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## **Closure and permeability From Pneumatic Experience to Extra-cultural Insight in the Kairós**

### **Summary**

Apocalypse may be defined as the onset of a specific time – *kairós* of Christian eschatology, as opposed to *chronos*, the usual, historical time in which usual events take place. In the specific, apocalyptic time cultural distinctions, categorisations and ways of doing things, belonging to a secular time, lose their validity. Apocalypse is also a suspension of culture. No ritual, no paradigm, no procedure corresponds to the logic of the events that acquire eschatological value. This is why the human being confronted with the pandemic conceptualised as an apocalyptic event lacks not only an efficient bodily cure, but also adequate strategies

of fear management, solidarity, mourning, etc. Nonetheless, the *kairos*, i.e. the suspended, a-cultural time, offers an opportunity of novel insights, fostering the transgression of hitherto respected cultural limitations.

In a recent, yet pre-pandemic essay *The Life of Plants. A Metaphysics of Mixture* (2019) Emanuele Coccia anticipated the importance of the pneumatic immersion-in-the-world, epitomised in this instance by plants. He speaks of “universal transmissibility” and “perpetual contagion”. The importance he attributes to the physiology of breathing, common to all living beings, leads to a philosophy of the organic that operates by a constant inversion of container and contained. *Pneuma* introduces a permanent overlap between the organism and the environment, and thus the principle of circulation, transmission and unavoidable contagion. Coccia’s conclusion is of paramount importance for the pandemic times, bringing an acute awareness of bodies being constantly penetrated by viruses.

On the other hand, in the secular time (not-*kairos*, *chronos*), the dominant physiological pattern that finds a cultural reflection is that of ingestion (consumption, incorporation) that we experience through nourishment. Meanwhile, the respiratory character of the COVID-19 disease fosters the rethinking of human body, previously conceptualised as an interior, a bulk, a closed, intestinal reality. If the fear of contagion brings about the experience of absolute exposure, the actual disease, lived mainly as a breathing trouble, fosters the awareness that the human being is and must remain open to the world around him or her in a constant pneumatic exchange. Visceral closed-ness, creating a body as an inner, intimate space is nothing but an illusion. The onset of the illness forces the deconstruction of the human as an essentially claustrophiliac being. In secular, non-apocalyptic time, we build houses and offices, create interiors in which we spend most of our time; our culture is a way of transforming the world according to the same, claustrophiliac pattern. We construe intimacies, transforming portions of the world that are closest to us into the same sort of material extension of our closed, visceral bodies. This process of interior-making implies as well the symbolic activity, concept production, emotions. Our activity as cultural creators leads to the transformation of the world into an inner space, an interior in which we

try to keep all other beings in a tame, neutralized condition. The advent of uncontrollable virus forces a radical redefinition of the human as a maker of controllable interiors. The disease reveals our tragic oneness with the external environment derived from respiratory physiology that excludes any possibility of definite bodily closure.

**Key words:** Cultural analysis – Apocalypse – *chronos* vs. *kairós* – pandemic

The outbreak of a new disease, designated as COVID-19, brought about not only the consolidation of scientific methods of addressing the global crisis, but also the renaissance of religious patterns of imagination, and more generally, of the cultural heritage accumulated during similar events, such as plagues that periodically inundated the mankind since the Antiquity. No wonder thus that humanities, as well as medical sciences, are expected to address the issue of the disease and its lasting consequences, providing a “fuller story” than just that of the medical intervention and the invention of the vaccine (cf. Smith 2021). The aim of the present essay is to revisit and re-examine those inherited ways of facing the catastrophic events such as the current pandemic, that date back to the Antiquity, and to contrast them with the contribution provided by the present-day post-humanist philosophy.

The surge of the infection is an event that defies comprehension; it is unexpected, uncontrollable (in spite of our ever-expanding technical means), provoking incertitude and anxiety, putting man in a liminal situation: death, despair, forced isolation, dissolution of the usual bonds of solidarity. The liminality of the pandemic implies a return of irrationality, surges of unjustified stigmatisation and hostility (such as the attacks against medical personnel that were frequent in Poland and other countries in the first weeks of the pandemic; cf. Amnesty International 2020), episodes of dramatic competition for mingling resources, such as the access to intense care or supplies of medical oxygen.

Certainly, the liminal condition is experienced individually, by a patient who depends on the artificial supply of oxygen or an apparatus inducing respiration. It is a moment in which a human being relies, to an extreme degree, on artefacts, knowledge and skills that could be accumulated only due to the human ability of cultural transmission. Yet paradoxically, he or she is also thrown into an a-cultural condition, isolated from the community and its rituals; the risk of contagion excludes the usual rituals of human solidarity; the so called brain fog that often accompanies the disease attacks the specialised human organ that makes our cultural participation possible. At the same time, the novelty, the unprecedented aspect of the outbreak, the rapidity of the globalization of the new disease put on the brink of cultural normalcy not only the contaminated individuals, but also societies, communities and the mankind as a whole. Searching the cultural archives for precedents and paradigms, it sinks, at the same time, in an a-cultural condition of rupture, despair and terror.

