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2 Doing time in social science and humanities research

3 Working with repetition and re-reading

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6 Abstract

7 This chapter sets out an account of a project set in a men's prison in 2014-2015. The
8 stated aim of the project was to explore the ways that science fiction can support the
9 development of plural reading techniques among the participants, particularly in
10 relation to their futureconcepts. Time and temporality functioned as fundamental
11 constituents of the methodology in three ways in the project:

- 12 1) Time was the context for the project. It took place in a prison where
13 the participants were doing time for offences committed in the recent past.
- 14 2) Science fiction films which used queered time as a plot device, were
15 employed as objects from which to elicit contemplative discussions about
16 ontological positions in relation to the present and the future.
- 17 3) Time was explicitly used as investigative method throughout the project.
18 Participants were asked to imagine plural versions of personal and global
19 futures and hold them in play as part of the interviews and discussions.

1 It is argued that employing time and temporality as an investigative focus
2 provides rich insights but poses complex ethical questions for the researcher
3 and the participants. The effects of using time as method are reflected on,
4 including how it worked in practical terms, what the benefits were, as well as
5 its limitations. Finally, it is suggested that time has functioned in a fourth,
6 unanticipated way in the intervening gap between the conclusion of the
7 empirical work and this writing because it has allowed for deeper meaning to
8 be made from the data. It is therefore suggested that building in a
9 methodological delay between execution and analysis leads to more depth of
10 understanding. Finally, it is suggested that future research might also focus on
11 time as a healer, unmediated by any other intervention.

12 Introduction

13 Science fiction has much to say about time and temporality.¹ Most of the texts in the
14 both the film and literary versions of the genre are based in the future and time travel
15 is a standard plot device. In the work of Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler
16 narrative experiments with chronopolitics are used to expose present day injustice and
17 to ask questions about alternative futures. Other writers ■ such as Philip K. Dick ■
18 present time askew to ask serious questions about temporality and its relationship to
19 the nature of consciousness and subjectivity. Cinema has produced many film texts

1 which challenge and expand the way that we think about time and temporality, often
2 by queering it and making the familiar strange.

3 The research project described here ■ *Reading Resilience in a Men's Prison* ■
4 drew on heretical depictions of time in the formulation of its methodological
5 framework. The project took place in a Category D (low security) UK men's prison in
6 the winter and spring of 2014-2015. I set up a science fiction film appreciation group
7 with a small collection of participants in order to explore how useful science fiction
8 films are in helping people to frame thinking about the future. The project deployed
9 three films as objects from which to elicit conversations about the future. The films
10 were: Andrei Tarkovsky's [Solaris \(1972\)](#), Stanley Kubrick's [2001: A Space Odyssey](#)
11 [\(1968\)](#), and Robert Zemeckis' [Contact \(1997\)](#). Each of these films queers the
12 understanding of time as a way of advancing the plot. The films were a useful framing
13 device for the project. The participants were immersed in questions of time; they
14 were, literally, *doing time* as punishment for offences they had committed in the past.
15 These films therefore suggested space-time as an interrogative frame which enabled
16 something else to be understood ■ in this case, an individual's ability to *read the*
17 *future plurally* ■ in a prison environment. Here I reflect on the effects of using time as
18 method, how it worked in practical terms, what the benefits were, as well as
19 considering its limitations. Writing now, in 2021, the methods I used in the project
20 described here feel like social practices from a different historical era. The idea of
21 sitting in a room with a small group of participants, watching a film, and then having

1 a group discussion about it over a cup of tea, feels like a quaint historical practice.
2 Since then, face to face teaching has been securitised, and largely replaced by
3 emergency eLearning, as Michael [Murphy \(2020\)](#), p. 492) has argued. Similarly, at
4 the point of writing, almost all social research with live participants in UK universities
5 has been jettisoned in favour of digital or remote enquiry. The writing of this chapter
6 is therefore its own experiment in time and temporality. Any retrospective reflection
7 on research is a kind of work of fiction, written in the past tense. Here we have the
8 extra dimension of the pre-and post-Covid division, a division that historian Peter
9 Hennessey has argued will be come to be understood as one of the fundamental
10 markers of change in human history (Hennessey, 2020).

