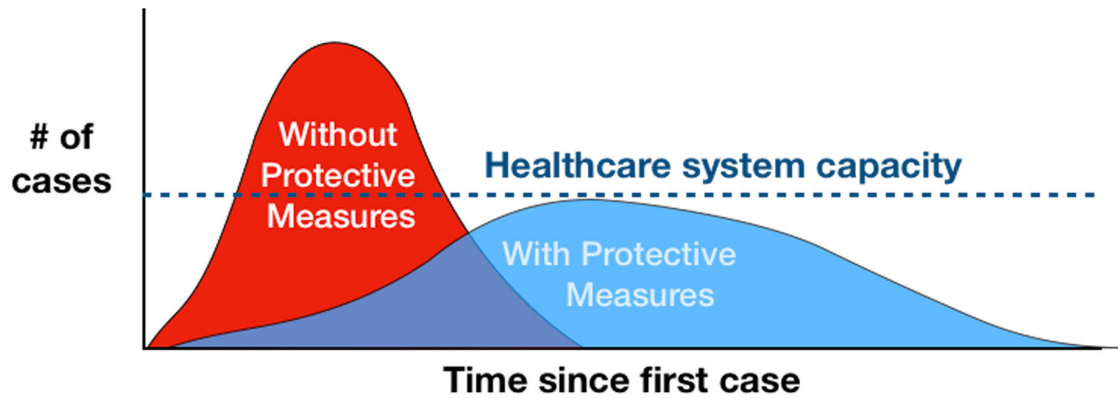
(Forensic Architecture, 2020)

Long before its advent, this catastrophe has relied on a series of systemic flaws and risks which were allowed to accumulate over the long-term. It renders a complex and incomplete image of an unstable, politicized and militarized environment as the brink of disaster. A slow progression of dubious administrative and regulatory practices contingent to underlying and ongoing socio-economic crises. The precursory time-space of this disaster, before the first signs of smoke rising from the Beirut Port at 17:55, designates a theatre, in which the disaster acquires potential and briefly signals the factors which have enhanced its impact and conversely have not been approached through concerns of pre-emption. The kind of case who's diagnosis intensifies the pain of uttering: "Hindsight is 20/20".

The inter-*media*-te disaster

In December 2019, Chinese authorities began to signal the emergence of a novel strain of Coronavirus within the province of Hubei. By February 2020, the virus had managed to spread across most of the globe. The initial warnings and inherent risk of this contagion scenario set the stage for a distributed temporality of organised responses throughout the world's nation states. A number of countries, which were severely impacted by the exponential nature of growing infection rates, were initially observed by the rest of the world as an augur for what is to come. The consensus was that the measurable aspects of this viral agent, in the form of a graphic depiction of confirmed

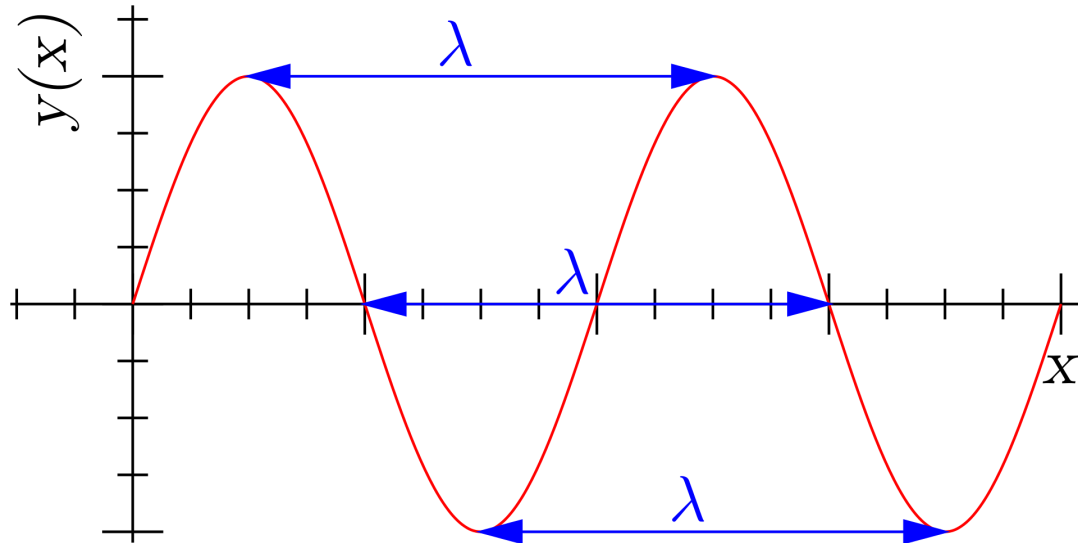
cases on a timeline, was a curve that needed to be flattened. A wavelength with a high amplitude would have disastrous implications on the limited gamut of nationalised healthcare entities. Therefore, a low amplitude of the wave was desirable for coping with the inevitable contamination of the world population in its eventual entire



Adapted from CDC / The Economist

(CDC, 2020)

The visualisations documenting the spread of this viral agent along with journalistic accounts of how it has collapsed a multitude of infrastructures have given way, particularly in the early stages of crisis, to quantitative and qualitative insights into the future. Reports compiled on the basis of how certain governments have handled this crisis held the potential for pre-emption in regards to combating the spread of the virus, and conversely signalled the potential scope of undesirable scenarios as embodied by the collapse of systems across the globe. Perhaps too optimistically, the initial images which circulated in tandem with the slogan of “Flatten the curve” have failed to foresee a more or less periodic frequency of the continuous wavelengths inherent to the crisis.



