

# The World's Clock: Reflections on the Perception of Time

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## Abstract

This article aims to discuss the perception of time as a psychic experience, especially how this phenomenon occurs at a time when its experience and apprehension is more and more ephemeral, producing a generalized sensation of scarcity and progressive acceleration of time. To accomplish this plan, reflections were built about this subject, through a dialog between Jungian psychology and propositions from contemporary authors from different fields of knowledge who deal with the same subject, especially Zygmunt Bauman's sociology. Although time itself is nothing more than an abstraction or a category of understanding, according to some theorists, what is important for us to consider is its archetypal dimension, as expressed in the myths covered in this text, notably Cronos, given his great emphasis in the contemporary world. Thus, from a perspective that considers almost exclusively its quantitative aspects, it is necessary that we begin to give more meaning to the acts of our daily lives, even the simplest ones, so that our experience with time is full of quality and completeness. In short, our study was limited to simply proposing brief reflections on how contemporary man experiences time and what are the circumstances involved and possibly determining perceptual changes.

## Descriptors

jungian psychology, time perception, collective unconscious.

## Conflicts of interest:

The authors state no professional or personal interest that may create a conflict of interests regarding this manuscript.



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## O relógio do mundo: reflexões sobre a percepção do tempo

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### Resumo

O presente artigo visou discutir a percepção do tempo enquanto experiência psíquica, sobretudo como tal fenômeno processa-se em uma época em que sua vivência e apreensão é cada vez mais fugidia, produzindo a sensação generalizada de escassez e a aceleração progressiva do tempo. Para satisfazer tal proposta, foram construídas reflexões sobre o tema, mediante o diálogo entre a psicologia junguiana e proposições de autores contemporâneos de diferentes campos do saber que versam sobre o mesmo assunto, especialmente a sociologia de Zygmunt Bauman. Conquanto o tempo em si mesmo não passe de uma abstração ou de uma categoria do entendimento, de acordo com alguns teóricos, o que nos importa considerar é sua dimensão arquetípica, tal como fora expresso a partir dos mitos contemplados neste texto, notadamente Cronos, dada sua grande ênfase no mundo contemporâneo. Assim, de uma abordagem que leva em consideração quase que exclusivamente seus aspectos quantitativos, necessário se faz que passemos a dar mais significado aos atos do nosso cotidiano, mesmo aqueles mais simples, de modo que nossa experiência com o tempo seja de qualidade e plenitude. Em síntese, nosso estudo restringiu-se tão somente em propor breves reflexões acerca de como o homem contemporâneo experiencia o tempo e quais são as circunstâncias envolvidas e possivelmente determinantes das alterações perceptuais.

### Descritores

psicologia junguiana, percepção de tempo, inconsciente coletivo.

## El reloj mundial: reflexiones sobre la percepción del tiempo

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### Resumen

Este artículo presenta un debate sobre la percepción del tiempo como experiencia psíquica, especialmente la forma cómo tal

fenómeno se procesa en una época en la que su vivencia y aprehensión es cada vez más efímera, produciendo la sensación generalizada de escasez y la aceleración progresiva del tiempo. Para cumplir esta propuesta se construyeron reflexiones sobre el tema, mediante un diálogo entre la psicología junguiana y proposiciones de autores contemporáneos de diferentes campos del saber que hablan sobre el mismo tema, especialmente la sociología de Zygmunt Bauman. Aunque el tiempo en sí mismo no es más que una abstracción o una categoría de la comprensión, de acuerdo con algunos teóricos, lo que nos importa considerar es su dimensión arquetípica, tal como fuera expresado a partir de los mitos examinados en este texto, en especial Cronos, dada su gran énfasis en el mundo contemporáneo. Así, desde una perspectiva que considera casi exclusivamente sus aspectos cuantitativos, es necesario darles más significado a nuestros actos cotidianos, aún los más simples, de manera que nuestra experiencia del tiempo tenga calidad y plenitud. En síntesis, nuestro estudio se restringe solamente a proponer breves reflexiones acerca de la forma de experimentar el tiempo del hombre contemporáneo y cuáles son las circunstancias involucradas y que posiblemente determinan los cambios de percepción.

### Descriptor

psicología junguiana, percepción del tiempo, inconsciente colectivo.

## Introduction

**The time occupies a significant place** between the existential questions which have disturbed and still haunt the mankind. For the Greeks, this instance is personified by Chronos, whose main characteristics are rigidity and intolerance. Chrono-Saturn is the god who devours his children, having as a motivation perpetuate his power (Hollis, 1997).