11 [Theoretical context](#)

12 The combination of science fiction and prisons is not new. Both experiences work by
13 rupturing our habitual temporal assumptions and forcing us to stare at time in its own
14 element, and for its own sake, with conviction. Philip K. Dick is perhaps the best
15 example of a science fiction writer who queers chronology in ways that allows for a
16 new appraisal of what we understand to be real time to take place. He presents
17 rationally-understood linear time as part of the black iron prison – his term for the
18 all-pervasive social control system in his classic novel *Valis* ([1981](#)). The reality
19 described by the Blakean term contrasts strongly with the visionary experiences
20 depicted in the book, which represent absolute reality, stripped of the facade of

1 conventionally understood time and temporality. In the work of Ursula Le Guin, the
2 prison environment is used to shock us into questioning the assumptions on which
3 privilege is based. In her short story, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* ([1973](#))
4 she invites us to meditate on the suffering of a child whose imprisonment in a cellar
5 means that s/he experiences time as never ending. The child's suffering is contrasted
6 sharply and shockingly with the lovely seasonal celebrations of the inhabitants of
7 Omelas whose prosperity and grace depend entirely on the debasement of that child.
8 Elizabeth [Povinelli \(2011\)](#) has used the short story to guide her argument about the
9 urgent necessity of the ethical responsibility we have to each other, before we run out
10 of time in the (pre-Covid) historical period which she calls late liberalism. Matthew
11 [Martinez \(2020\)](#) writes of Ursula Le Guin's thought experiments: "In the construction
12 of other worlds and their potential as alternative societies, there are occasions when
13 the writing seems to reach a limit or else gestures to something beyond the writing
14 provided on the page" (pp. 137–138). The methodology described here was a partial
15 attempt to use temporal objects (i.e., the science fiction films) in a way that gestures
16 to a sense of time that exists beyond the frameworks conventionally employed to
17 understand it. Keri Facer and Bradon Smith draw on a fish metaphor to describe the
18 ubiquity of time later in this book, stating that, "time is the medium in which we are
19 swimming. We cannot escape from it; there is no privileged vantage point "outside of
20 time" from which to observe its use" ([2021](#), Chapter 11, p. 382). The methodology

1 described here employed science fiction as a way of transporting the fish into another
2 element in order to examine the water.

3 Beyond science fiction, scholars have reflected on the very intense experience
4 of time and temporality in prisons. Writing about the experience of conducting prison
5 research, [Wahidin \(2005\)](#), for example, notes that in Greek mythology, feminine and
6 masculine aspects of time are represented by the siblings Chronos (symbolising
7 measurable and sequential time), and his sister Karios (symbolising the right time for
8 action, the moment). Wahidin argues that in prison, Chronos rules. Johnsen and
9 colleagues ([2018](#)) also consider what they call the particular **chronopathic**
10 experience (p. 4) of prison. They argue that prisoners have a distinctively **naked** (p.
11 9) relationship to time which they describe as **chronolectic**. Activities have no
12 purpose in themselves but are primarily undertaken to pass time. They are **designated**
13 to afford ways of passing the intensity of time as affect (p. 4). Drawing on the work
14 of philosopher, Michael Theunissen, Johnsen et al. interrogate their data gathered in
15 a Finnish high security prison through a framework based on his assertion that **time**
16 **[i]s a force that subjugates human existence by dominating it** (pp. 4-5). They explain
17 that **[t]o Theunissen, it is only through the resistance to the rule of time that we can**
18 **begin to envision a successful human life** (p. 7).

19 According to this interpretation, the experience of waiting is central to the life
20 of the prisoner. This operates, not only in terms of the release date itself, but also in
21 terms of repeated waiting for the structured activities of the day to begin or to end.

1 Certainly, data from this project supports Wahdin and Johnsen et al.'s depiction of
2 time as punitive for prisoners. One of the participants in the project described here,
3 Rick, told me "I mean, I've had some quite dark times in my sentence, like, I
4 haven't done a massive sentence but by the time I get out, I'd have done three and a
5 half years. ... I remember the first week I got (to my first prison) I was locked up for a
6 whole week ... when you're like that, it's just day by day, you must have a hope just
7 to get through the day". Johnsen et al. concede, though, that there is some capacity for
8 contemplation in this environment. "Time is the enemy, feared by inmates, as they
9 lose their hold on it mentally and physically. However, such situations, we found, also
10 create an imperative toward meaning" (p. 13). Johnsen and colleagues note that
11 watching films and playing games are examples of "chronolectic behaviour" (p. 13)
12 where activities are undertaken for the sake of "killing time" rather than for the
13 purpose of the activity itself. This leads to "a radical experience of finitude" (p. 15) for
14 prisoners, which suggests that the prison provides access to an experience of raw
15 time. . They have the potential to understand the relationship between time and the
16 self and time and the future in ways that are not open to the rest of us.

