

Incommensurable things

Undergraduate VCS Symposium

Rachel Wang

When we ask ourselves what can be catalysts for reforming relationships to reality during crisis, under what conditions does this “reformation” happen? And how does the category of “crisis” change things? I used the pages of my thesis to think about the parallels of speculative design, climate fiction, and the movie *Wandering Earth*, to talk about the fictionalized position of “action” when time is the insurmountable object. The technoscientific mobilization of disasters is often characterized by a state of permanent anxiety, in which the affective speculation of preparedness is not just individually provoked but socially and economically oriented. The moral economies of “future-thinking” are inhabited now—while crisis produces a temporal domain that is suspended in supposed immediacy, its circulating affects and desires aren’t always as progressive as one hopes. For this video, I have some continued parallel thoughts:

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How do we imagine the unimaginable?

How do we commensurate the incommensurable?

How do we create incidental meaning out of moments of ennui? That don’t necessarily have relevance now, but may resurface later?

When the future becomes an inadequate category for thinking about the future, how should the diffusion of ideas be oriented when they seem to collapse in times of urgency?

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Black holes are weird, complicated things. Take this image of a black hole. On April 10th, 2019, this image was captured by an international network of telescopes called the Event Horizon Telescope. As reported on NASA’s Chandra X-ray mission page, this “supermassive black hole is in the center of Messier 87, an elliptical galaxy some 55 million light-years from Earth.” But how do we actually understand what’s happening in this image, besides looking at it as a relatively circular blob?

The “shadow” at the center of the ring is in fact the *entirety* of the black hole’s event horizon, and then some. The ring of color is like the precipice of visibility—the light, gas, and matter that swirls around the black hole near the event horizon. As light passes the event horizon, it gets warped into the black hole like wrapping around a sphere, so to use an imperfect, three-dimensional metaphor, the “shadow” we see in the image is as if we unfolded a sphere. The variation in the ring of visibility around the black hole is basically “layers” of light rays being looped around the black hole. Light and matter are actually being bent in all directions, but we can only capture it from one vantage point.

It is fundamentally different from an actual shadow because for us in our atmosphere, light travels in a straight line. If I put my hand in front of a lamp, I’ll see a shadow of my hand on the wall because I am not gravitationally significant enough to warp the light rays; the

straight path of light doesn't go through or around my hand, hence the shadow. The shadow doesn't appear totally dark the way a black hole does because the room I'm in is very textured, and light rays are reflecting off other objects and still reaching the surface of the wall. I'm curious about the path of photons as it touches the edge of my hand. I started looking into the quantum theory of light diffraction, but was overwhelmed really quickly.

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I've been overwhelmed by a lot of different things in the past many weeks. I had a conversation the other week about the relevance of theory in times of urgency: why does any of this shit matter when crisis is at hand? Why is having a technical understanding of the optical difference between black holes and shadows important? Where is gravitational understanding when people are talking about the gravity of a situation?

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I was pondering the shared etymology of Universe and University recently, and how we conceptualize their respective relevance in times when pedagogy must be critically challenged, fundamentally transformed, and hopefully progressed. However, I'm always very wary of paying too much homage to etymology because while they represent origins, they don't necessarily relate to reality. These are some etymological diagrams for the word "universe" and "university." I got these graphics from Google searching "[term] etymology," and I believe they're automatically generated. Ironically, it's difficult to actually confirm their source. Universities have strange relationships to learning. I can uncover the universe in university, but like Pandora's Pithos, like anyone's can of worms, [SLOW DOWN] unpleasant things may lie inside.

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Our reality of people-and-virus is incommensurable. How do we reckon the incommensurable? I've always been very wary of phrases like "now more than ever" or "unprecedented times." I'm wary because to what extent does that indicate some kind of historical amnesia? Or an amnesia that isn't even historical? South Korea and the US announced their first cases of COVID-19 on the same day. What if the US government started taking preventative measures as early as January? What if they actually ensured hospitals would be well-equipped? The devastating thing about this crisis is that those who could have mitigated the crisis didn't, and now everyone must pay those consequences in different, uneven, and unfair ways.

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How do we externalize our internal physiological mechanisms through adaptive technologies? The way we manage our internal and external environments is also a process of reckoning the history of this management. If anything, the technocracy of inequality during crisis reveals how inadequate the categories of life and non-life are. Thinking about radiation seems very relevant now. Like, how have we engaged the memory of radiation and the radiation of memory? Detonations are not symmetrical, nor are their spread. Toxicity is not everywhere in the same way.

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We have no long-term plan for storing radioactive waste.

We have no long-term plan for mitigating viruses.

We have no long-term plan.

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Radiation and viruses diffuse the notion of the sovereign self. Anthropologist Anna Tsing has said, “Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option.” Things leak across bodies, and contamination is inevitable. As these ecological actors leak out of the logic of government and capital, how do I get through this? And who do I want to be on the other side?

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In the past two months, *virus* has emerged as the predominant regulator of planetary bio-geo-chemistry. From the collapse of immune systems and immunities, it seems that the possibility for environmental recovery has been resurrected. It’s ironic. Whose immunity?

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Comparisons between climate change and COVID-19 is not so much analogous than it is one of rapid collision. Critiquing Bruno Latour’s characterization of coronavirus as a “dress rehearsal,” Joshua Clover describes the two threats as things “that challenge our senses of scale and temporality and so seem to demand something like a state to address them. Rather it turns out that one shows us the character of the other with horrific lucidity.” In deploying the rhetorical strategies of fiction, the scorched-earth policy of the covfefe-19 administration blunders in the graves of its constituencies. I have no idea what faith in the illusion of sovereignty will bring. I think that anything with unwavering faith in returns to the fiction of “normalcy” and all its baggage will be taken by COVID, be it physiologically or existentially. But again, I have no idea what that would be like.

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This text, like any edited volume, was written asynchronously. If it wasn’t for the time-based format, it would have been likely that this text was also read asynchronously. As global, planetary paradigms shift, so do considerations of synchronicity change. In reckoning the complicated timescales of matter, not every issue can be taken as an endlessly scalable challenge to overcome. But as Joseph Grigely suggests, what if we take it as things to *intercome*? To continually resituate, maintain, realign, and sustain? It brings together intergenerational sensing and intersedimentary thinking. It is historically-aware anachronism. Nothing changes when the biospheric ethic stays to a deterministic path; the porosity and elasticity of these exchanges necessarily feed into one another in a nebulous fashion as opposed to a hierarchical one.

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In 2019, Thomas Lamarré presented on “Radiation: Ecology and Economy,” and proposed that we think of radiation beyond the notion of half-lives, as a political entity, as a mode of existence. Here, the concept of “animation” comes in. Does animation maintain itself? Sustain itself? When unraveling the yarns of animism, I think it’s exceptionally important to imagine the things that are supposedly beyond our imagination as things with agency. Like with viruses. Like black holes?