(Lyon, 2009)

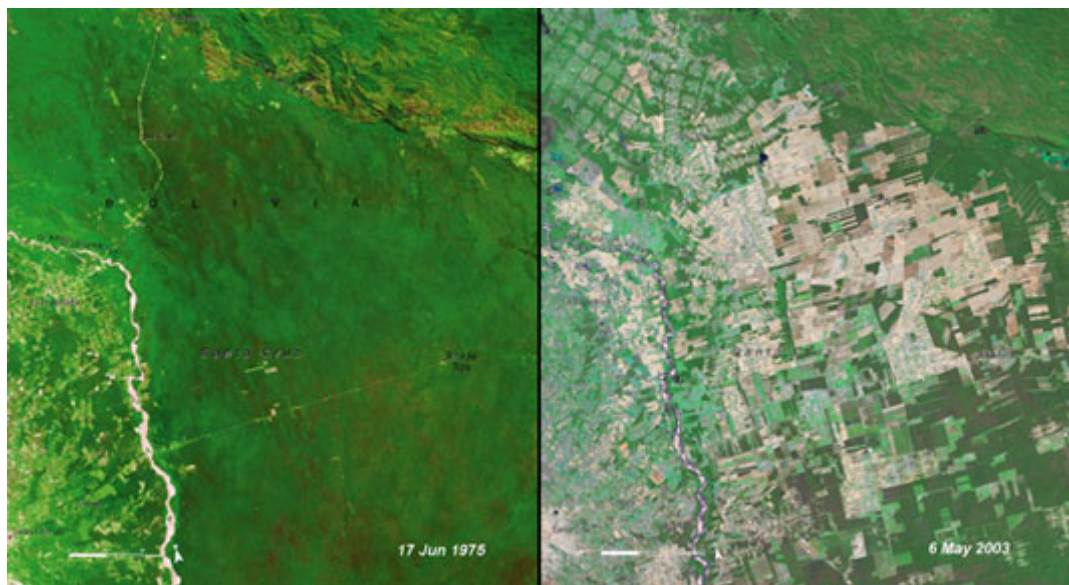
What started as a negligible blip on the radar, turned into a continuous state of crisis which is still unfolding as these words are written, and probably will remain an underlying threat for the years to come. The varying COVID-19 response measures imposed by different governments translates into a wildly fluctuating experience of globality versus locality. The act of crossing borders becomes a situation of enhanced surveillance and curtailed civil liberties. And if travelling is prohibited entirely, isolation takes place at multiple scales, with limits being posed at the entry points of individual residences, urban outskirts and/or nation-state territorial perimeters. Any existing tensions between these predefined limits are both turned inside-out and exacerbated as the virus makes its way across space and adapts over time.

The ultra-media-te disaster

Meanwhile, floating overhead is the overarching disaster, the vast edges to which escapes one's perception. Climate change, as an ongoing disastrous process, manifests its ultramediacy by engulfing everything in the slow release of its altering force. It is an indicator of disastrous time-spans beyond human individuals' perceptions, with effects too latent and complex to grasp. So latent and so complex that, from an anthropocentric point of view, they fail to induce a fight or flight response and they are unevenly distributed throughout space and time.



(n.d.)



(NASA, n.d.)

To think about the origins of such a disaster might be to consider it taking place in the slow catagenesis of organic matter, continuously crushed by the weight of the planet over a vast time span, patiently becoming a main resource to extractivist practices. Even though its processes are not clearly in sight, the ultramediate disaster that we're now referring to as climate change has a degree of acceleration related to human activity. And it is easy to see why engaging with this degree of acceleration under the parameters of the Anthropocene is synonymous with an increasing frequency of disasters. Satellite imagery of humanly altered ecologies and their homologous effects within a complex spatiality of a changing climate, as depicted in the images of melting

ice caps and deforestation, shows a contrast in the temporal states of the same territories as a compelling way to imply the causality of human intervention upon a global environment.

3. A Conversation that Never Took Place

ALL WRITING IS IN FACT CUT-UPS OF GAME AND ECONOMIC BEHAVIOR OVERHEARD? WHAT ELSE? ASSUME THAT THE WORST HAS HAPPENED EXPLICIT AND SUBJECT TO STRATEGY IS AT SOME POINT CLASSICAL PROSE. CUTTING AND REARRANGING FACTOR YOUR OPPONENT WILL GAIN INTRODUCES A NEW DIMENSION YOUR STRATEGY. HOW MANY DISCOVERIES SOUND TO KINESTHETIC? WE CAN NOW PRODUCE ACCIDENT TO HIS COLOR OF VOWELS. AND NEW DIMENSION TO FILMS CUT THE SENSES. TH PLACE OF SAND. GAMBLING SCENES ALL TIMES COLORS TASTING SOUNDS SMELL STREETS OF THE WORLD. WHEN YOU CAN HAVE THE BEST ALL: "POETRY IS FOR EVERYONE" DR NEUMANN IN A COLLAGE OF WORDS READ HEARD INTRODUCED THE CUT-UP SCISSORS RENDERS THE PROCESS GAME AND MILITARY STRATEGY, VARIATION CLEAR AND ACT ACCORDINGLY. IF YOU POSED ENTIRELY OF REARRANGED CUT DETERMINED BY RANDOM A PAGE OF WRITTEN WORDS NO ADVANTAGE FROM KNOWING INTO WRITER PREDICT THE MOVE. THE CUT VARIATION IMAGES SHIFT SENSE ADVANTAGE IN PROCESSING TO SOUND SIGHT TO SOUND. HAVE BEEN MADE BY ACCIDENT IS WHERE RIMBAUD WAS GOING WITH ORDER THE CUT-UPS COULD "SYSTEMATIC DERANGEMENT" OF THE GAMBLING SCENE IN WITH A TEA HALLUCINATION: SEEING AND PLACES. CUT BACK. CUT FORMS. REARRANGE THE WORD AND IMAGE TO OTHER FIELDS THAN WRITING.

(Burroughs, n.d.)

