

‘Chiasmic time’: Being-in-time in *Time Being*

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Time Being is a collaborative film made by Ruairí Corr and Deborah Robinson that explores the temporalities that emerge when the primacy of sight and sound in film is brought together with touch, breath, vibration, smell, heat, and other somatic sensations that enable us to feel ourselves in and through the world, remaking it as we go. Ruairí is a creative maker living with a complex set of visual and sensory-processing differences related to the condition adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD). Deborah is an artist who uses film and neurodivergent experiences of time and attention in ways that disrupt narrative sequence. As Ruairí and Deborah developed a collaborative relationship over time, they used practice-as-research methods that attended to Ruairí’s everyday experience to develop forms of audio-visual representation that reframe normative versions of time. They worked together to find ways of holding in film the time made when the world is sensed through the hands, the lungs, the stomach, the skin, and through the temporal displacements of alternative experiences of sight and sound. Through a practice of waiting, slowing, and attending to these sensations, the work gradually emerged. This was not a form of coming to know ‘about’ the world, but one of making sense of it ‘otherwise’, over and through time. And as the film slows the viewer down, inviting them to wait with and dwell in the images and sounds, it works to expand understandings of how the senses work according to multiple yet distinct tempos, beats, and rhythms.

I. Waiting *with*

Maybe we should think less of what crip time is and more of what crip time does, thinking beyond specific speeds, toward as yet unimagined imaginaries. What are the temporalities that unfold beyond, away from, askance of productivity, capacity, self-sufficiency, independence, achievement?¹

What does ‘crip time’ do, asks Alison Kafer, in her reflections on her own attachment to an idea developed in the foundational work *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.² Following the reclamation of the word ‘crip’ by disability activists, Kafer develops a concept of ‘crip time’ that merges queer theory, critical disability theory, and reflections on lived experience, to open a space for the diversity of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent experiences of time. But ‘crip time’ also critiques the dominant temporal regimes that govern everyone’s time, including the temporarily able-bodied (to use a term now ambiguously attached to in Disability Studies). For no-one is ‘master’ of their own time; time is instead structured by social, political, and bio/necropolitical forces that produce and constrain the body; by cultural habits and rituals that reproduce normative temporal narratives; and by our individual histories and the time of our lives. Nobody is completely in sync with what Elizabeth Freeman calls ‘chrononormativity’, or ‘the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity’.³ But ‘crip time’ sheds a very particular light on temporalities that fall outside of this trajectory, limning specific modes of dependency and interdependency, practices of maintenance and neglect, and experiences of violence and care. In ‘Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time’, Ellen Samuels argues for a time that might interrupt chrononormativity by placing disabled ‘being-in-the-world’ first, while also reflecting on the losses and forms of alienation involved in living in crip time.⁴ She quotes Alison Kafer as saying ‘rather than bend[ing] disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds’.⁵ This

bending of the clock, rather than the body, suggests that time is not rigid and unyielding, but can be moulded and shaped by the ways that bodies sense, relate, and collaborate.

What does it mean to wait or to slow? And what does it mean for time to elongate now, in historical and socio-political conditions in which the possibility of the arrival of what one is waiting *for*, or of having one's needs met, feels increasingly unlikely. What does it mean particularly for disabled and neurodivergent individuals and those living with chronic conditions, alongside all those inhabiting the chronic condition of the current capitalist everyday? Kafer critiques romanticised attachments to the 'slow', or to the idea that what people need is simply more time, by drawing attention to the difficulties of waiting:

for treatment, for diagnosis, for recognition; for the ambulance to arrive, for the doctor to see you; for asylum, for documentation, for release. Only some folks – white folks, well-resourced folks, folks living outside of institutions – wait with a real expectation that the treatment they want is coming and coming soon.⁶

Is there a way crip time and waiting might be thought alongside one another that pays attention to these painful realities, but which also opens up other possibilities, including the potential for care?

