



Forum

Proposing Anticipated Solastalgia as a New Concept on the Human-Ecosystem Health Nexus

Lars Moratis

¹*Antwerp Management School, Antwerp, Belgium*

²*Breda University of Applied Sciences, Breda, The Netherlands*

Beyond representing itself as an immediate health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has escalated into myriad crises, notably an economic crisis. Economic indicators and forecasts demonstrate the severe impacts of COVID-19 on patterns of production and consumption: (Jones et al. 2020). As a result, governments have launched large-scale business support programs and economic recovery schemes.

While governments worldwide are trying to mitigate and contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2 through policies of lockdown, remarkable patterns of environmental restoration can be witnessed. These patterns are the result of substantial reductions in the negative ecological externalities as a by-product of the deceleration of economic activity. These range from satellite images showing reduced air pollution, people's accounts of witnessing blue air unspoiled by airplanes' vapor exhausts, water in rivers turning transparent again to sightings of animals returning to urban areas unseen in years. Critically, this includes figures of carbon emissions falling sharply. We are essentially witnessing the revival of parts of the natural world and as the French sociologist and philosopher Frédéric Lenoir has aptly described this pause of the Anthropocene: “pendant que nous portions des masques, la planète a respiré” [Eng. “while we were wearing masks, the planet was breathing”] (Williams 2020).

However, the temporary nature of such patterns of environmental restoration seems evident as politicians have been rallying for relaxing regulations for polluting companies and putting planned and implemented climate policies on hold as an integral part of economic recovery schemes (e.g., Euractiv 2020; Friedman 2020) and indeed air pollution levels are already shooting above the levels registered prior to the pandemic (Loughran 2020).

It has long been recognized that humans react to the state of their lived environment. Scholars have developed myriad conceptualizations of what ecophilosopher Albrecht (2019) has labeled “Earth emotions,” capturing “the relationship between ecosystem health, human health and control (hopelessness and powerlessness) and negative psychological outcomes” (Albrecht et al. 2007: S98). While these Earth emotions can be positive (e.g., biophilia), many conceptualizations are oriented toward negative emotions, reflecting the dominant patterns of environmental degradation and ecological loss that have characterized the Anthropocene. Examples of emotions within the latter category are ecological grief, climate anxiety, and environmental melancholia (see Cunsolo and Ellis 2018).

Among the more popular conceptualizations of Earth emotions is solastalgia, a concept developed around 2003 describing a “specific form of melancholia connected to lack of solace and intense desolation” (Albrecht 2005: 48). Stressing the topological nature of people's lived experiences of the world, a sense of one's loved place and assaults leading to the desolation or undesired transformation of

this place is central to understanding solastalgia. Solastalgia hence relates to “the pain or distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one’s home environment” (Albrecht et al. 2007: S96). It has been contended that as a result of lived experience of the effects of climate change, people are likely to experience solastalgia, leading to an accelerating spiral of mental illness (Galway et al. 2019; Louv 2011). Particular manifestations of solastalgia as observed by researchers have been disgust, fear of health issues, frustration, feelings of hopelessness, isolation, psychosomatic illness, and depression (Albrecht 2005: 49; Galway et al. 2019).

The current episode, or pause of the Anthropocene, may give rise to the identification of a variant of solastalgia, namely anticipated solastalgia. Building on the solastalgia concept of Albrecht, anticipated solastalgia, too, integrates the ideas of solace, desolation, and place, capturing feelings of distress and pain as a result of expected or imminent environmental degradation and ecological loss in the face of the lived experience of a desired transformation of the environment, i.e., a restored environment or the process of environmental restoration. However, anticipated solastalgia is not just about the lived experience of environmental restoration and accompanying feelings of distress as a result of expectations regarding the future, but also about the anticipation of lived experiences of continued or recommenced environmental degradation and ecological loss as the externalities of a revived economic machinery. Anticipated solastalgia recognizes a connected, nested relationship between positive and negative Earth emotions, presenting a meaningful integrative notion beyond the usual positive/negative dichotomy of feelings observed in the relationship between people and ecosystems.

With regard to solastalgia’s conceptual building blocks of solace and desolation, anticipated solastalgia suggests that, even in the face of environmental restoration or improved ecosystem health, it may not be possible to find solace in loved places. Anticipated solastalgia acknowledges that people may at the same time feelings of solace and desolation through one’s lived experience and that they, moreover, may experience desolation *because* of the solace one derives from their episodic lived experience of environmental restoration, suggesting solace *implying* desolation.

As with any of the so-called Earth emotions, anticipated solastalgia may affect people’s sense of wellbeing or mental health. In order to alleviate such feelings and counter their effects, it has been suggested that people act

upon these feelings by joining social movements, engaging in activism, and expressing our engagement with the world through art (Albrecht et al. 2007; Finegan 2016). These activities may play a restorative role in the context of anticipated solastalgia, too, providing feelings of empowerment, instilling hope, and eliciting courage. The concurrent experience of positive and negative emotions, however, may be confusing for people and it is difficult to predict how people may cope with feelings of anticipated solastalgia, how they will respond to it, and what their interpretations of the roles of institutions will be. Will feelings of anxiety of what is imminent prevail over feelings of marvel and hope as a result of the lived experience of a possible future? How will people act upon the knowledge that interventions, however radical they may need to be, are imaginable and implementable to restore our planet and have a fighting change to reach the goals of the Paris Climate Accords? Will anticipated solastalgia spark fiercer environmental activism? Will it increase people’s trust in certain institutions, notably governments that are able to impose drastic rules when really necessary?

For the reasons outlined above, anticipated solastalgia deserves to be integrated in the typology of psychoterratics on the human-ecosystem health nexus as it is conceptually distinct from solastalgia and other conceptualizations of the nexus between ecosystem health, human health, and place/landscape. Also, it may open up new avenues for investigating the emotions, mental health effects, and the resulting behaviors stemming from their complex relationship with the planet in the Anthropocene.

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