

EDITORIAL

The idea that irreversibility affects every one of us is reassuring, if we are seeking comfort in numbers. We are confronted with irreversibility in the face of our own mortality: death is the ultimate biological tipping point from which there is no return. The journey towards irreversibility is uneasy, like asking for forgiveness, or even embarrassing, like the desire for eternal youth.

Despite our experience that life passes irreversibly, we notice that it is often possible to reverse an action. For instance, this could be deleting a letter from a text on a screen or picking up an object from the floor. In the cases where a full reversal isn't possible we have developed strategies and methods of coping, which have determined the very structure of our societies. An insurance policy cannot return a house lost to fire, but it may pay back an equivalent amount in money. A judge in court cannot undo the actions of a person who has grievously harmed another, but they may decide on a suitable punishment. Irreversibility has an associated compensation.

Language provides us with an abundance of words to describe reversal, from which almost all synonyms for irreversible are constructed as the negation (e.g., unalterable, irreparable, irrevocable). Why must irreversibility inherit its personality from the definition of another concept? One of the initial aims of the project was to characterise and better understand irreversibility from its unique properties.

When we initially came together we were surprised at how different our approaches (quantum physics and political philosophy) were. Brimming with curiosity and faced with the difficulties of interdisciplinary collaboration, we wanted to complicate things further by inviting more people to contribute their perspectives to the study. In autumn 2022 we first met with the artists Angela Detanico and Rafael Lain in Paris to navigate possible routes through the excess of experiences, observations and phenomena of irreversibility. It became obvious that we all had some kind of preliminary, anecdotal knowledge, but that trying to come up with a universal definition would not help our understanding.

We were missing the connections.

In an attempt to elucidate the links between our perspectives, we decided to try to map the space of irreversibility or, as we soon came to call it, the Irreverse. We invited scholars and artists from all over the world to a workshop in Graz, Austria in January 2023, where we discussed the science, politics, philosophy and art of this uncharted realm. The discussions were lively and truly cross-disciplinary. How do we document irreversibility? As vocabulary in a dictionary or as appointments in a calendar? Can it be chronicled at all or is it like ephemeral performance art, unrecorded? Do musicians have regrets after the moment of improvisation? Consciousness catches us by surprise, like the moment in chess when we realise we have lost – we could have seen it coming, but now it's too late.

Climate cycles were forecast, but are now interrupted. Paralysed, we watch on passively as we accelerate into the unknown. Can we undo our circumstances? Can we bring a system back to its initial state? On paper, yes, but when it comes down to it, no. Not even the biggest computers can store enough information to control the return. Irreversibility is different in theory and in practice.

The connections were beginning to coalesce.

Following the workshop we cast our net further and announced an open call. The result is the Atlas of the Irreverse – a selection of contributions depicting a series of dimensions, conditions and consequences of irreversibility. The Atlas is neither complete, nor exhaustive: it highlights some and omits others.

From the Atlas we learn that the Irreverse is not just the negative but also the imperative. Calls to action are clearly audible in the contributions, from instructions to create an individual invisible mark (Zaccagnini) to manifestos for big and small actions (Kuchková). A job advert appears for the role of an artist in a company. In an attempt to undo the widely held opinion that artists have no practical role in a business-oriented world, it is not written in 'plain English' but hides its message playfully in a series of reversed words. Would such an illusion make the audience take the value of artists more seriously? After all, they are the same words, but backwards. In general though, we find that reversing something is not 'the same thing backwards'. We accept that time only goes in one direction and when we retrace our steps we don't walk toe-to-heel, eyes cast over our shoulder. Just like when assembling a shattered glass, we don't return to the same place: the new is also the unknown.

In the face of uncertainty we are “alarmed, petrified and scared” but also “prepared” (Çitaksu). But how prepared are we really? The contributions call this into question. We are taunted with the abyss of a black hole (Mangeol); offered a glimpse into a future with no sun, where the laws of thermodynamics are sanctified (de Vivre); and presented a more sobering assessment of our present compulsion to waste resources and throw things away (Peppiatt).

For the mathematically oriented, the unknown is not to be feared but rather to be embraced as a vast playground of possibilities, be they on grids (Šiljak), or in boxes (Guryanova). Direct confrontation with irreversibility can be avoided via cunning escape routes into higher dimensions or by accepting irreversibility as the de-facto state of affairs – a cheap way to “appease our own unease”.

Another common theme throughout the works is the notion of change, expressed heavily through derivatives of the word ‘move’ or from the motion blur of a camera (Prag). This movement is articulated most often with the word ‘back’, but surprisingly also frequently with the word ‘up’ – a word that reflects a culturally ubiquitous observation that everything oriented skyward is associated with the good, the heavenly, the progressive and the future. It seems, subconsciously, that we’re not afraid of the Irreverse, but that we view it rather optimistically.

For Detanico and Lain, playing with words on the page, movement manifests itself as an illusion to the reader, just like Kuchková’s illusion of words. Illusions work best when one forgets that one is being deceived and are thus mediated by the loss of memory or information, the latter forming another overarching theme of the Irreverse. For some, loss could be a relief (Desmedt), while for others, stuck in the liminal space between remembering and forgetting, a mere aspiration (Dejaco).

The Irreverse not only doles out compensation but also has associated costs. Our authors highlight that society not only protects us against irreversibility, but in some cases exposes us to it, and for this it is heavily criticised. Online platforms create fertile ground in which hate speech can thrive, causing irreparable harm to communities (Román), while excessive consumption entices us to alienate ourselves from our bodies and collectives (Silier).

Faced with irreversibility, cultures have always strived to contain decline before they fall into ruin. Attempting to hold onto that which is slipping away, container metaphors permeate the texts. From the vessels of the Jewish universe (Gorgone) and the ships of science and society (Mackowitz) to Japanese craft (Bobb) and contemporary art (Detanico, Lain), customs of repairing broken bonds, structures and ceramics, penetrate our practices. The body, itself an organic vessel, is reconfigured (Shaw). Unable to master irreversibility completely, we accept that in some sense we have to start again.

Progress outdates traditions and misconceptions, casting them into history's mortar. Against the darkness of the past, flickers of the future pierce through the cracks of the moment passed. Old materials are repurposed; friendships are fixed; broken devices are repaired in the knowledge that they are not original but born again. Detanico and Lain ask whether reversing a process can create something new, which our research answers with an emphatic "yes".

The connections are coinciding.

One year after we first met Angela Detanico and Rafael Lain, we are still collaborating intensively. While we are editing and revising manuscripts, they are creating the layout for the magazine, shuffling texts and designing arrangements. The black pages speckled with white marks, appearing between the contributions, are original works by the duo titled *Deep Fields*. They were created using images of flower fields, manipulated to give them the appearance of distant galaxies. These visuals connect two opposite times – the flowers of today, with the stars far in the past.

Annual flowers sprout, blossom and grow before they die to irreversibly return again. Just like dandelions (Siemens), which "resurface in even greater numbers with just one blow of the wind", one step backwards is in fact many steps forwards, into the Irreverse.

Yelena Guryanova and Laurin Mackowitz
Vienna and Graz, September 28, 2023