17 In the project described here, the importance of the *chronolectic* in the prison
18 experience was something that I did not understand either at the point of planning or
19 operation. I did not grasp that the project was providing the group with *something to*
20 *do* at a very basic level. Immersed as I was, in the parallel concerns of adult learning
21 and research ethics, I approached the project from a teleology of purpose and care. I

1 wanted the participants to learn something, and I wanted to do no harm. I shouldn't
2 have worried so much on that count. Possibly the greatest benefit of the project from
3 the participants' point of view was that it killed time. For those who live there, prison
4 is boring, and the experience of time is indeed, for the most part, chronoleptic. So, the
5 option to spend some afternoons in a comfortable room watching films was a
6 welcome alternative. The chronoleptic poses important ethical questions to the
7 researcher, which are different from well documented concerns about the
8 problematics of asking incarcerated subjects to give consent to being part of a
9 research project. The fact that taking part in the project killed time made taking part
10 more enticing for the participants than it would be for participants outside of prison.
11 Potentially the researcher can be released from the perceived requirement of brevity
12 and succinctness in method that often govern research design (we are always aware of
13 the encroachment on people's time). In prison, arguably, the more time that is filled,
14 the better it is for the participants. The temporal enticement loads new complexity
15 onto an already loaded ethical undertaking. On a literal level, we need to consider
16 what will replace the participation in the project after it ends — in this case, how might
17 the participants fill the time when there are no more films to watch? At a deeper level
18 we need to worry about the effects of taking a playful approach to plural futures with
19 participants whose psychosocial circumstances might make the reality of choice
20 untenable. Awareness of the chronoleptic also raises ethical questions for the
21 participants themselves. The findings from the data suggest that for the participants,

1 time was experienced in a much more nuanced way than either Wahdin's image of
2 overbearing Chronos, or Johnsen et al.'s depiction of chronolectic Purgatory. The
3 discussions were rich and wide ranging, and they certainly felt authentic. But it could
4 be that participants were playing the researcher, just to kill time. It might be that the
5 unusually contemplative nature of the answers was a clever way of extending a
6 pleasant afternoon as a way of avoiding the return to the mundanity of prison life.
7 This did not seem to be the case in this project, but it is a useful exercise in academic
8 humility to ask that question of the data.

9 **Re-reading and multiple readings of time**

10 *Reading Resilience in a Prison Community* was a long time in the planning. Being a
11 prison project, it was necessary to seek additional permission to proceed from the
12 UK's Ministry of Justice's research governance team. One effect of the rigorous
13 permissions process was that I had to write the entire project, in detail, in future tense,
14 before I had met anyone involved — the participants, the gatekeepers, or the prison
15 authorities. I have written elsewhere about the tensions between doing this and
16 working within a funding framework that was strongly supportive of a co-constructed
17 methodology (see [Hoult, 2018b](#)). My stated aim was to understand if watching and
18 discussing science fiction films which dealt explicitly with time, as a group, could
19 lead to the participants (the prisoners) developing a facility with deconstructive
20 reading techniques. By this I mean the ability to hold multiple readings at the same

1 time, without closing the texts down to fixed meanings ■ what literary theorists might
2 call the ability to engage in free play. In previous work (see Hoult, 2012). I had
3 conjectured that resilient learning can be understood, in part, as the ability to hold
4 multiple interpretations of events (including one's own life) in play. I wanted to see if
5 it was possible to teach people to do that by encouraging them to read fictional events
6 and interpretations plurally and, if it was, for participants to apply this technique to
7 their own futures. From a pedagogical (let alone a therapeutic) point of view, this was
8 a highly ambitious aim in the context of a project which lasted less than six months.
9 The aim, though, was rather to explore if the technique could be realised, rather than
10 to test its efficacy. The future is a safer contemplative object than the past for most
11 prisoners. What they dreamed of, they told me, was the possibility of a future which is
12 not defined by the past: prisoners suffer specifically and acutely from the lack of the
13 right to erasure. It means that an event in their past is usually freely available for
14 anyone to read, at the end of a google search, and this fact has the potential to
15 continually write their futures, however hard they try to write over the past.