The return to pre-modern patterns of religious thought, and also to an ancient language that preserves useful categorisations, is thus almost instinctive under such circumstances. The humanity on the brink of a catastrophe tumbles out of “normal time” that might be designed by the Greek word *chronos* (χρόνος) and becomes immersed in a “special time” – *kairós* (καιρός). The Greek antonym of the term designating the “usual”, “everyday” chronology connotes a time of opportunity, a moment of a lucky chance, but also a crisis that may lead to some decisive breakthrough; the term *kairós* contains both a menace and a germ of promise. The pagans worshipped *Kairós* as a luck-bringing divinity; nonetheless, the term appears in Christian apocalyptic tradition to designate the eschatological time that enables the access to certain mysteries that remain hidden at all other times. The theological term *eschaton* (ἔσχατον) refers to the post-historical era of God’s overt reign, contrasting with the historical age dominated by the usual presence of adversity, evil and injustice as we experience them in the usual life as we know it.

The passage from *chronos* to *kairós* happens when the time is ripe for a revelation: in the Apocalypse of Saint John this passage is symbolised by the moment of breaking the Seven Seals of God and the opening of

the Book of Secrets (Revelation 6-8). Each of the Seals corresponds to a new vision, such as that of the Four Riders (First to Fourth Seal), the cry for vindication of the Christian martyrs (Fifth Seal), a great earthquake and the rise of the black sun (Sixth Seal), and finally the great silence in heaven (Seventh Seal). The unveiling of those symbolic signs, interpreted in various ways during the subsequent development of Christian esoterica and exegetic tradition, were to be followed by the properly apocalyptic act of pouring “the vials of the wrath of God” upon the earth (Revelation 16:1). What is to be stressed here is the association of the catastrophe and the unveiling of secrets. The biblical Book of Revelation is the source of a lasting cultural tradition in which the expectation of novel wisdom accompanies the anxiety of catastrophe. Such an association determines the profound ambivalence of Christian eschatology, conceptualising the end of time (*chronos*, history, “life as we know it”) as a menace and a promise.

The couple of Greek terms to designate time may also resume two ways of conceptualising the pandemic. *Chronos* is the “normal time”, a time of sequences of events that occupy a given duration, shorter or longer, but never eternal. The defining characteristic of the epidemic/pandemic disease – as opposed to an endemic disease – is chronological, i.e. related to time; the difference lies precisely in the dynamics of the outbreak. An epidemic is a disease that appears suddenly on a certain territory; the number of cases climbs sharply, but also declines sharply over a period, a measurable duration. This chronological conceptualisation corresponds to the pragmatic approach toward the predicament, and implies hope (any disease with epidemic/pandemic characteristics will considerably diminish or disappear after a certain time). On the other hand, human mind tends to experience the pandemic in a way that has to do with the “non-chronological” modality of thinking: *kairós* as a time of crisis, but also an end of times, a great, final catastrophe that may put an end to human history and “life as we know it”; it is a radical denial of all subsequent chronologies.

The cultural productivity of apocalyptic patterns of imagination is enormous; the apocalyptic scenarios return in a great variety of cinematographic and literary narrations, in visual arts and in computer

games. No wonder that this way of thinking is also present in the popular way of facing real events. Only with time, our manner of facing the rise of the new disease returns to the normal, sequential way of experiencing the outbreak as a temporary, secular, not an eschatological event. Even if the number of cases, as well as the number of deaths, is still as high or higher than initially, the disease is no longer terrorizing us, because we stepped back from the apocalyptic *kairós* into the *chronos* of normalcy. In the “normal”, non-apocalyptic time, simple, repeatable, prescribable actions, such as vaccination and washing our hands, are supposed to improve our situation in the world, to increase our chances of survival, to protect us from the catastrophe conceptualised as an end of “life as we know it”. We are safely back in the cultural realm of paradigms and procedures. But what remains to do is to ask what kind of revelation the experience of *kairós* actually brought to us, what kind of novel thought or idea can be preserved from the apocalyptic time of trial that we believe to have lived. What novel cognition of ourselves can stay with us after the pandemic?