How to set up 'A Conversation that Never Took Place'

A Conversation that Never Took Place is a rhetorical aberration conveyed via multiple speakers. It is based on a series of recorded conversations, which took place separately and by way of more or less unstable internet connections. The interlocutors featured in each recording are a series of four people whose work, together with the particular ways that they themselves refer to it, has been of great interest to me in the past few years. More specifically, these four individuals are thinkers who are also inquisitive towards the occurrence of what I've been referring to as 'bad things'. Establishing contact and entering a dialogue with them became a means of surmounting a kind of remoteness in regards to engaging solely with their published work. And it allowed for a resource of compelling tangents to their previous writing to be contextualised as the elaboration of *Terrafying Theories*.

Each recorded conversation is driven by multiple considerations of the disaster. The series of three 'events' and their mediated scales of impact, which I described in the previous chapter, were proposed as thematic anchors for discussing the disaster variable. This loose thematic approach, together with my invitation towards each speaker to elaborate and even digress at

times, have generated a large part of the material used in this work. To theorise the disaster through these conversations results in a ranging approach towards its perception by the human, its undulating temporalities and its spatial implications. In short, the disastrous nature of these three events is discussed through lenses of personal experience, cognitive science, probability modelling, media theory, continental philosophy and science-fiction. Thus, the speakers who lend their voice towards a disentangling of disasters are as follows:

Geert Lovink (GL) is a media theorist, internet critic and educator, who observes historical dynamics to a continuous communication crisis. I have approached him within our dialog as keeper of cyclical multimedia-crises

Amy Ireland (AI) is a theorist, experimental writer and xenofeminist contributor, who thinks through modernity in terms of technological agency. I have invited her to decipher the disaster for her abilities as time-sorceress and xenopoet.

Inigo Wilkins (IW) is a writer and lecturer with a wide range of focus, such as information and probability theory, cognitive science and finance. His contribution to our talk was as interceptor and translator of disastrous signals.

Sara Hamadeh (SH) is an artist, researcher and dear friend, whose work focuses on the production and distribution of images of war. Her role within our conversation has been that of field-researcher and conveyor of catastrophic intensities.

For the sake of brevity, throughout the remainder of this text I shall refer to my interlocutors by their initials. Each of the invited speakers has contributed to the development of *Terrafying Theories* based on their existing practices and experiences related to intensive phenomena, such as cyclical crises, loopy perceptions of time, and probabilistic considerations of the unknown. From GL's account of digitally mediated representations of the disaster; to AI's quantum approach to the entanglements of catastrophic events; interjecting with IW's reflections on perception, prediction and probability; and invariably returning to SH's proximity, either direct or circumstantially mitigated, to the recurring shockwaves of the catastrophe.

Synopses of conversations that actually took place - still at the level of notes

GL:

“So the real-life 24/7 reporting about the disaster is almost... It doesn't come after the event. The media, and social media in particular now, are so fast that the disaster and the media event itself have become one and the same.”

In my encounter with GL we discussed the media inherent to the disaster's representation, with a particular focus on its effects of inducing a cyclical bewilderment. His position on the matter of the disaster enforced a specific relation of causality, as implied by Paul Virilio's reflection on the

accident. GL emphasised the accident as the looming potential to every aspect of modernity, wherein the endemic nature of the precursive disaster becomes an area of study to be urgently populated with a diverse range of methodic observations.

GL shared perspectives from his own personal archive of looping crises, wherein an anarcho-communist youth and an awareness of cultural complexities at that time drove him towards his experimental approach to media and his catastrophic reflections on their use within different contexts. Our talk was a sprint through a non-sequential history of communication crises around the disaster, from the delays of early media transmissions, to a discourse of compromise and the challenges it faces within our current capitalist forms of organisation. His stance on the continuous crisis as an expression of the disaster variable was a collateral thinking, which involved an extended analysis of our current affordances in relation to the chronic intensities of a loopy disastrous history.

AI:

“This is something that is part of talking about concepts like templexity⁴. All of time is folded together and we only experience it in the way that we experience it because of the way that our cognitive faculties make us experience it, synthesize it. I mean, we're kind of simulating our reality in a way, by having a particular computational process of the way that we put together experience. And outside of that, maybe when you have a near death experience or if you can break out of the way that humans think, through some sort of machinic process, you can access this other kind of realm.”

The conversation I had with AI revolved around various considerations of time within a transformative context of the disaster's processes, as opposed to its forces of destruction. Her contribution towards theorising the disaster has led the conversation to examine the entropic dimension of intense occurrences through temporal experiences of non-linearity. Together we speculated on ways in which human cognition is able to access those experiences by way of cybernetics, memory, simulacra and divination. Within this conversation, multiple disastrous futures have been visited in order to make sense of a prolonged present. A reversal of cause and effect through disastrous hyperstition is what allowed the discussion to explore the ability of 'bad things' and their observers to travel through time. These insights were particularly based on her written work, as I mentioned having an interest towards the temporalities described in *The Poememenon: Form as Occult Technology* (Ireland. 2017).

⁴ Templexity, (a portmanteau concept (temporal + complexity) developed by Nick Land), can be understood as chronologically-disobedient time that is fractured, or as Land himself describes it in *Fanged Noumena* (Land, Mackay and Brassier, 2011, p. 615-616) ':

A prolongation of the time-arithmetic association would thus require a remodelling of time as nonprogressive synthesis without consistent scale or continuous-quantitative trend, no longer intelligible as passage or development. Such ordinal-lexicographic time maps a 'templexity' that is uncountable, fractured/fractional, erratic and heterogeneous, sequential but nonsuccessive.

We discussed the mediated experience of recent disasters through the prism of a limited temporal cognition in relation to telltale omens of a hostile future, as apparent with an ongoing global pandemic and an inevitable climate crisis, both unevenly distributed through time and space. However, she expressed affirmative beliefs through evoking those mediated experiences as carrying a technological potential for temporarily transcending a given order of things and tapping into the entangled structures and possibilities of disastrous hypermedia. My discussion with AI has been an engaging snare into what broadly translates as mystifying technologies of prescience and proto-experience. From speculating on the processing power required to run infinite simulations of the disaster's probability, to a bridging of ontological hierarchy through the development of a unified and seamless neuralnet between human and artificial intelligence, the disaster has emerged as a partially computable occurrence.