16 The methodology I developed drew on the disciplines of literary studies and
17 adult and community learning. It was as much a pedagogical intervention as it was an
18 empirical piece of research. The method began with text. The text is as the centre of
19 the intervention and, to a certain extent, shaped the intervention. The choice of texts is
20 crucial to the methodology: it shapes the quality and the content of the discussions
21 which produce the data. I constructed a long list of possible texts for the project by

1 asking a science fiction network to help me, as well as doing a more conventional key
2 word search in the library. As I have written elsewhere (see [Hoult, 2018a](#)), I departed
3 from my original idea to make this a science fiction reading group because of advice
4 from peers and the Ministry of Justice to take heed of the adult literacy rates in UK
5 men's prisons. I therefore applied a reading methodology that had been designed with
6 the written word in mind (drawing on the work of Ben [Knights, 1992](#)) and applied it
7 to film by converting the long list of literary and cinematic treatments of time and
8 temporality to a short list of films which did so. Each of the films was also linked
9 strongly to a literary predecessor, although I did not use the book versions, and two of
10 the films have attracted a degree of independent scholarship, again, which I did not
11 access until later in my analysis. The films were connected because each one took
12 time and inverted it or subverted it in some way. In each film this de-familiarisation of
13 time resulted in a shift in the central character's experience of temporality. The films
14 therefore provided the structure and the culture of the project. The key scene in each
15 film was one in which time was distorted. These scenes were also impossible reduce
16 to single readings. They deliberately leave the viewer with unanswered questions. In
17 this study at least, texts which radically distort time and temporality are also playful
18 texts which resist closure and authoritative, single readings. When Chronos is
19 jettisoned in favour of an all-encompassing fictional moment, our responses also have
20 the capacity to split open and to engage more deeply with mystery, just as Ellie

1 Arroway ■ Jodie Foster's character – in *Contact* does when she encounters a world
2 beyond time.

3 Once the core films were chosen, the group was established (working through
4 gatekeepers, for a fuller account of this please see [Hoult, 2018a](#) and [2018b](#)). Over the
5 next six months I worked with a core group of six men in a Category D UK prison.
6 We met once a week for an afternoon in the early stages of the project, and then more
7 intermittently after that, at the interview stage. As the project was linked to a larger
8 project which was exploring the usefulness of co-production methodologies in
9 community research, I asked the participants to nominate an additional film. The
10 group chose Ridley Scott's 2012 film, *Prometheus*, the prequel of the *Alien* series.
11 *Prometheus* complemented Robert Zemeckis's *Contact* in interesting ways. Both
12 might be feasibly described as feminist films ■ with strong female protagonists and a
13 critique of masculinity built into the narrative ■ and it was these two films which
14 garnered the most interesting and open responses from the group. Before embarking
15 on the core films, we did some pilot work using other, shorter film texts. I showed the
16 group some of Carl Sagan's 1980 series, *Cosmos*, (which was pertinent because he is
17 the writer of the book *Contact*, as well as being consultant on the film) as well as an
18 episode of *Dr Who* written by Mark Gatiss. I chose the latter because of the
19 complexity of Gatiss's writing and because it revealed a lot in terms of vulnerability
20 and background. We then watched the core films together, as a group, and discussed

1 them across four months. I recorded each group discussion as well as conducting
2 individual interviews with each participant at the end of the project.

3 As with much social research, the aims as they evolved, were rather different
4 from those stated. The pilot work revealed that the aim to teach and transfer plural
5 reading techniques into discussions about the future was both ambitious and based on
6 a problematic premise. I discovered that my earlier assumption ■ that incarcerated
7 participants would likely lack the ability to read plurally was fallacious. In fact, the
8 participants were already sophisticated and plural thinkers. Some of them knew much
9 more about science fiction than I did. I also noticed that the ability to read a text
10 plurally is not the same thing as reading a human life plurally, particularly one's own.
11 As we worked through the films that I had chosen for the group other, more
12 interesting questions emerged, though. We watched each film and then, in the
13 following week, we had a semi-structured discussion about it, which I recorded and
14 had transcribed. I asked the group to think about their responses to the films and to
15 comment specifically on the presentation of the future and of the alien in each one. In
16 practical terms, the delivery of the project was also heavily dependent on time.
17 Prisons are structured around very strict timetables and this prison, being a category D
18 prison, allowed for some release on licence. I had to work around the availability of
19 the group, which only gave me time slots of two and a half hours at the most. This
20 meant that I had to dislocate the watching of the films from the discussions about
21 them, which gave the participants and me time to think.