Among the criteria used to assess the psychic conditions of a person, we have their orientation in relation to time, as an adequate time orientation can be considered an indicator of relative normality (Santos, 2010). In agreement with the above, Fierz (1997, p. 38) states that:

It's generally knowledgeable that the velocity which the time passes in the manic depressive states is different from the habitual experience. For the melancholic one, the minutes seem to drag, the hours seem like an eternity. For the manic one, the months pass like hours. However, the subjective experience of time it's not necessarily uniform.

In these terms, the time works as an important reference when it comes to situating the person in relation to their own experiences. What we have just said are questions observed from the individual psyche. None less important to mention that some aspects of the collective consciousness influence significantly the individual consciousness, seen as these levels of consciousness work as complementary systems.

Such an assertion is explained by the widespread feeling of acceleration and scarcity of time. This is, with no doubts, the paradox of our times, since the development of new technologies and tools has allowed the man to shorten the space and optimize the time. However, this has proven to be an inverse equation, insofar as we cannot glimpse a real economy in relation to time (Valladão, 2017).

Considering that a given phenomenon or experience that crosses through the collective consciousness is also experienced individually, as it was observed, having a universal character, could we say that this is a phenomenon, whose basis is archetypal?

According to Jung (1969/2012), the archetypes are constituent parts of the human psyche, being considered indissociable from the vital processes, acquiring the *status* of true psychic organs, that manifest themselves into the consciousness by images loaded with meaning. Although they are not essentially circumscribed to the time and space conventions, being because of this, timeless, it is known that the archetypes actualize themselves continuously by flourishing to consciousness.

These affirmations are valid by the perspective of the psychology. From the philosophical point of view, however, two great schools of thought diverge among themselves by conceptualizing the time as object of knowledge. In one of the sides we have the rationalists, who admit that the only possible way to know something is fundamentally by reason, by logic. In the other side, we have the empiricists, to whom the knowledge is obtained through experience, denying the intuition as a source of access to it (Kant, 1781/2002).

Kant's merit, in this way, was his attempt of reconcile these main chains, resulting from his categories of understanding, (analytic and synthetic judgements). On his work "Critique of Pure Reason" (1781/2002), Kant clarifies that time is not inherent to things, nor does it possess intrinsic objectivity. The time, as the space, for Kant is a component of human sensible intuition, that is, it is an *a priori construct*, necessarily innate.

Contextualizing, thus, Jung's thought with Kant's conceptualization (1781/2002) over the time, we are able to infer a field of theoretical intersection. What, for the German philosopher is an *a priori* category of understanding is, for the Swiss psychiatrist, it is a psychological experience that finds its roots in the deepest substrate of psyche, that is, in the collective unconsciousness (Jung, 1969/2012). Based on the similarity of these two thinkers propositions, we propose the analysis of time through archetypal references.

Ultimately, for both Kant and Jung, is time truly a psychological experience? Starting from this supposition, can we consider the experience of time as a parameter to evaluate the psychic state of a subject or of a collectivity? In that case, what does characterize the perceptual distortion of such experiences?

Bringing these reflections into our scope, we ask ourselves: what would be the archetypal foundations of the accelerated experience of time in our current days. Thus, we seek, in this reflective article, to try to answer those questions, having as base the theoretical conceptions of Carl Gustav Jung and from different areas, disciplines, fields of knowledge, looking forth to stablish dialogues between psychology, philosophy and sociology, for example.

## Methodology

According to what we propose to develop in this present study, we can state that the nature of this research is essentially qualitative. In general terms, the qualitative research is predominantly descriptive, aiming for a deeper comprehension over the investigated phenomenon, based on a coherent theoretical framework.

It considers elements that go beyond the fields of common observation, based on a given frame of the reality. Beliefs, habits, values and the significance attributed to certain events are taken into consideration (Silva, 2010). This approach, through the inductive method, is much more concerned with the human subjectivity than with building general laws or sustaining statistical data over a given research problem.

Based on this research, a theoretical interdisciplinary reflection has been built, which its main goal analyze and discuss the perception of time as a psychic experience.

## The liquefaction of reality

Starting from the assumption that the spirit of the age influences prevailing human behavior, we can infer that some psychic states,

like anxiety, are related to sociocultural and economical questions of the current times (Valladão, 2017).

Indeed, we do not intend, in any way, to assert that the incidence of a characteristic group of mental disturbs is, overall, a subproduct exclusive of our contemporary culture. However, we can deduce that some circumstances and factors have contributed to its expression in a non-precedent scale.