IW: "Yeah, it's directly baked into the theory of the Black Swan⁵, right? Which you mentioned in your email. So Taleb defines a Black Swan as a low frequency event with a high impact. And the idea is that the Black Swan is something that you couldn't imagine before, but that once it's happened, immediately it seems obvious. So it becomes retrospectively woven into a narrative, according to which of course it was going to happen. But it's before the fact that you couldn't imagine it happening."

My interest in approaching IW was largely informed by his reading of the introduction to his then forthcoming book *Irreversible Noise*⁶ (Wilkins. 2021). Through his reflections on noise as a theoretical concept, technical term, and aesthetic genre, his stance on the disastrous variable implied different acts of measuring and re-measuring. During our talk IW was engaged in maintaining a rigorous consideration of terms and a returning emphasis on the necessity of revision within modes of theory-building, while performing an acute analysis on the perplexity. As a means of establishing distinctions of noise versus signal in regards to the disaster's transmissions, IW has brought up the question of perceiving and processing these intense occurrences by way of sensorial stimuli and how they play a fundamentally cybernetic role in cognitive processes of deduction and the modelling of probability.

IW's elaboration on mediated experiences of disasters was a correlation to online hallucinations that human cognition synthesises in order to make sense of and adjust an expectation of 'bad things' happening. As IW puts it when he contextualises the concept of the Black Swan (Taleb. 2008) as a sudden display of latent catastrophic mechanisms, through a retrospective ascertainment of the disaster's impact, both direct and indirect, a sufficiently complex dynamic should arise from the manners in which we build theories around catastrophic occurrences versus the ways we act upon those theories.

⁵ Or more precisely, according to Nassim Nicholas Taleb (Taleb, 2020, back cover): "A BLACK SWAN is a highly improbable event with three principal characteristics: It is unpredictable; it carries a massive impact; and, after the fact, we concoct an explanation that makes it appear less random, and more predictable, than it was. The astonishing success of Google was a black swan; so was 9/11."

⁶ Reading available at: <https://soundcloud.com/urbanomic/plaguepod-bonus-irreversible-noise-readings> (Urbanomic, 2020)

SH: “That despair is something that you just carry around with you no matter what geography you live in. And once you experience the disaster, that's it. It's not that you're traumatized, I don't know if that's the word to describe it. But it's just something that you carry with you, it becomes part of who you are. It's more like a way of life. It's an expectation of what life looks like, that maybe other people don't see in the same way. [...] for me, despair is just... It becomes like a reality of yours. Yes, it's how life works. There's nothing really outside of despair. There's no exteriority.”

Throughout our exchange, the manner in which SH engages in dialogue becomes an act of juggling, in which the proximity of experience and the remoteness of abstraction seep into each other to form a disastrous discourse of particular significance. Having previous contact to the work as text and performance, I found her to be a conveyor of intensity in her accounts and her philosophy of the disaster. She spoke primarily about her contact with the explosion of August 2020, with profound interludes of her history in Beirut and her growing political disillusionment vis-à-vis the hegemonic and managerial practices at work within the Lebanese state. However, SH did not experience the sweeping blow of the explosion immediately, she was elsewhere on the globe. Rather, what she experienced was a highly entangled, time-twisting form of the disaster's impact, tapping into the summation of her previous catastrophic encounters and the losses that she has already faced. SH described the explosion as a sudden totalising shock, a singular moment experienced by everything in its path and in its wake.

Within or without the confines of our conversation, SH is someone who wields extraordinary oratorical prowess, has a large range of experience and sensibility in regards to the disaster, and states without reluctance that, for her, the disaster is a way of life. The figure she embodied within our conversation, as a result of her individual and collective experiences with the disaster implies that, to her and many others, the shock of the catastrophe is no longer an interruption to the pre-established order of things, but rather a commonplace occurrence within the sequence, an sustained expectation of what is to come. Similar to how Maurice Blanchot refers to dissimulation as an effect of the disaster, which I epitomised in the introduction of this thesis, SH personifies the manner in which the disaster variable can inscribe itself onto a plane, pointing to the catastrophe as a cumulative experience rather than a singular event. In relation to her position, being terrafied is merely an effect cultivated by prolonged exposure to the disaster's mediated impact. Thus she can never be terrafied. As a fictional figure suggested by her contribution to the conversation, she is one with the disaster⁷.

⁷ Perhaps a helpful contextualisation of being one with the disaster is Gilles Deleuze's notion of being in the middle: “The English zero is always in the middle. Bottlenecks are always in the middle. Being in the middle of a line is the most uncomfortable position. One begins again through the middle.” (Deleuze et al., 2012)

Weaving Nonlinearity : Cutting Up & Folding In

The decision to generate a supercut of all the conversations I recorded was not made post-facto. It has been an explicit interest since the early stages of developing this work, and generally thinking through notions of non-linearity is something I've been implementing within previous outputs of my editorial practice. During the development of this work, I've been moving to-and-fro between modes of editing the material I compiled and experimenting with forms of authorship, which both preceded and later became adjacent to the recording of the conversations that actually took place. As the terrified host, automated stenographer and editorial specter of *A Conversation that Never Took Place*, I took the opportunity of editing spoken material, while simultaneously embodying the contextual node through which the material is spoken in the first place. In other words, documenting the discussion of *Terrafying Theories* has led me to write out loud with other people's voices.