Time Being was commissioned by *Waiting Times*, a five-year research project funded by the Wellcome Trust, that has brought together an interdisciplinary research group to understand this complex relation between waiting and care. Its aims have been to pay close attention to the possibilities, both painful and hopeful, of delayed, interrupted, and suspended time. Although, in the context of healthcare, waiting is typically associated with service insufficiency or inefficiency, and sometimes with forms of institutional violence and neglect, the project's interdisciplinary research has revealed how care does not only happen when waiting stops; rather, waiting is the ubiquitous but hard to grasp time within which much ordinary care gets delivered. And while it can, as Kafer describes, be felt as punishment and withholding, waiting can also be experienced as a form of careful attention. For instance, waiting together can allow trust to deepen so that a therapeutic relationship can have a chance of alleviating mental suffering; waiting with an other during end-of-life care can enable a vital elongation or deepening of the time that is left; waiting allows a body to respond in its own time to a new medication; it can be the 'hovering and adjusting' of intensive care, of home care, of rehabilitation.⁷ Attending, in an ongoing way, to other needs and rhythms, the time of waiting *with* others necessarily withdraws from ideas or experiences of achievement, overcoming, deliverance, or cure – a waiting *for*;⁸ it sticks instead with ordinary, hard to register, ongoing practices of maintenance and endurance. Waiting *with*, as a practice of care, becomes a way of being in time; but it also *makes* time of a very particular kind during a socio-historical hiatus in which progressive time no longer seems able to unfold.⁹

Deborah has been working with the *Waiting Times* project since its inception, and she brought to *Time Being* an artistic research practice and ethics developed over many years that emphasise a particular time of attention – of waiting *with*. The oldest occurrences of 'waiting' in English associate it with the idea of actively applying one's mind or energies to something – of 'attending' in terms of stretching towards (a link retained in the French *attendre*). In modernity, however, ideas of waiting and attending shifted from this more active form to the uncertainties and anxieties of waiting without a clear object or outcome. Deborah's artistic practice is particularly concerned with this latter sense of waiting, and how it might be linked with care through what we are, riskily, calling a mode of looking/after. Of course, 'looking

after' is freighted with associations that all too easily slip into hierarchical relationships, in which a person assuming a position of carer is figured as knowing in advance what is required and how care will be delivered. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's work on disability justice is clear that care can have negative connotations or consequences, noting their experience of receiving offers of care that are 'intrusive, unasked for' and 'coming from a place of discomfort with disability'.¹⁰ Piepzna-Samarasinha indeed critiques how '[a]bleism mandates that sick and disabled people are always "patients", broken people waiting to be fixed', who are 'supposed to be grateful for anything anyone offers at any time'.¹¹ But by shifting the term to looking/after, we are hoping to invoke something different: a practice that might look from the position of 'after', remaining behind in both temporal and spatial terms, in ways that allow care to emerge in relation to need and consent and in its own time. This requires the suspension of pre-existing ideas, wishes, and assumptions, but committing instead to remaining in a time of not-knowing. This particular form of looking/after requires dwelling in a pause, a meanwhile, a 'time being'.

The twentieth-century psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion spoke of the value of this kind of attention, where instead of seeking knowledge, which is so often influenced by preconceived ideas or a desire for something to be so, the analyst might come, over time, to a process of understanding in which things are received and held with more attention paid to their own shape and qualities. Bion wrote:

Instead of trying to bring a brilliant, intelligent, knowledgeable light to bear on obscure problems, I suggest we bring to bear a diminution of the 'light' – a penetrating beam of darkness [...] The darkness would be so absolute that it would achieve a luminous absolute vacuum. So that, if any object existed, however faint, it would show up very clearly.¹²

Deborah's practice with film has consistently emphasised the value of being in the dark with material. Deborah will work through hours of footage, using a blackout hood, waiting until something emerges that captures her attention. Importantly, she doesn't know what she is waiting for. Instead, something appears while waiting in the darkness that produces a relationship, attaching to her in a way that enables the new and unexpected to become gradually illuminated. In the case of *Time Being*, the elements of air, wood, clay, and metal gradually came into view. Ruairí's intimate haptic knowledge of the world is 'seen' and 'heard' in Deborah's world, emerging through sight and sound, which are the primary sensory tools of her filmmaking practice. Film is, of course, unique in its capacity to capture time passing through moving image and sound; and this was important to both Ruairí and Deborah. Following Ruairí's idea of strapping a GoPro camera to his chest, filming became a process of bringing the multiple rhythms and tempos of somatic sensation into the audio-visual time of film – a process that enabled different ways of being in time to touch one another.