1 At the end of the whole project, I interviewed each participant. As well as
2 asking them generally about their thoughts on the films, I took a three-stage approach
3 to asking them to structure their responses to the time and temporality aspects of the
4 films and apply it to their own and wider futures. These stages are set out below.

5 1) Taking a key scene from each of the films (notably, the space baby at
6 the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the time travel through the
7 wormhole in *Contact*), I asked the participants to provide three
8 alternative but co-existing explanations about what the scene might
9 mean.

10 2) I then asked each participant to use the same technique to provide three
11 alternative scenarios for what might happen to the planet in 50 years
12 time.

13 3) Finally, I would ask each participant to provide three alternative
14 scenarios for what their own futures might be, post release.

15 The questions therefore built on an initial response which required the ability
16 to hold plural readings in play, towards a demonstrable capacity to imagine multiple
17 futures, on a global and a personal scale. The questions also focussed increasingly on
18 the temporal as they progressed. Below I take the participant Jim as a case study to
19 demonstrate the way that the answers built on each other.

20 [Example of how the method works](#)

1

2

1) Can you give me three interpretations of what the scene might mean?

3

4

At the first level, when I asked about the ending of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with

5

particular reference to the way that time was jumbled up in the final scene, Jim

6

responded:

7

8

So, was he going forwards or backwards then? So, was he going forwards, as in, not

9

him, because it might not have been him, so was it just the human race going

10

forwards or backwards? Do you know when we were going through all that

11

psychedelic flying through space thing, some of, sort of space clouds actually looked

12

like a foetus before we got to the actual foetus. And I couldn't work out whether

13

they were whether we were going backwards in time, in the sense was that where

14

we came from, or whether we were going forwards in time, as in if you want to get

15

there, you're going to have to evolve and evolve and evolve to the next generation.

16

2) Can you give me three versions of what the future might look like, globally,

17

in 50 years' time?

18

1 This opened to a conversation about how time in a fictional capacity works as
2 a device to talk about the real, human experience of temporality. I had thought that
3 there might be more correlations between the ability to imagine different scenarios on
4 a world scale and the ability to apply the same technique to one's own life. In fact, in
5 most of the cases, these seemed to be different skills. In the case of Jim his ideas of
6 the future seem to be a variation on the present and didn't consider the pressures of
7 climate change, for example. In response to the question about global futures, Jim
8 answered that:

9

[In] 50 years time I think we'll be still trucking relatively similarly to where we are
now. We'll have different problems that are that will seem difficult at the time
but I think I think medicine will continue to I think genetics will play a big role
and I think technology will play a big role.

14 3) Can you give me three versions of what your own, personal future might
15 look like, post-release?

16

17 Jim was imaginative as well as being realistic in response to the third question
18 about his own future. He had been a very successful specialist surgeon before his
19 conviction and Jim drew on this to imagine three versions of his own future: a)
20 working on a checkout in a specific supermarket; b) returning to his own profession;

1 or c) we lose everything, so we lose the house, we lose all our finances, all our
2 savings, because of confiscation and other bits and pieces ... (in which case) I'd be
3 pushing the family unit to a relatively brave decision, so rather than just, "Let's try
4 and recreate what we've got now", a case of, "Let's start completely new." Jim's
5 response here indicates the intricate relationship between hope, agency, and
6 temporality. He understands he may face rejection by his previous professional peers,
7 and he holds the clean slate of total loss up as the version of the future which is the
8 most exciting.

9 At the end of the project all the discussion and interview data were
10 transcribed. As the participants were prisoners, high levels of security about the data
11 were in operation. I sent them for transcribing to a transcription service accustomed to
12 highly confidential and sensitive documents before analysis and I had to commit to
13 destroying the data within a year. It added to a sense of urgency and fighting against
14 time at the end of the project. It felt rushed and, with the benefit of time, I now think
15 that my initial reflections on the project were somewhat superficial. I conducted a
16 thematic analysis, but this was less useful than juxtaposing the answers for each film,
17 then the future predictions for each participant and therefore treating each as a case
18 study.