An important note which arose from revisiting the initial recordings was the degree to which these conversations, although taking place separately, were able to correspond and seep into each other. How did this occur? Is it their loose cognitive compatibility that allows for this interwoven construction? Or is it based on a potential concurrence between the speakers, which might have manifested if this conversation actually took place? Certainly this overlap between dialogues wasn't caused solely by implementing a common theme among them, but was also largely due to the manner in which I engaged in the relay of information from one discussion to another successively, similar to a game of telephone. By taking part of my interlocutor's input from one recorded talk and planting it into the following one with another speaker, I've attempted to synthesise possible responses that each character might have towards one another. Surely this can be interpreted as an obscure form of agency on my part, in which my intention to converse with my interlocutors becomes an act of fabricating a kind of relational dynamic between them. And I can firmly say that this was the case. However, I've maintained a careful consideration towards reducing the chances of misrepresenting my interlocutors, simply by not representing them at all and instead referring to each as 'another person I've spoken to'. Suffice to say that I've also communicated my intentions of fabricating to everyone involved, both in my initial proposal and in the conversations that actually took place. My main intention was thus to convey a loopy rendition of multiple views on my suggestions of disasters, as uttered by multiple characters within a chimeric conversation.

At the level of conceptual semantics, the manner in which I've strewn together *A Conversation that Never Took Place* means to express both an alignment and contradiction amongst the speakers. Thus they rely on a premeditated arrangement of cut-ups and fold-ins, to dissolve their pertinence to their own mediated time-space and to synthesise a conversational feedback loop that never took place. Throughout the different versions I've edited and produced under this format, the resulting interplay has made me consider each voice as a figure taking part in a speculative fiction, through the emergence of a disastrous discourse. With this in mind, I've been interested in building a granular structure, in which the relations between the spoken and written words that compose this conversation are somehow embedded, both sequentially and non-sequentially, within the interface of its multiple dimensions. As a disastrous outcome of my

multiple positions, my research and the methods I've been experimenting with, *A Conversation that Never Took Place* emerges as an attempt towards a certain entangled complexity amongst the units of media depicting an elusive tableau of both the disaster and the dialogical frequencies which carry it.

4. Conclusion



I felt **that** it just... Because I was also thinking of prediction, predicting disasters... And what does that mean to put the disaster on some kind of a terrain, a chart, a map? What does it mean when the disaster happens and to the moment of it absolutely eludes you? Like, it passes and you're like, 'Oh, it's happened already? I didn't see that'...

Screenshot of A Conversation that Never Took Place (work in progress)

With this work, I've embarked on a research trajectory aiming to explore multiple conceptual narratives within a unified context, which was in turn established by my situated experiences and mediated position in relation to undesirable events with devastating impacts. Being terrafied, as an epilogue to this journey, is explored as an embodiment of a latent anxiety induced by the disaster making its way across time and space, lodging itself within an already cramped amygdala. However, it apparently is also a feeling which coagulates a particular investigative approach towards its sources, the kernels from which the disaster transmits. The recent terrafied—and virologically cyclical—time spent in isolation has for me been generative of means through which to engage with what is happening outside. The terrafying theories lying at the basis of this thesis have allowed me to explore a complex set of theoretical interests and affective experiences, through which to reach a further discourse involved in witnessing the disaster from its margins. And the more or less ludic means through which I've generated and rearranged discussion aim to render a speculative consideration of the chosen topic on multiple fronts. While I can reflect on the specificity of this work as pertaining to the choices that I've made and my terrafied disposition, I believe that the methods I've elaborated on thus far can be employed within other frameworks that require documentation, classification and editorial practices. However, twisting time and reverse-engineering the future should be a primary impetus upon choosing these methods.

The concerns of this project allow me to regard it as a convoluted form of urgent publishing around topics of collapse, using a series of textual artifices and carrying a kind of memetic charge. The leaps and loops that this work operates through aim to cross-narrate an overwhelming experience of seeing and hearing traces of disastrous hypermedia. The methods I've used within this entanglement of sources, formats and plurivocal modes of address have amounted to a work of speculative fiction, through which to question and represent the disaster. The input of my interlocutors within this loose discussion thus becomes a result of my subjective positioning in relation to a range of situated knowledge pools, rather than a universal or technical approach towards high-impact phenomena. To paraphrase the seemingly bewildered, yet highly perceptive, account to which SH testifies at the very beginning of A Conversation that Never Took Place, both a remote observation and a direct exposure to the disaster's variables are perhaps still insufficient in order to grasp the abstract or concrete forces which the disaster

channels. What might be necessary is a speculative record of the disaster's translatable signals, varying duration and transformative continuity.

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Appendix

A (provisional) Transcript of A Conversation that Never Took Place

A working, yet still early, prototype of the conversational dynamics of this piece is available for listening and reading at:

https://hub.xpub.nl/sandbox/~ioanatomici/cc/edit3/edit3_html/edit3.html.

Thus far, part of story goes like this:

SH: I felt that it just... Because I was also thinking of prediction, predicting disasters... And what does that mean to put the disaster on some kind of a terrain, a chart, a map? What does it mean when the disaster happens and to the moment of it absolutely eludes you? Like, it passes and you're like, 'Oh, it's happened already? I didn't see that'...

IW: You know, the idea of disaster... Or like, etymologically, disaster is the negation of star, right? So it's based on this kind of ancient idea that the position of stars has reflections of fortune or luck or whatever. Then, you know, also the word flu comes from the same kind of idea, the influence of the stars.

AI: It's two different ways of looking at it, though. Like, one is kind of pragmatic and social and infrastructural. And the other is kind of like more abstract and philosophical. Which I think gets into really interesting questions of... What is a disaster? Like, the notion of a disaster isn't necessarily absolute. I think you always have to ask, like, who is it a disaster for?

IW: And then, you know, so the disasters you mentioned are all kind of direct effects of these confluence of things, particularly capitalism. So...

SH: I know you mentioned that you don't want to talk about it within a capitalist context, but I think it's inevitable. I don't know if one... Even if you don't mention the word capitalism, and I'm not saying you have to say capitalism in every sentence, but...