II. Time's quality

Time Being bends the clock to meet Ruairí's way of being in time, which is shaped by sensitivity to touch, heat, smell, vibration, and his particular artistic sensibility that can 'feel' the world emerging in material form through taking in air, registering vibrations, reading wood through his fingertips, beating metal, and kneading and moulding clay. In Ruairí and Deborah's hands, time itself emerges as something that can be traced, kneaded, pressed, pounded, and held. Time moves slowly, but there are also remarkable moments of acuity in which timing becomes everything, so to speak – the split second between creative production and injury that

we see most clearly in the metalwork room. Time seems to acquire nuanced qualities: it can soothe and attack, stagnate and judder, accumulate and release.

Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman write about ‘the positive experiences of crip life and crip temporality, such as exultance, solidarity, grace, the simple rhythm of the breath’ (2021: 249) that are set against the relentless rhythms of both capitalist temporality and the more confining aspects of crip time – experiences of frustration, impediment, and often of loss. Samuels and Freeman argue that crip time is paradoxically ‘both liberating and confining, because it breaks open rigid socioeconomic structures of time and affords others, and because that breaking is not a choice but a necessity, an enforcement issued by the physical and mental strictures of the crip bodymind’.¹³ These strictures mean that Ruairí’s time emerges in relation to a network of care that supports his ongoing explorations of the world, and his creation of new modes of work, sociality, and being.¹⁴ This network includes his family and friends, Mary McNicol (Ruairí’s care worker and yoga teacher), Patrick Phillips (Seale Hayne), Rob Hills (WESC Country Works, West Hill), and the staff at Unearth Ceramic Studios and Workshop (Exeter), amongst many others. Yet many of the services that support Ruairí are precarious. Although Ruairí says that he thrived in the home environment during conditions of lockdown, during the COVID-19 pandemic many services that support disabled individuals disappeared, and some of the alternatives offered – contact over Zoom for example – simply did not work for those for whom touch is a central form of communication.¹⁵ *Time Being* intervenes in the fragile micro-economies that constitute care networks, making clear the interdependencies that allow lives to flourish, and the vital connections and relationships that are potentially lost when services are interrupted or cut. Equally, we can note that it is precisely the *quality* of time that is lost when care time is withdrawn. This flattens experiences of time, even when more time is offered as a substitute. As Kafer notes:

how easily crip time has been reduced to, narrowed to, more time – more time as a way of mobilizing disabled people into productivity rather than transforming systems; more time as a way of increasing productivity rather than refusing such values altogether; offering extra time on tests rather than doing away with timed tests; allowing us to work on our own time as long as the same amount of work gets done.¹⁶

Instead of making more time, what crip time does is make and remake *relation* – what Kafer would call ‘crip kin’ and ‘crip affiliation’.¹⁷ These are alliances across different modes of care-giving that give time its qualities.

III. Haptic temporalities and the ethics of care

What touches a viewer when watching *Time Being*? In her archival work on an ‘album’ of prison photographs from the Breakwater Prison in South Africa compiled in 1893, Tina Campt describes the haptic as a multiplicity of forms of contact that go beyond physical touch.¹⁸ For Campt, in the haptic realm physical contact (touch) runs alongside visual contact (seeing), psychic contact (feeling), and what she calls ‘sonic contact’ – the frequency that requires us to listen to, as well as view, images. These multiple forms of touch allow the visual to touch us and for us to touch the visual in ways that leave impressions. Campt writes:

The haptic is not merely a question of physical touch. It is the link between touching and feeling, as well as the multiple mediations we construct to allow or prevent our access to those affective relations. These haptic relations transpire in multiple temporalities, and the hands are only one conduit of their touches.¹⁹

While *Time Being* does foreground the hands through Ruiari's image-capture with the GoPro camera of his own hands meeting and cradling the material world, the film also pays particular attention to the multiple temporalities of the haptic.

