Article

Editor’s Prelude to Special Issue: ‘Coronaphobia and Fearsakes’

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It is now eight months since the world has been gripped by the novel zoonotic virus SARS-CoV-2 – the new ‘child’ of the ubiquitous corona family, which is the cause of COVID-19, colloquially known as the ‘corona virus’. The pandemic has been unprecedented in living memory. For extant humans, COVID-19 has become the quintessential ‘bogeyman’ - a silent and unpredictable killer and usurper of the world order. Indeed, the pandemic has devastated a considerable portion of modern humanity, plunging it into an unknown future. Ironically, the overall political and social response to the virus has been disproportionate to its ‘killing’ power; A recent study by prominent Stanford University epidemiologist John Ioannidis has showed that COVID-19 death rates are marginally worse than the standard flu viruses. Additionally, an increasing number of scientists have voiced concerns that the global response to the pandemic has been largely driven by fear and panic. From needless panic buying to continuous media misinformation and xenophobia, modern humans are in an existential mess. It is the pan-human fear of COVID-19 that forms the theme of this special edition, on “Coronaphobia and Fearsakes”. The noted psychologist C.G. Jung deemed humans to be irrational animals, guided by the imagination. Similarly, William James noted that the ontological imagination is where the real, the imagined and the non-ordinary conflate with the life world to recreate a surreal realm (1963, p. 72). Since the human imagination is tied to our daily existence, the future takes on profound meaning. In times of crisis the quest for a meaningful future intensifies, prompted by genuine threat. Human crisis often becomes a crucible for reauthoring the self. Levi-Strauss (1976) states that humans have a penchant for modifying and reconstruing their personal and collective symbols in order to make sense of their experiences.

Here, our personal and collective response to crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled us to re-imagine the future. For Inayatullah (2008), the future encapsulates multiple possibilities. Each scenario is equally possible for coming into fruition, driven by the tenor of human endeavors and ideologies. The future is both fluid and malleable to human manipulation; a set of unknown possibilities, whose indeterminate nature can be revoked through various existential strategies. This special issue showcases various ideas which have been fostered by global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and their implications for the future.

Bengston’s paper unpacks the innovative idea titled ‘future estrangement’ which is ideologically inspired by Alan Toffler’s seminal work Future Shock (1970). For Bengston, future estrangement is based on one’s sense of alienation from the future. The future is no longer an imagined realm of positive potential but rather shaped by indeterminacy and rapid technological change. Future estrangement conjures up Jackson’s notion of the “existential imperative” (1998), in that humans fall into psychological disequilibrium if they lose the power to enact agency – of stamping their sense of auctoritus onto the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a novel and major driver of collective ambiguity due to the rapid and disruptive social changes it has produced. Furthermore, future estrangement sets the trajectory for emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), synthetic biology, CRISPR gene editing and nanotechnology. While these technologies will have the power to transform our daily lives they may also have the potential to disrupt and to amplify our feeling of ambiguity.

Continuing with this theme of emerging technologies and indeterminacy, Saniotis et al.’s paper discusses how COVID-19 has propelled the relevance of artificial intelligence AI via the use of medicorobots in China. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the relevance of medicorobots. Interestingly, is not only how medicorobots
have supplanted human hospital roles, but have also become increasingly anthropomorphised. The COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the process for artificial intelligence to interact and adapt to its environment in an unprecedented way. This process has changed peoples’ attitudes regarding robots, from an ambiguous and threatening ‘other’ (as evident in the terminator movies) to ‘caring’ protectors in times of crisis. Saniotis et al. highlight how collective upheavals can foster or amplify technological innovations that may influence the future.

Dennis et al. contextualise the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia and its disruption of the familiar. The authors provide a sophisticated analysis of fear and its capacity to obtrude into our familiar places and disturb our life rhythms. Like other countries, Australia was initially hit with a high number of COVID-19 infections in early 2020. Commonwealth and state governments enforced lengthy lockdowns leading to massive unemployment and social malaise. The forceful suspension of everyday activities brought on by the pandemic was particularly menacing due to the recent and devastating bushfires which many Australians had endured. This brutal ‘double wammy’ of nature had not only in a few months upturned the flow of ‘normal’ social existence, but had intensified indeterminacy in the Australian collective unconscious.

Marcus Anthony draws the reader into the ways which the COVID-19 pandemic has engraved itself into the psyche of human populations. His paper is a caveat to utopian ideals that frame technology as a panacea to global problems. Of course this is delusional. For instance, research indicates that overexposure to the internet and social media is a risk factor for anxiety and depression in youth. Anthony claims that our social institutions are becoming positive feedback systems where negativity patterns of thinking inform social relationships and how humans conceptualise the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed humanity’s disconnect with nature that now demands a rapprochement. Anthony suggests that embodied presence is a method for finding humanity’s way out of its current psychological malaise. In a nutshell, embodied presence is about being mindful and fostering cognitive responsibility. The potential future benefits of embodied presence are ongoing and can have an indelible effect on social and economic institutions. These include reduced participation in group identity and ideologies that separate humans, increased empathy, questioning dominator systems and decreasing one’s desire to control others.

The essay by Phillip Daffara outlines the models Future Wheel of Consequences (FW) and Macrohistory to unpack the global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. His analysis commingles present macro responses with possible future opportunities. His essay continues from Saniotis et al.’s paper regarding how the COVID-19 pandemic has showcased various technologies, and how these will become increasingly prominent in future society. For example, during this time digital technologies such as data generation, spatial mapping (bio-surveillance) and analytics, have been successfully used in several countries. Case in point is how the Australian government took on board Singapore’s TraceTogether digital application. Daffara points out interesting revelations brought on by the pandemic such as the reduction in global CO2 emissions which not only improved air quality, but provided an opportunity for governments to reflect on humanity’s overt dependence on fossil fuels.

References