In agreement with this, Bauman (2007) indicates that the transitions of what he understands as solid modernity to its liquid phase has brought with it a series of alterations, producing significant impacts in the most varied areas of human life.

The author asserts that the social institutions which once gave to people reliability, safety and predictability, due to their solid structures, have gradually undergone a process of liquefaction, which started to promote the anguish and uncertainty for an obscure future (Bauman, 2007).

We can observe in the thought of this Polish sociologist and philosopher the evident analogy with conceptions from physics, in this case, the change of physical state, thorough the contemporary social transformations that were the object of his scientific investigation. However, we can also identify in his reflections another expression of fundamental importance, which is related straightly with one of the aspects we intend to discuss in this article: the perception of the acceleration of time as a psychological experience. Once that the rhythm is one of the expressions of time, Bauman (2007, p. 15) asserts:

Unable to slow down the stunning rhythm of change, let alone predict or control its direction, we concentrate ourselves on the things that we can, on the things that we believe we can, or are assured that we can influence: we try to calculate and reduce the risk that we, personally, or those who are closest and dearest to us at the moment, might become victims of countless dangers that the opaque world and its uncertain future supposedly has reserved for us.

In this way, the experience of time comes to rule the human reality, what highlights its importance as a psychic experience.

## **Chronocracy and anxiety**

The idea that man possess an almost unrestricted level of autonomy and decision-making power over his own destiny is recent construction in the history of humanity. In ancestral cultures, people

used to relate themselves with forces of the nature that influenced their connection with the world and themselves, this gave the man a sense of being an integral member of the cosmos.

The advent of industrialization transformed the man's perception about the time. If, before, the forces of nature, both in its objective and subjective aspects were integrated to our daily life, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the utilitarian and chronological vision of time began to prevail. The season of the year no longer regulated the productive relations and the market logic allied with the chronological time started to coordinate the modern man's reality. (Valladão, 2017).

We have reached a situation in which we are currently dominated and subjugated by time (Santos, 2010). This is very easy to deduce, since most of our decisions and actions, inevitably, consider the chronological time as an essential variable. Considering that our approach with time has become quantified, we progressively start to distance ourselves from its qualitative aspect. Matos (2009) *apud* Valladão (2017, p. 34) reflects that:

(. . .) amid the confusion of urban life, we have lost the capacity to give meaning to our daily acts, coming to live in function of alienating tasks that in no way contribute to the development of the human subject. It's notorious that, in the last decades, the external existence to the world of work has started to have deep similarities with the Ford and Taylor's production lines.

Thus, one of the immediate consequences of transposing this utilitarian logic, which regulates the production relations, into life is the significative anxiety increasement: we have come to perform a greater number of tasks simultaneously in a increasingly reduced amount of time. Our capacities, talents and skills are undertaken to the scrutiny of time, overvaluing the productivity to the detriment of quality, serving as a fertile field for the cultivation of competitiveness, one of the characteristic traits of our age spirit (Valladão, 2017).

Reflecting further about this spirit of age, Maffesoli (2019, p. 4) mentions that, just like the time, we live moments of great change: "This is the Hegelian idea of *Zeitgeist*, of the spirit of time or mental atmosphere that can change – more or less. We are in one of these moments of saturation". According to the author, the concept of saturation, as in chemistry, involves the collapse of a determined molecular structure, in order to then undergo in a new arrangement, thus forming a new body.

From the theoretical reference of the analytical psychology, we can consider what this means for the collective soul or the deepest

substrate of the psyche: What psychic principles are acting in our contemporary times? Beyond attempting to answer this question, we can consider a closeness or dialogue between the psychology of Jung and other sources of knowledge, as proposed in this article.

Particularly, both Maffesoli's image of equivocated saturation (2019) and, especially the Bauman's (2007) concept of "liquid modernity", are nothing more than alchemical operations in activity, more specifically what Jung referred to as "*solutio*" (Sales, 2021).

### **Anxiety: a brief contextualization**

According to the most recent edition of the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems- ICD-11 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024) Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is defined as:

The generalized anxiety disorder is characterized by prominent symptoms of anxiety that persist for at least several months, in the majority of the cases, for long days manifesting by general apprehension (i.e., "free-floating anxiety") or excessive worry focused on multiple daily events, most often related to family, health, finances and school or work, together with additional symptoms as muscular tension or motor restlessness, sympathetic autonomic hyperactivity, subjective nervousness experience, difficulty maintaining concentration, irritability or sleep disturbances.