Film is an audio-visual medium, but chrononormative vision is decentred as the preeminent mode of knowing about the world in *Time Being*. Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us in his notion of the chiasm that looking is not simply a question of a subject apprehending or looking over the objective world; rather, the person who looks also meets the world and its tactile materiality – in other words, they are touched by it.²⁰ We see the world as a subject, but we are also objects that receive its impressions in an intertwining of the visible and the sensible that he calls 'flesh'. To materialise and explain 'flesh' as at once both subject and object, a sensing body and a sensed thing, Merleau-Ponty turns to the haptic and the experience of one hand touching another. That which is touched is also touching, with each sensed/sensing being established as both subject and object. But two hands touching, even if they belong to the one person, do not become exactly the same, they do not meld into a unity, but are separated by a gap that defers merger. In insisting that knowledge emerges in this chiasm of the 'flesh' – the tracing through of the reversible moment when 'the "touching subject" passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into the things, such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things' –²¹ Merleau-Ponty also implies that this touching never happens within precisely the same time. The reversibility of the chiasm, which takes place over and through time, means that coming to a sense of the world is a radically emergent process. This chiasm of touching and being touched, Merleau-Ponty argues, 'is the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh';²² and this can only occur if there is not just an ontological but a *temporal* deferral, however infinitesimal, between the touching object and the touching subject that establishes their relationship, while stopping them collapsing into one another. We might call this temporal gap a waiting of flesh, a 'chiasmic time'.

This intertwining of the touched and the touching enables an apprehension of time that is embedded within the materiality of the world – a world as flesh that is experienced, sensed, and that subsists. All material things to this extent are time-pieces: they all hold and mark time, and their marking of time can be materially registered through the multiple forms of touch that Campt alerts us to. *Time Being*, as a piece on time and a time-piece, specifically attends to materialising this temporality of the visible and the haptic. As Ruairí literally touches the rings of a tree that encode its age, as his stomach touches the vibrations of the gong, as he beats and shapes metal leaves, and he makes and remakes clay forms, *Time Being* reveals the haptic in its expanded sense, in which the physical meets the visual, the psychical, and the sonic.

In various sections of *Time Being*, Ruairí's GoPro camera captures his outstretched hands. As he touches the clay in precise, slight and tender movements, skilful strokes and pinches, coaxing shape out of formlessness, a tingling sensation in the viewer's fingers might even emerge – an empathic touching of his experience that they are unable to direct. But just as Deborah's practice of looking/after allows the work to emerge ahead of her, Ruairí's desire to film himself, but also to be filmed filming himself, interrupts the possibility that the viewer might simply merge with his experience, inhabiting his space and time. A viewer may involuntarily mirror his hands, feeling into that experience, but any viewer is also a split second behind. In the 'chiasmic time' of intertwining that *Time Being* renders visible and sensible, there is a vital deferral, a beat between a form of touching another's touching and the experience of being touched – something that stops the two experiences becoming one. The

film materialises instead the delay within the intertwining, the time of the chiasm, in which one shuttles between becoming subject and object. This is the time it takes for subject and object to form a relation, both within the self and within the world.

This process has a certain kinship with the philosopher David Applebaum's call for a somatic 'delay of the heart' in the workings of thought and of knowledge. As we described in "'Containment, Delay, Mitigation": Waiting and Care in the Time of a Pandemic',²³ for Appelbaum thought is essentially retentive in 'grasping again what was once present' and projecting it into the future.²⁴ This kind of cognition is parthenogenetic; in holding onto itself it can only give birth to itself, to more thought. In delay, however, there is an interruption in this process of self-production and something in thought 'slackens'. Applebaum calls this the 'delay of the heart', not to invoke poetic tenderness, but as an appeal to the somatic as an asynchronous force that demands not self-reproduction and presence but, instead, a form of relationality: 'Severed from its impulse to self-reproduction, thought is momentarily related to the other'.²⁵ We want to argue that it is in this chiasmic time of the delay, which is also the establishment of a relation of interdependence between subject and object, that the conditions for care also emerge. Care is necessarily temporal in its practice of attending, or inclining towards a need or call for a relationship or attachment that emerges in one moment but that necessarily shifts and changes – it is not for all time. To care is not to attach and attach and attach; this would be a form of clinging, even of dominating or appropriating. Such clinging might imagine itself to be taking care of something, of always already knowing what is required by having mapped the shapes and crevices of the world beyond the self through a particular kind of thought. But we conceptualise care as another kind of looking/after, which materialises a different movement and rhythm, by staying behind in the delay: attach, and release, attach, and release. Ruairí invites others to touch with him, but in the delay between his touching, Deborah's touching, and a viewer's touching – in the touching and being touched of a haptic being-in-the-world and in chiasmic time – an ethical distance is maintained. In and through Ruairí's hands, a viewer gets to touch the world differently through the image, but not identically to the way Ruairí touches it.