IW: Then, you know, the spatial and temporal occurrence of those events, where they happened and when they happened, are in some sense unpredictable. But they're also entirely kind of foreseeable and foreseen from another kind of perspective. Right? So we knew that there was a possibility of explosions happening from storing explosives in ships and warehouses. We knew that there was the likelihood of a pandemic. We knew

that kind of producing coal, chucking out coal fumes into the atmosphere produces pollution. And so obviously other things do. And so obviously, you know... So we knew all of that. But it's like, then it brings us to the way in which you act on knowledge and what's being sacrificed in the action. And in the capitalist form of social organization, it doesn't... You know, those effects have not mattered because the rich are then able to insure themselves whilst the poor are the ones who get the effects right.

SH: But everything that... I mean, if you hear politicians in Lebanon talking about the post explosion situation, everyone was saying the word 'opportunity'. 'This is an opportunity for us to do this and that. This is an opportunity for us'... And thinking of disasters as also opportunities within a capitalist, you know... Within a financial capitalist context is... Yeah, it's mind altering a bit.

IW: Whereas on the other hand, you know, psychotic of beliefs in, like, 'Aliens are controlling my mind' is the opposite. Right? So you've got this kind of pathological overweighting of your expectations of your kind of theory, of your evidence.

GL: Yeah. So that is a completely other mindset, time-frame, event horizon in comparison to, say, the disasters that we currently hear about. Which are earthquakes, floodings and maybe a plane crash or something like that where, you know, really it's all about the accident. Right? And yeah, I am quite influenced by the, you know, the theorist of the accident, which is Paul Virilio, of course. And, you know, he describes very well that the accident is part of the design, if you like.

IW: Yeah. I mean, it's kind of directly baked into the theory of the part of the Black Swan. Right? So, I mean, Taleb defines the Black Swan as a low frequency event with a high impact... Yeah. So it has a high impact. And the idea is that the Black Swan is something that you couldn't imagine before, but that once this happens, you immediately... Immediately, it seems obvious. So it becomes kind of retrospectively woven into a narrative according to which, of course, it was going to happen. But it's before the fact that you couldn't imagine it happening.

AI: Time is something that's created by synthesizing subjects. So for Kant, he has like this whole thing about how humans create space and time cognitively, that they don't... Linear time doesn't exist outside of the way that humans process experience and that it's a necessary way that we create experience. We don't really know what's outside of it because we can't get out of it. And in Deleuze, I guess, the sort of way that he transforms that is when he talks about, like, the Virtual. And the Virtual is this kind of strange topological space where, I mean, space is even not the best way to represent it... But it's like all time is folded together in that, in the Virtual. And if you get out of your

way of synthesizing time and space, you break that up through certain kinds of catastrophes, like intense experiences... Death is also like one of those things. You know, he talks about stuff like vertigo as also like one thing that sort of breaks up your... Momentarily, breaks up your way of synthesizing time and space. You suddenly get to this point where time is kind of all folded in on itself. So there's this kind of, like, and this is something that I guess is part of talking about when you use concepts like Templicity... All the time is kind of folded together. And we only experience it in the way that we experience it because of the way that our cognitive faculties make us experience it, synthesize it. So talking about, I mean, we're kind of simulating our reality in a way by having a particular computational process of the way that we put together experience. And outside of that, maybe when you have a near death experience, or if you can break out of the way that humans think through some sort of machinic process, you can access this other kind of realm.

SH: Um, can I ask you why you chose time as a parameter for determining the difference between different types of disasters? Like why do you think that the duration it takes to reach the point of disaster is...

IW: Um, I guess, yeah... Well, one of the things you're talking about there, again, is this idea... OK, so I mean, the idea of this loopy time you're mentioning and the experience, the relationship of disaster to time is interesting. I mean...

GL: So this kind of disconnect is very, very difficult to deal with because some people will have worked on it, or thought about it and have been busy with it for decades. But not us. So we're out. But OK it already hit them and, you know, but not us. And this is funny because the time, this kind of incubation time of the catastrophe, can be really decades, sometimes even centuries. Whereas, what we are used to with the disaster... The disaster usually unfolds in seconds, or well, at best, maybe minutes, some minutes. And then we're already online, live. The reporting about it has started, you know, seconds into the event. So the real life 24/7 reporting about the disaster is almost, you know... It doesn't come after the event. The media, and social media in particular now, are so fast that the disaster and the media event itself have kind of become one and the same. It's important to note that there is no reporting anymore. Right? It just unfolds in real time.

SH: Have you read Jalal Toufic, "The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster"? I just opened it right now, while I'm talking to you... Can I read to you the first page? So he starts in the really, like the... In the very, very introduction, he says: 'If the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, respectively, are a surpassing disaster', and he will explain later what he means by 'surpassing

disaster'... Then beyond not only the immediate death toll and the manifest destruction of buildings, including museums, libraries and temples, and of various other sorts of physical records, but also the long term hidden material effects in cells that have been affected with radioactivity in the depths of the body and the latent traumatic effects that may manifest themselves apres-coup. There would be an additional immaterial withdrawal of literally philosophical and thoughtful texts, as well as of certain films, videos and musical works. Notwithstanding, the copies of these continue to be physically available of paintings and buildings that were not... [...] In other words, whether disaster is a surpassing one for a community defined by its sensibility to the immaterial withdrawal that results from such a disaster'. So if this surprising disaster 'cannot be asserted by the number of casualties, the intensity of psychic traumas and the extent of material damage, but why whether we encounter in its aftermath symptoms of withdrawal of tradition'. And he talks a lot about what he means by this. And he goes into...

GL: There is the idea of the representation, but there is also something else happening. And I think we need to make this distinction, at least. For many people, they are one and the same. But I think we must at least question this and also look if there is not more to it than just the image. And to kind of build up this more sophisticated vocabulary of the disaster in all its different forms, that in itself can be good because it means that, just as a pure beginners problem, the question is, what are we dealing with here? We say, OK, well, but there are different, you know, phenomena that we are talking about. There are different timelines. There are different things that occur to us that have a completely different scope and nature. So that is in itself very useful, to understand that not all disasters are the same.

IW: I wouldn't be a... I don't think we are doomed to follow the trajectory, the current trajectory.