19 [Temporal aspects of the methodology](#)

1 The location of the project in the prison was fundamental to any meaning that
2 emerged from the data. The construction of the method around the three staged
3 questions was an interesting way to link plurality to temporality but it would have less
4 or at least different meanings in a community context where people had
5 surrendered their own control over time. That fact also fundamentally divided my
6 experience from the experience of the participants. Issues of power and privilege are
7 always at play in social research but here there was a very stark dividing line between
8 the researcher and the participants. The prison experience also led to a pure
9 experience of time in a way that is unusual for people outside the prison context.
10 Reflecting on the experience of a friend who he met in prison, who still had seven
11 years remaining of his sentence, one participant, Luke, remarked:

12

I'm sure his first day in prison was exactly the same as my first day in prison because
I suppose you can't fathom seven years, of doing this for seven years, but there must
be a point in reflection throughout your sentence where you go, I've still got, you
know, X amount of time to do, and I think that then really tests, you know, your
resilience.

18

1 The participants did not begin with a different relationship to time to that
2 which than enjoyed outside. But the process of being incarcerated forces people into a
3 space where they work with time, not exactly in a way that is servile, but in which a
4 degree of peace must be negotiated in order to survive. My abiding memory of the
5 project, five years on, was the sense of raw, immediate reality that the whole
6 experience took on. The encounters felt somehow timeless and completely authentic.
7 At the time I thought this effect was produced by encountering people who have
8 acknowledged their shame as a public fact. They were remarkably kind people, and it
9 is rare to be with people who are so undefended. Now I also wonder if another
10 dimension might have been that these were people who had struck a peace deal with
11 time. But equally, time kept pushing through the smooth delivery of the programme.
12 The afternoon film sessions and discussions were strictly timed and boundaried, in the
13 immediate sense, they the participants had to get back to their wings and engage in the
14 activities of late afternoon before dinner. In the longer frame as well, time kept
15 intervening. This was a Category D (partially open) prison, which meant that the
16 participants were being prepared for release. The constitution of the group was fluid
17 as the men earned the right to return home for visits and take on paid work. By the
18 time we watched *Solaris*, towards the end of the project, only a three of the group
19 could watch it in person and I had to leave the disc with the others to watch in their
20 own time.

1 I tentatively suggest here, then, that when time is outed and understood
2 nakedly as a structuring power in participants lives it, paradoxically, opens us up to
3 free play. We are able to cultivate less defended relationships with texts and with the
4 future because we surrender the illusion of control over time. This is not to
5 romanticise the prison experience in any way. It is, however, to question the views
6 outlined by [Johnsen et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Wahidin \(2005\)](#) that Chronos in the prison
7 environment is almost always oppressive.

8 When Jim imagined his future, post-release, the scenario that excited him the
9 most was the idea of total loss, followed by a completely new start for him and his
10 family. These themes of natality, loss, and hope are perhaps more thoroughly or
11 typically the subject matter of the transformative humanities, rather than social
12 science or education. The relationship between time and these theological themes is
13 complex. Temporality operates both as a representation of itself (time is, literally,
14 experienced wonkily for the main characters) but also as a sort of metaphor for
15 ontology in the films. The final scene in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the space wormhole
16 scene in *Contact*, and the co-existence of the past in the present (the dead girlfriend)
17 in *Solaris* are all ways of trying to imagine an entirely different relationship between
18 self and other, and both with the cosmos. In each of these key scenes, conventional
19 time is revealed as constructed and temporality is revealed as habitual and local █ but
20 not real. With hindsight the enquiry at the heart of the project was theological, without
21 using religion. The central questions were about the ability to deploy hope in the

1 imagination of the future and the ability to apprehend a different way of being in
2 relation to each other, to resist the darker forces of time. As such, the ability to read
3 plurally as a technical skill and the ability to handle queered time acted as servants to
4 a deeper concern with a hopeful future ■ for the planet and for the participants. That
5 said, despite their Kairotic (or ■feminine■) nature, it should also be noted that each text
6 acted differently on the quality of the discussion that followed and the way that the
7 participants treated each other in the discussions. The responses to *Prometheus* and
8 *Contact* were markedly more tentative, collaborative, and curious than the
9 opinionated and quite binaried responses to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for example.