In this idea, Valladão (2017) highlights that, until the mid-20th century, this disorder did not use to have the nosological entity status, exclusive and independent of the other psychopathologies. Thus, in the literature itself, the anxiety was described as part of a specific group of symptoms, for example, the neuroethical cases. Jung (1960/2011, p. 68), in his piece "The Psychogenesis of Mental Disease", states that:

Affective states devoid of adequate ideational content, so common in the ones with early dementia, also find an analogy with hysteria. It is enough to recall, for example, the anxiety states in obsessive neuroses! As a rule, the ideas of this states are so inadequate that the patients themselves recognize their lack of logic, considering them as absurd, even though they seem to constitute the anxiety source.

We must say that such assertion refers to the particular historical moment in which Jung still maintained a strict conceptual and



theoretical relationship with the psychiatry of that age, especially in his research together with August Forel and Eugen Bleuler, in a cantonal sanatorium and in the psychiatric clinic of the University of Zurich (Jung, 1960/2011).

## The gods of time

The mythology, in general, invites us to reflect about the temporality. Thus, the time that aims the normalization, logical sequencing and, above all, the measurement of our experiences with the outworld that is the realm in which **Chronos** supremely reigns. This face of time takes us to what Freud (1920/1997, p. 90) designed as “the reality principle”. In these terms, for the current culture, in especial the Occident, undertake the dictates of Chronos means being in agreement with a certain state of normality, that is, of social integration and adequation to the “*status quo*”.

However, the experience has increasingly shown us that the modern man have, precisely, been suffering with reality (Valladão, 2017). According to the collective ideals and some traditions, especially the Eastern ones, every excess carries within a lack of something, besides being prejudicial. Taking on commitments, organizing our routines, getting into our workplace in the scheduled time, among other daily tasks, are pillars of our society.

As a result, there is a great investment, both from the individual and collective points of view, in which living experiences to the detriment of our subjectivity, our symbolic experiences and, ultimately, our connections with the sacred. Such circumstances, for the analytical psychology, may characterize the one-sidedness of the consciousness, it means, a new massive energetical effort in a single direction, disrupting all the psychic system. This symbolic emptiness produces some immediate consequences, among them, the anxiety (Jung, 1935/2015).

On the other side of this psychic dimension we have the time of **Aion**, the time of eternity. For Jung (1951/2008), this dimension represents time of the Self, in which the habitual references by which we base our worldly experiences do not make so much sense.

Stein (2021) states that, in comparison to the worldly temporality, characterized by conventions and well-defined rules, all aimed at measuring of the displacement of the objects in space, there would exist a time that operates from other references, more associated to the “meaning” of things, possessing a more qualitative character than quantitative, in this case, the kairotic time.

Amplifying the spectrum of his reflections, Stein (2021, p. 50), suggests the dialogue between Chronos and Kairos, because:

We use the word “*kairos*” to indicate that a special moment in time: “*in the fullness of time*”, says the biblical phrase. This means that it is a special moment in the “*real time*”, when suddenly and unexpectedly (for the ego), something that used to lay asleep in the unconsciousness (in the domain of psychoid) emerges and becomes manifested (emphasis in the original).

In this way, we can infer that, although based on another dimension of reality, we keep a strict relation with it. Kairos would represent the right measure or a middle path, because if the reality (Chronos) keeps us imprisoned, on the other hand, by surrendering ourselves to the reign of Aion, therefore of timelessness, we could be swallowed by the forces of unconsciousness.

Something worth mentioning is the omission of the great influence of another god, whose presence and participation in all of this process is extremely important for the comprehension of the phenomena described so far: the Greek god Hermes or Mercury, for the Romans.

At first, as it's well known, through the alchemical studies that Jung has developed, the “mercury” element (Hermes representation) is involved in practically all the processes of transformation and transubstantiation of the matter, in which Hermes, necessarily, is the god who guides the changes in the world, both from the material and the psychic points of view.

## The psychopathology and the mythology

On several occasions, within his theoretical and practical construction, we can glimpse the fundamental importance that Jung attributed to the myths, identifying in them expressions of archetypes, the structural foundations of the psyche. Obviously, expressed by a symbolic narrative, the myths portray, actually, the human daily experiences. Thus, for von Franz (1990, p. 15), in relation to mythology “we are the ground of the symbolical themes – we, the human beings”.