AI: And, you know, like, not to be just completely dark and grim about it. Another example of one of these ways of breaking out of linear time is falling in love. Like, when you fall in love, it is a kind of catastrophe. Like, it really absolutely makes it impossible to live in linear time. And you just get stuck in this strange kind of space where everything that you presupposed or thought was going to happen has completely melted away. And you're in the sort of, like you said before, a freefall.

GL: What crises, you know, are comparable to the ones we're confronted with today? I think a lot has got to do with kind of, you know, looming crises that you don't really see and feel and then suddenly become apparent. So they are not really there until, yeah, they hit the surface and then, you know, become really a concern for everyone with

enormous, you know, personal, political and economic consequences. And, yeah, those types of crises we've had many, many of. And I think the, let's say, the Lebanon crises are kind of becoming not the norm, but becoming the exception.

SH: 'To start a story of horror and despair, it is almost always appropriate to talk about the weather. A clear blue sky or a cool, gentle breeze on a summer day and a barrage of normalcy that draws the final line between an undisturbed natural condition and the inevitable disaster it precedes. As a tower falls, a camera seizes its initial descent, tears it apart from time like a dream. As we walk erroneously in the street, as we lurk in a shadow uncertain and insecure, just before the world as we know it falls apart, crumbles into small particles and disappears. The catastrophe seems to have just eluded us. We retain no memory of it, no document or testimony. All we can recall is that only a moment earlier it was late fall and now it is spring and the fields below are green and moist. We rise from a bunker or a bank, a private loan or a rifle in hand. The air still saturated with the usual suffocating odor of bones, urine, blood and cow guts coming from the city's public slaughterhouse. The surrounding nightclubs sunken into the ground like communal graves and bomb shelters. Their lightheartedly featured tables, shaped like coffins and war memorabilia. Their loud beat failed to disguise the deep, groovy homes of tower cranes and the buzzes of surveillance aircrafts. To talk about the weather is to foresee and to forecast, with an oracle or a satellite and an all embracing gaze. The weather allows us to allocate the disaster on a set of defined coordinates, a sudden fall or a loud burst. But then again, there is no punctual moment of disaster. Talking about the weather is to define the disaster in terms of predetermined parameters, stacked and categorized into complex models and processes. With a log, a chart or a trembling needle, a young intern's face is overjoyed as her war machine detects a movement or a long anticipated disturbance on an infinite plane of stillness. Both as catalyst and as a warning, the sky turns yellow and the city drowns in its own flooded sewage. All at once, we are in motion, and then we are still again. Talking about the weather requires a register of perpetual disturbance on infinite plains of stillness. It requires a constant territorialization of space. Talking about the weather requires the ability to distinguish between the calculable and the incalculable. It is to come to terms with the fact that an Orwellian nightmare always starts on a bright, cold day in April and that drone strike on Sunday mornings in June'. Then there's, like, a whole rumbling about drones. But I just wanted to read that segment...

GL: Yeah, so of course, we could say that even in that case, you know, the explosion was a result of years and years of corruption, incompetence, a looming kind of war that wasn't really happening. It wasn't really a follow up of the civil war. But what kind of war was it then? But these kind of sudden outbursts, yeah, we're longing for them. But they don't often come. And suddenly, they don't come at the moment we want them to

become apparent. So that is a problem. The problem is really that the collapses and catastrophes of today are really endemic. So we try to make them visible. We try to make other people aware of the fact that they exist and really threaten our well-being and planet or our economic existence. But that's a very, very lengthy undertaking. Right? So funny enough, the catastrophe and the disaster unfolds itself suddenly, but in most cases... Yeah, where is the story that led to it? We haven't really noticed, or we were vaguely aware that they were happening, but not really. So there's this kind of disconnection between the event and everything that led up to the event. Right?

SH: The, you know... The explosion happened. It reeled me back into that time-space, simply because it was so fascinating to understand that, momentarily, there was one thing happening. In all the explosions that used to happen before, it would, let's say, an explosion happens in the southern suburb of Beirut. But people are already partying in the nightclubs in the center of the city. It's a very, the city is not a cohesive entity. It's islands of many different societies and religions and experiences. And, like, when I went to my bachelor's school, it was the first time I met people my age who, to my shock, had completely different experiences with war and... War was part of my life. It wasn't part of many of my peers' lives. When I was, in 2006, crying over some massacre that happened in the southern suburb, a friend of mine was eating a burger at McDonald's telling the guy to shut off the TV because she doesn't want to hear about the war while she's eating her burger. It's a completely different paradigm.

SH: But on the 4th of August, 2020, everyone in the city from every type of socio economic religious backgrounds, every single one for a split of a second, was suspended in the air... Suspended in the air. Between life and death. For a split of a second, everyone experienced that, everyone heard the same thing, everyone felt the same shake. Everyone. And that is extraordinary for me.

IW: And yes, then, of course, there's all of these signal noise-distinctions where you have modelling, right? So when you produce a model, effectively you're saying these details are important, are signal, and these details are not important, they're noise. And then some details you haven't even considered at all. They're outside of your possibility framework. You just haven't thought of them. Then suddenly something happens that you hadn't considered. And that's a noise to your model, right? It's a perturbation to your theory or to yourself. Right? If it's something like COVID, which kills you or makes you ill...

AI: Yeah. I saw a couple of essays early on kind of connecting the... I mean, the conditions that created the possibility of the pandemic are conditions of the way that humanity is engaged with the environment. Through farming, through globalization,

through transport of goods. This, I mean, it wouldn't have spread in the way that it did, obviously, if we weren't so interconnected. The way that the meat industry, monoculture is like one of things that's created the conditions for transference from animals to humans, in the way that this virus has spread, particularly. So a lot of these disasters kind of thread together as well, in a way that's interesting.

IW: There's this nice term that Longo and a few others have, Giuseppe Longo, calls it the 'adjacent possible'. So there's, you know, if you think of your state space as a kind of rectangle there, then there's a possibility that's outside, that's adjacent to that possibility space. That gets opened up by, once you get into this possibility, here within the rectangle, then suddenly the adjacent possible becomes available. And it's not possible until you're into that position.