10 The films about time and temporality were objects through which wider
11 questions about the potential to imagine hopeful futures were elicited. This is, in
12 effect, a methodology which is closer to object elicitation, than textual analysis. It
13 allows for discussions about the future in ways that could initially be moved away
14 from conversations about personal futures, or past, which would have been closer to a
15 therapeutic or probation-style intervention. It should be noted, though, that the third
16 stage ■ thinking of three versions of one's own personal future – is incredibly
17 difficult. It is a dizzying question and if you do it for yourself you'll notice how easy
18 it is to retreat to the familiar or a mildly inflected version of the familiar, but very
19 difficult to imagine a radical alternative. Something feels dangerous about letting
20 yourself imagine a wildly alternative future, even if everything in it is exciting and
21 auspicious. Good luck feels dangerous. We resist the parallel universe and whole

1 other life scenario. The responses to that question contrasted sharply with the
2 responses to the questions about global futures which combined realism with
3 imagination (although nobody mentioned a pandemic). The use of prophesy as a
4 methodological tool may have implications for researchers whose aims are concerned
5 with encouraging proper engagement with climate change and social justice. Personal
6 change and resilience are in some way inherent in our ability to imagine a different
7 future and this depends on a realistic understanding of the social, political, and
8 climactic forces. It is very difficult to integrate the meaning of these changes without
9 doing good imagination work with people first. A popular version of therapy is that it
10 is very concerned with analysing the past and making meaning from it. The project
11 would suggest that time might be better spent imagining alternative futures.

12 **Time limits: The constraints and dilemmas of temporal** 13 **methodologies**

14 The project was weighed down with the sense of obligation I felt to people outside the
15 project ■ the ethics committee at the University as well as the research sub-committee
16 at the Ministry of Justice – as well as the overarching methodological direction of the
17 *Imagine* project of which this project was a part. These pressures pulled against each
18 other in temporal terms. The process of writing the plans for the project in detail and
19 in the future tense at the permissions stage meant that I felt very limited by what I
20 could do in the present. I was also aware of the press of the past on the project. To

1 some extent, the participants were defined by an event in the simple past: their crimes.
2 I didn't ever ask them about their crimes, but they wanted to talk about them anyway,
3 even at the point of introduction. I was weighed down by the responsibility of doing
4 something for them, unaware at that point of the particularly chronoleptic nature of
5 prison life. Had I understood this from the beginning, I would have focused much
6 more assertively and unapologetically on my own research interests and worked with
7 the participants to help me understand, not the relationship between reading
8 techniques and resilience, but the relationship between the ability to imagine a
9 different time and temporality with hope.

10 While the science fiction films were useful in eliciting rich and plural
11 responses to the questions of meaning, the main interrogative device — asking people
12 to apply a playful reading technique to their own future — was less successful than I
13 had hoped. The participants could provide thoughtful understandings of global futures
14 (noting the effects of climate change on water shortage and mass migration, for
15 example). They did so, however, without pulling the thread through to the imagined
16 accounts of their own personal futures. There was little consideration, then, of how
17 the global future might have an impact on individual lives or local circumstances:
18 there was little sense of the psychosocial, in other words. A limitation of the project,
19 therefore, might have been the absence of any specific pedagogical method which
20 linked the psychosocial to the global. I could have supported the answers about global
21 futures by presenting a range of scenarios based in fact and this might have helped the

1 group to reflect in a more concrete way on timescales and their own lives in the
2 context of (scientifically) imagined futures.

3 The prison was low category. On one level this was enabling and lent a degree
4 of hopefulness and sense of facing forward to the project. The participants were
5 getting towards the end of their sentences and this knowledge interfered with the
6 project. The future kept interrupting the project in the form of release to work and
7 family leave. It meant that the intervention was inevitably more fragmentary than
8 would have been ideal. As time went on, some of the participants literally, didn't have
9 time to take part. Methodologically, it would have been easier to work with a group
10 with no clear future for example participants serving longer sentences in a high
11 security prison but that would have also made it a less hopeful experience.

12 The methodology could have been improved by making the links between the
13 representations of time and temporality in the films and the particular experiences of
14 time and temporality in the prison, much more explicit. The participants spoke readily
15 of their experiences and I could have worked harder to make links with them between
16 these accounts of prison time and the films. For example, Jim volunteered that the
17 liminal space between being sentenced and going to prison was a beautiful memory
18 because the march of time stopped:

19



1 We waited a month or five weeks before [redacted] from being found guilty to getting
2 sentenced and, you know, I spent five weeks just not doing anything except enjoying
3 the little things [redacted]

4

5 And that this new understanding of temporality had continued into the prison
6 experience itself:

7

8 I'll come out of prison and learn to take it very easy and spend a lot more time
9 enjoying the things that you just take [redacted] take for granted. You know, I worked in
10 neurophysiology surgery for 14 years, you know, I was on call 24 hours a day and
11 you don't realise that until someone takes your phone off you [redacted] You know, and it is
12 just bliss having no internet and all the guys in here are going [redacted] Can't wait to get back
13 on my phone. I'm like, I don't, you know.

