

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Out of (This) Time — Brief Notes from “Astrodoubt and the Quarantine Chronicles”

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By Luca Buvoli

I had just returned to New York from a month traveling in India, where I had enjoyed rediscovering, among other things, the power of narration in visual arts (in the carvings in Hindu temples, in miniature paintings, etc.) and of a mythology and conception of time outside the Newtonian one. This was a couple of weeks before Covid-19 arrived in the US and I was working on one of the 180 ideas/projects that comprise *Space Doubt*, a work conceived as a ten-year “expedition” started thanks to a collaboration that I developed with NASA scientists and the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C., exploring an idea enabling me to find the courage to use some dark humor about my aggressive and advanced cancer of a few years ago—luckily and hopefully cured—and cancer in general.

During the confinement, I started producing a new series – at the crossroads of drawing, painting, comics, and animation—*Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles*, part of *Space Doubt*, and, starting from April 2020, I shared this tragicomic series of visual narratives commenting on the Covid-19 health and social crisis on Instagram, as they unfolded. *Astrodoubt* is the protagonist of several of the 180 projects in the “expedition” *Space Doubt*. In *Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles* *Astrodoubt*, a person of unspecified gender, race, and age, grounded by the deadly pandemic, wanders and daydreams, transforming domestic chores, pandemic restrictions, and fear of contagion into fantastic astronomical journeys and Olympic feats.

The pressure of temporality is embedded in *Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles*, coupled with the awareness that these “themes” will age. In making this series, I have chosen to plunge into this time-sensitive bomb. On the one hand, the series implies ethical choices, such as addressing human suffering, being “irresponsible,” supposedly “wasting time” by making “comics” or attempting to make jokes on difficult subjects (after proper self-censoring trigger warnings); and, on the other hand, “giving the works away” online—for free—to whomever would use them in their life or work.

Time travel: *Astrodoubt and The Quarantine Chronicles*, in its sequential and yet constantly interrupted format, echoes the narrative of fragility and vulnerability explored in my *Not-a-Superhero* series that I had started 29 years ago to derail myths of masculinity.

How do we want to remember this pandemic, a few years from now? My *Astrodoubt* artist books can be seen as time capsules: like insects trapped in amber, not squashed on the floor. Moreover, in the crystallized experience of this Covidocene, I explore the relation between “slow media” (painting, drawing, artist book, etc.) and fast, digital social media with their expectation of immediate response and quick oblivion.

A new work, *Lesson 5*, from my current project *A Brief History of Time (Under Covid) – in 7 Lessons*, is presented for the first time in the page that follows and will appear on Instagram