AI: I was thinking, like, in terms of the kind of what you were saying about this desire, which I think is very palpable in the UK here and obviously the US as well, to kind of keep these policies liberal. Which seems to be a marker with some exceptions, of like the Western response to it, like New Zealand is a good exception. Melbourne in Australia, which have I think recently been charged with breaking human rights with one of their really severe lockdowns, as another exception. But the fact that there's this complete difference in the way that the governments have handled the pandemic in these different cultural contexts is really interesting, because a lot of the Asia Pacific countries are now, you know, kind of living as if the virus is finished. Like, I left Australia three months ago and I had to go through a very convoluted process to actually be allowed to leave my own country, just because the borders are closed down at the moment. But it was kind of back to normal there, like, no one was wearing masks. It's changed a little bit now, but no one was wearing masks. Everything was open as normal. And then here it's just like you're going back in time. We're going back to kind of like the dark ages of the beginning of the pandemic again. But I was thinking, right, because there was this sort of conspiracy theory at the beginning, of it being a biological weapon and it escaped the lab in Wuhan. And we had these kind of like... Sort of panicky conspiracy theories about China and Chinese power, which have been debunked. But I think it's interesting how there is, like, in a way that, if you want to frame it in terms of East versus West... That the way that it has completely destroyed the economic functioning of Western countries, partially through their own liberal handling of the situation, versus a lot of the Asian and East Asian and Pacific countries, is in a way its own kind of like soft warfare. Everything is kind of going on as normal in these other cultures

. So I think that's kind of interesting, that that's always the same kind of result, just like through this kind of like geopolitical play. At least the virus is not deadly enough to kind

of be seen as a biological weapon, but it has this economic effect, that it's going to change the geopolitical power structure of the globe for the next 50 years or so.

GL: But yeah, the tipping point, of course, can be applied to many, many things. And these days, we are most often thinking about, you know, the tipping point of a disaster. Also think of the endemic... And so how the virus grows and then reaches a point where it starts to really multiply very, very fast. This is applied also to many other things, of course, not just the disease or the virus, but... And of course, this is one of the dominant motives in the whole climate change debate. And it's that, I believe, you know... Is it the two degrees tipping point, or the one and a half degrees, or in between one and a half and two? Right. Well, what happens when you go over one and a half, let's say? We're very close to that or already over that tipping point.

AI: Yeah, because there's a... There's a fundamental mismatch between the way that the human individual with a particularly limited lifespan experiences catastrophe, versus the scale at which catastrophe occurs. And the ones that you, like, the example of climate change is a good one. I was thinking, I was writing the other day about, what are called in official literature, endocrine disruptors or, like, hormonal pollution in the water supply and in the ecosystem. And how there's a kind of... Like, this is another catastrophe that we live in. I guess it's connected to the environmental catastrophe that we live in. That we can't really perceive the long term effects of because they're happening at a time scale that's too slow or that's below our threshold of human sensing.

SH: We forget that at some point most of the industries or most of the... Yeah, most of the polluting elements right now exist in the Global South. They're owned by companies in the North, but the actual companies... And it all comes from, still, the whole colonial operation of taking the resources of the South in order to build the North. And when you come in the middle of this and tell, let's say Iraq, to abandon their fossil fuel dream in order to pick up their economy and finally have some... Or when you talk about Lebanon, we have natural gas and we're in... You know, people are dying of hunger. You forget that without... I mean, climate change will kill the poorest of the poor in the Global South before anyone else. Or, if anything, it will force these people to be displaced into other places, within a time when we are so reliant on border states and border regimes and anti-immigration and all of these kinds of politics. We forget that you cannot blame someone in, let's say, Alexandria, when you tell them, you know, the level of the sea, will be a few centimetres higher in the next 50 years, when they are scared whether they will be alive this evening or not.

AI: So. Oh. Oh, yeah. And the other thing that that reminded me of when I was writing about it was I don't know if you read it, but the trilogy, the science fiction trilogy by the Chinese writer Liu Cixin, he wrote The Three Body Problem, The Dark Forest and Death's End I think it's the third book. One of the novels is about... Basically Earth receives a kind of declaration of war from an alien civilization in another solar system. But the time scale of the war is so huge, it's impossible for the currently existing human civilization to be able to really prepare for it. So I think it's supposed to happen about four hundred years into the future. By the time that the alien civilization actually physically approaches Earth... Right. So how do you say... Like, the world governments get together and they create like a global body to prepare for this war. But then how do you say to a series of populations 'You have to forfeit everything in your life right now, all your ambition and dreams, in order to prepare for a war effort in the future'? 'So we have to live underground. It's total austerity. All of the income and wealth of the earth has to be put into developing military technology. And that has to happen for you, for your children and your children's children for war that you're never, ever going to see through or perhaps even come out the other end of. So there's a kind of fundamental mismatch in the way that you can internalize that idea of that catastrophe in order to actually prepare for it.

IW: In the last, this is the problem of induction: 'So in the last... In my life, I've only had this many instances of... I've experienced an earthquake only twice. But if you go back like the last thousand years, there's maybe more. And so the frequency measure is different according to which scale you opt for.

GL: Malcolm Gladwell has that famous book, "Tipping Point". But usually this is read by CEOs and business people and entrepreneurs and so on, right? Where they are looking for the tipping point of their own market. Right? Which is all about growth.

IW: So the idea of hedging is based on collectivizing risk, collectivizing against risk. And the whole kind of insurance business is as well. But it's also, like, from its beginnings, insurance has been the driver of capital and driven by it. But then there's no reason why insurance couldn't be kind of completely imagined in a different much more collective way. And for example, the most kind of concrete example for me is the NHS, in UK is what it is called, I guess it has different names elsewhere... You know, it's just a collective insurance against health. You know, then there's other ways that we can collectively avoid the disaster that are just as important.