Of course, all making sense of the world is in fact temporal; the fantasy of the blink of the eye, of the idea that just emerges or is simply present, is indeed a fantasy. Making sense is not possible without the time of relations with a material world and the attachments of care. For the somatic cannot subsist on its own; rather, it materialises the ongoing need for care and the reality of interdependence through which anything that lives is sustained. All sense-making is reliant on the temporality embedded within relations and attachments to the world; indeed, it is a form of *making* through sense, as opposed to the parthenogenetic ways that thought imagines it can reproduce itself auto-affectively, all by itself. One thing we see emerging in *Time Being* is the reality that Ruairí lives a life of accompaniment, as Sejal Sutaria names it; he is with Deborah, with Stuart Moore (the camera person), with those who care with and for him and for whom he cares, and with the material elements of the world with which they are all chiasmically intertwined. But the film also materialises the reality that no life is ever lived alone. Lives cannot be divorced from the world on which they depend and somatic life only subsists by being attended to – that is, by being tended to. As Lennard Davis puts it, when claiming an ontological priority for disability as a mode of being-in-the-world: '[i]mpairment is the rule, and normalcy is the fantasy. Dependence is the reality, and independence grandiose thinking'.²⁶ In its attention to disabled experience, *Time Being* materialises precisely these webs of dependence that attach, slacken, and reattach themselves over and through time so that all life, all sensation, and all thought might find the conditions to flourish.

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- ¹ Alison Kafer, 'After Crip, Crip Afters', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 120 (2021), 415-434 (p. 421).
- ² Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
- ³ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 3.
- ⁴ Ellen Samuels, 'Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 37 (2017), n.p.
- ⁵ Samuels, n.p.
- ⁶ Kafer, 2021, p. 421.
- ⁷ Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 206.
- ⁸ Laura Salisbury, 'Between-time Stories: Waiting, War and the Temporalities of Care', *Medical Humanities*, 46.2 (2020), 1-11.
- ⁹ Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- ¹⁰ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Deaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), p. 145.
- ¹¹ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Deaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), p. 145.
- ¹² W. R. Bion, *Brazilian Lectures* (London: Karnac, 1990), pp. 21-22.
- ¹³ Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth, 'Introduction: Crip Temporalities', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 120 (2021): 245-254 (p.249).
- ¹⁴ For more on care networks and webs, see Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).
- ¹⁵ Anonymous, 'The Structural Silencing of Disabled Children and their Parents: A Reflection on who is Absent in Discussions about the Toll of Coronavirus', 25 April, 2020, <http://somatosphere.net/2020/structural-silencing.html>
- ¹⁶ Kafer, 2021, p. 421.
- ¹⁷ Kafer, 2021, p. 420.
- ¹⁸ Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- ¹⁹ Campt, pp. 99-100.
- ²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining: The Chiasm', *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 130-154.
- ²¹ Merleau-Ponty, p. 134.
- ²² Merleau-Ponty, p. 135.
- ²³ Lisa Baraitser and Laura Salisbury, 'Containment, Delay, Mitigation': Waiting and Care in the Time of a Pandemic', *Wellcome Open Research* 5 (2020), 1-16 (p. 5).
- ²⁴ David Applebaum, *The Delay of the Heart* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), p. 2.
- ²⁵ Applebaum, p. 7.
- ²⁶ Lennard J. Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 31.