14

15 These ideas might have fed through into the conversations about the films and
16 in the groups. We spent a lot of time trying to imagine a benign alien. We could have
17 supplemented this with the attempt to imagine a completely different way of thinking
18 about time. This could have led onto deeper questions about how a different framing
19 for time might influence global futures and social justice.

1 Future applications of the methodology

2 The observations here about working with time might be of use to other researchers
3 working in other contexts and might be of value methodologically elsewhere in the
4 following ways.

- 5 1) The use of texts which queer time █ such as science fiction █ are
6 helpful in calling attention to the temporal water in which we swim,
7 and science fiction can make a serious contribution to research in the
8 humanities and social sciences.
- 9 2) The technique of asking for plural readings of the future allowed for
10 deep engagement with the notions of time and temporality.
- 11 3) The idea of healing time is underdeveloped in research and this is
12 connected to the notion of deliberate delay in research design. It is rare
13 for the benign intervention of time itself to be the subject of research.
14 Future research could incorporate this alongside the more analytical
15 aspects of this methodology.

16 Time is taken for granted in research but in fact our work is saturated with
17 time. It shapes all our activities, as Keri Facer and Bradon Smith point out earlier in
18 this book, we are immersed in the █timescapes of research funding, delivery,
19 accountability and impact █ ([2021](#), p.XX) and the dominance of this timescape

1 continually threatens to broadside the timescape of the intellectual development of the
2 project.

3 Funding applications and ethics applications are written in a fictional future
4 and accounts of the research are presented in the perfect past tense. In fact, though,
5 these activities bleed into each other, messily and problematically. We could choose
6 to acknowledge this and to frame our investigations differently in ways that admit that
7 time frames the artificiality of project design and that tense lends a disingenuity to the
8 presentation of completed research. We might also, literally, give more time to our
9 projects. Time has certainly improved this one. It took place five years ago and it only
10 is starting to make sense now. The rush to analyse █ then destroy █ the data, to report
11 and to publish in the period immediately after the field work led to a style of thinking
12 about the process and data that was knee-deep. It is only now that it is beginning to
13 make sense what happened in that room where we watched those films. It is, perhaps,
14 fanciful to imagine a mandatory gap of five years before publication of outcomes
15 from funded projects, but it is interesting to imagine what that might do to research.

16 The final film we watched was Tarkovsky's *Solaris*. Its core themes of
17 redemption and the return of the prodigal son were apposite in the context of a prison-
18 based cinema group. These ideas run counter to the view of prison time as oppressive
19 and entirely chronoleptic. Reflecting on how his experience of prison would shape his
20 future, Jim told me:

1

2

I feel hopeful about the future anyway, you know, because no matter what the future

3

I will definitely come out the other side (of prison) a better person for it and so

4

that's hope and it's there even when you're in prison, because you know you're

5

learning new things you know your family's being tested, you know, which is

6

going to make them stronger.

7

8

The healing potential of pure time, without anything else (such as a

9

therapeutic or pedagogical intervention) attached to it, is not a fashionable concept

10

and nor is it the feature of much research. But the measurable duration between

11

trauma and redemption is not empty it is filled with time. It is therefore possible to

12

imagine scholarship which looks at time unaccompanied by any other intervention

13

(therapy/punishment/pedagogy) and to watch its healing effects. Johann Siebers

14

explores the usefulness of delay in research elsewhere in this book, suggesting that

15

delay allows for clarity to emerge out of the timeless unconscious, claiming that the

16

temporal aspects of psychoanalytic work can help us understand these structures of

17

delay and the role they play in communication with ourselves and others (2021, p.

18

228). In the future I will feel bolder about deliberately building delay into the research

19

design, especially in projects, such as this one, where contemplation is at the heart of

20

the enquiry. This not a turn to longitudinal methods, but rather an argument for delay

1 to be integrated into strategic stages of the data collection, analysis, and, crucially, the
2 writing up stages. I am also interested in watching time heal or reform and to resist
3 the impulse to intervene, but rather to observe time as a benign agent in participants
4 lives. Such a project would represent a counter to post-modernity even modernity
5 but it would provide valuable insights into a neglected aspect of resilience and
6 survival.

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¹ Throughout this chapter *time* is used to mean the objective measurement of duration,
and *temporality* is used to refer to our subjective experience of time.