However, these same myths and symbolical themes have in the actuality taken on a different guise and distinct meaning from those characteristic ones of the classical antiquity: the gods that in another time, were worshipped in sacred places, are now found in the contemporary clinic under an infinity of diagnostic categories. For this reason, Jung (1967/2016, pp. 55-56) states that:

We have abandoned, however, just the verbal specters, not the psychic facts responsible for the gods' birth. We are still as possessed by the autonomous psychic contents, as if these were gods. Currently they are called: phobias, compulsions, and so on, in a word, neuroethical symptoms. The gods have become diseases.

In this idea, it is interesting to say that, if, indeed, a relationship between the divinities and the psychopathologies exists (Jung, 1967/2016), as mentioned above, this equation is at the very least disproportional: if the gods have remained the same since the immemorial times, then why the science has never ceased producing or classifying new diagnostic categories? May the answer to this question lie in understanding the science as a modern myth that, necessarily, create new symbols and narratives?

Bringing these questions forth to our discussion, it means, the strict relationship between the mythology and psychopathology, it can be said, in a certain extent, that of the three mentioned gods in the previous section, Chronos might be the one who presents himself more frequently in the people who seek psychology counseling, given the actual circumstances. As described in this article, for example, the oppression of time through its scarcity, quantification and the perception of its acceleration, contributing to the emergence and maintenance of a series of disorders, notably anxiety ones (Santos, 2010).

The modern man, anguished by the lack of time and disregarding the natural cycles of life, especially those related to the essential stages of development, such as the denominated "rites of passage", causes a significant rupture in what is considered vital for the human being, as it concerns their psychic development (Hollis, 1997). With no doubt, this is where one of the reasons of the symbolic emptiness that Jung repetitively alludes, resides.

Addressing this subject, Hollis (1997) states that the extinction of those significative rites in our culture produces a kind of wound, the most painful wound of the soul, having as a consequence a life with no depth. However, the god, unfailingly, demands the tribute which he is owed: the sickle of Chono-Saturn manifests as self-mutilation, a typical phenomenon in adolescence, filling mental health service thorough the world.

## **Final considerations about the multiple faces of time**

We begin the section evoking the known Saint Augustine's phrase: "What, then, is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain It

to the one that asks, I know not." (Saint Augustine, 1997, p. 206). This is intentional for two reasons: first, to indicate an insubstantiality that involves the theme, and second, to evidence that the knowledge which he refers to might not be explainable

While time itself is nothing more than an abstraction or a category of understanding, for some theorists, what matters for us to consider is its archetypal dimension, as expressed through the myths contemplated in this text, most notably Chronos, given his great emphasis in the contemporary world. In this idea, our greatest challenge might be changing the way we relate to it, the time.

Thus, from an approach that considers almost exclusively its quantitative aspect (the values and ways linked to the god Chronos), we believe that is necessary to integrate into our experience the callings from the other gods mentioned in this study. Maybe we can, even if only momentarily, escape from the relentless pursuit of Chronos and access the Aionic time, place where present, past and future create a single reality, the *Self*.

As Bauman (2007) points out, this state of affairs that we experience daily, characterized by the frenetic rhythm of changes and continuous transformation, would be, in theory, the result of Chronos and Hermes articulation, which, in combination, produces great transformations in behavioral, social, economic and cultural terms in a short space of time.

Expanding further the scope of our reflections, we could dare to affirm that the speed at which the information is currently produced and disseminated, would be, in a certain extent, related to the actuation of these divine potencies. However, with the caveat that the great quantity of information produced – as the rhythm that is applied on its vehiculation – it is always accompanied of evident superfluosity and obscurity.

Paradoxically, given the almost unrestricted accessibility to a truly inexhaustible source of data, from the cultural point of view, we became increasingly poor and impoverished, because, according to Albert Camus (2006, p 98): "Misnaming things is contributing to the misery of this world". Considering that the psyche is just the interplay of the archetypal forces, we can glimpse in this entire scenario the dark face of these very gods.

In the beginning, we have limited ourselves to saying that this subject is unfindable, offering a fertile field for studies and research on the subject. As Jung has affirmed, the clock of world is a symbol of the *Self*, that used to indicate the place where time and eternity meet in the *Self*, the totality. Such an encounter, in this idea, would just be possible through an integrative attitude, in which god is contemplated and given tribute to which he is entitled.

In synthesis, our study has restricted itself in only proposing brief reflections on how the contemporary man experiences the time and which circumstances and determiners are involved in possible alterations of their perceptions.

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