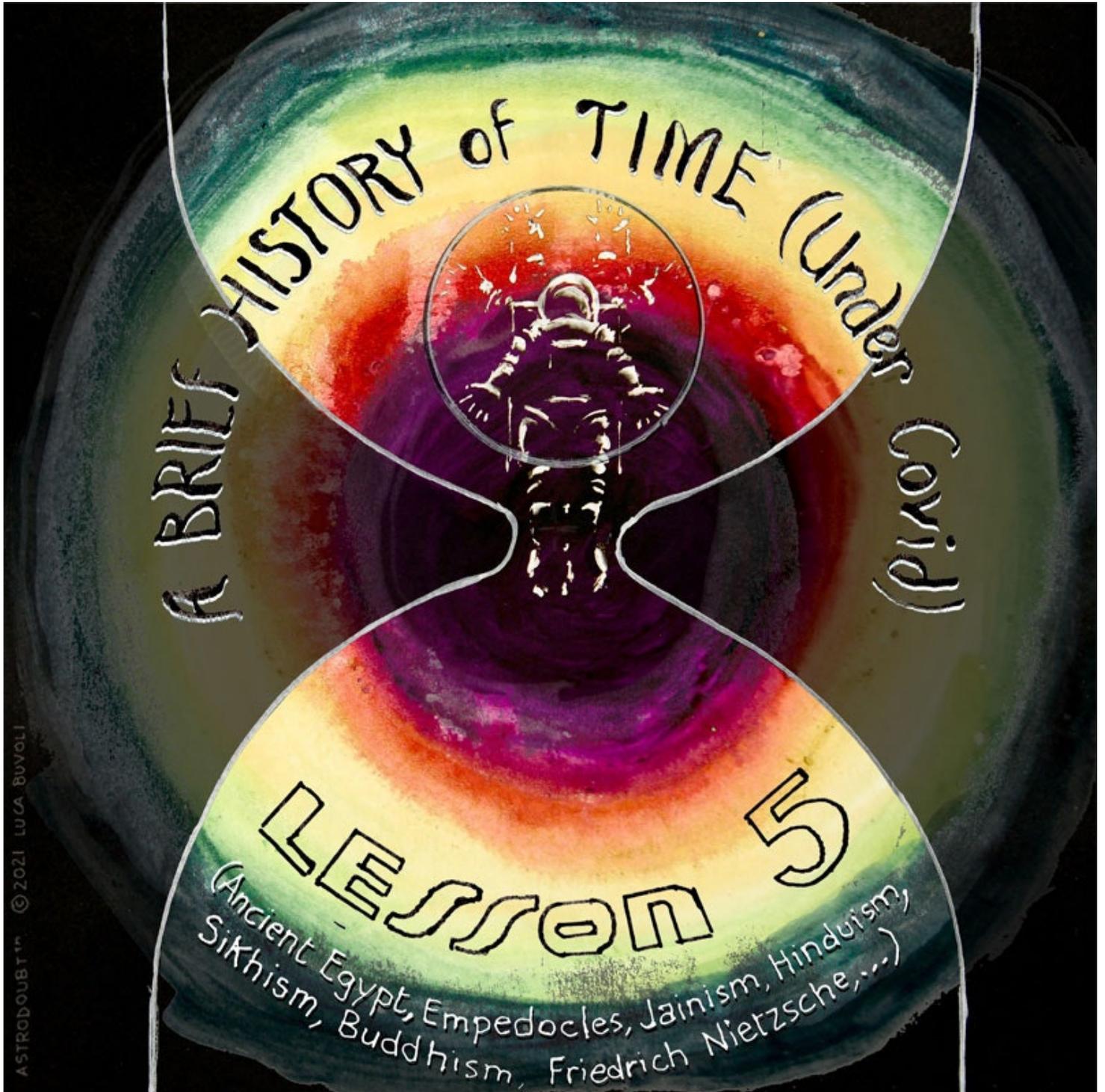
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soon (@astrodoubt_). *A Brief History of Time (Under Covid) – in 7 Lessons* is conceived as a crash-course of unforeseen learning outcomes, taught by an unconvinced teacher (Astrodoubt). Together, the *7 Lessons* unfold in one day (from morning to night) in the life of Astrodoubt—but perhaps of many of us—during the pandemic. In them, I embrace the challenge of visualizing and comparing different conceptions and shapes of time. Among the inspirational sources for this work, besides Stephen Hawking, are Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on Phenomenology of Spirit*, Carlo Rovelli's *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* and *The Order of Time*, Agnes Varda's *Cleo from 5 to 7*, Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomiche*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The off-timed visual joke that derails each *Lesson* causes a slippage from a system of beliefs inadequate to represent today's time of vulnerability and uncertainty. It is an attempt to inject a dose of vital irony. In *Lesson 5*, the color wheel, which embraces all phenomena shattered by a prism, and the greyscale wheel, which points at a vision beyond the Manichean one of black versus white, appear, next to each other, as a pair of clocks recalling the profound intimation of mortality in Felix Gonzales Torres's *Perfect Lovers*.

"Oh No! I am trapped in a virus loop!" (episode 14 of *Astrodoubt and the Quarantine Chronicles*): it is only in realizing that he/she/they are stuck in a time loop, that Astrodoubt can accept and convert uncertainty and anxiety into means to help rebuild a post-pandemic world.

The following image sequence: Luca Buvoli, *A Brief History of Time (Under Covid) – Lesson 5 (pages 1-6)*, 2021. Gouache and pen on black acid free paper, digital media. © 2021 Luca Buvoli. Photo courtesy the artist.

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Luca Buvoli is an Italian-born artist. He lives and works in New York. In 2020, his work was the subject of the show *Picture Present: An Episode from Astro Doubt and The Quarantine Chronicles in 12 Scenes* at the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., the inaugural online exhibition of that museum's digital *Intersections* series.