My starting point to reflect on this question and to search for a novel wisdom that might become available to the post-pandemic humanity (and humanities) is a recent essay *The Life of Plants. A Metaphysics of Mixture* (2019) by Emanuele Coccia. Although the book was written some time before the pandemic, the author anticipated the importance of the pneumatic (i.e. connected to our physiology of breathing) immersion-in-the-world, epitomised in his text by plants rather than by humans. At the same time, he speaks of “universal transmissibility” and “perpetual contagion” (Coccia 2019: 68), inherent to the condition of immersion-in-the-world, common to all biological organisms. These words acquire quite a new resonance and importance when we are confronted with the pandemic of a disease attacking human respiratory system. Emanuele Coccia, as I believe, helps to verbalise a new perspective that appeared in the pandemic *kairós*.

The essayist’s approach is inscribed in the philosophical coordinates of post-humanism and its rethinking of the organic status of man in the context of other forms of existence. The key point of his approach is the physiology of breathing, common to all living beings. The category of breathing organism is more encompassing than the concept of *phylum*,

i.e. the identification of the physiological type of organism that we are, introduced in the 1980s by the post-modern philosopher Félix Guattari. Focusing on plants, Coccia invites us to abandon the usual anthropocentric or even zoo-centric way of thinking. Shortly speaking, if we abandon our anthropocentric stance, and we focus on plants and their modality of being-in-the-world, we can completely change our perspective. Just to give an example, instead of speaking of anthropocene, i.e. the epoch in which human activity creates a new geological period in the history of our planet, he speaks of fitocene, making us remember that the creation of an atmosphere rich in oxygen, which was the effect of the activity of plants, was even more crucial turnover in the history of the planet. Plants create themselves and transform the world in which they are immersed by their sheer breathing, the dynamic balance based on continuous exchange of gases. Photosynthesis, that Coccia qualifies as “one of the major cosmogonic phenomena” is “indistinguishable from the being itself of plants” (Coccia 2019: 40). The pandemic of COVID-19 as a respiratory disease puts in the limelight a forgotten aspect as a basis of a new definition of man: man is an aerobe (oxygen-breathing) organism. Stressing this aspect, the new definition of the human condition accentuates the dependence of man on other forms of existence. On the other hand, it obliterates the typically human distinction between passive “being” and active “doing” or “producing”. The sheer being of man is already a form of interaction, producing and shaping a world for other forms of being. Including the virus.

A widespread way of conceptualising the pandemic is that of an event in which the human is confronted with “an invisible enemy”, a radically different form of existence, i.e. the virus. Of course, men try to control this situation by such means as mask, social distance and vaccination, expecting to “eliminate the opponent”. Meanwhile, such a conceptualisation of a total victory is far from realistic. The outcome of the pandemic implies rather an interaction and mutual adaptation in which the other form of being, the virus, mutates and survives in spite of human actions, decisions and efforts. One of the possible final results of the pandemic may be the establishment of a sort of equilibrium, in which COVID-19 becomes a widespread, but usually not mortal disease, just as

the common cold, a viral disease that has never been eliminated by the humanity. Philosophically speaking, the problem of the pandemic should be thus approached as a problem of coexistence, in which the physiological reality of breathing (and thus admitting alien elements such as viruses into the human body) is the defining factor in the relationship of man with other forms of existence. The human should be thus seen not as a closed fortress, but rather as a permeable being. It requires a very crucial shift of the dominant perspective concerning our way of being in the world.

Such a stance based on breathing leads to a philosophy of the organic that operates by a constant inversion of the container and the contained. *Pneuma* (πνεῦμα) – yet another Greek term that may refer not only to the physiology of breathing, but also to the spiritual and theological realm of Christianity, in reference to the “breath of life” insufflated by God into the human being at the moment of creation – is of crucial importance. Pneumatic character of human existence (in both physiological and theological sense) introduces a permanent overlap between the organism and the environment, and thus the principle of circulation, transmission and unavoidable contagion. Coccia’s conclusion is of paramount importance for the pandemic times, bringing an acute awareness of bodies being constantly penetrated by viruses: “The impenetrability we have often imagined as the paradigmatic form of space is an illusion: wherever there is an obstacle to transmission and interpenetration, a new plane is produced that allows bodies to reverse the inherence from one to the other, in a reciprocal interpenetration. (...) Everything enters and exists from everywhere: the world is an opening, an absolute freedom of circulation – not side by side with, but *through* bodies and others. To live, to experience, or to be in the world also means to let oneself be traversed by all things” (Coccia 2019: 68). This statement acquires a tragic resonance after the onset of the pandemic, yet becomes even more illuminating. As a pneumatic, i.e. breathing being, man cannot reject the essential condition of coexistence.

Coccia couldn’t predict such an event as the pandemic at the moment he wrote his essay, but it happens that the rethinking of the human condition he proposed is very productive in the present circumstances. In the secular time (not-*kairos*), the dominant physiological pattern that finds



a cultural reflection, as suggested by Coccia, is ingestion (consumption, incorporation) that we experience though nourishment. Meanwhile, the respiratory character of the COVID-19 disease fosters the rethinking of human body, previously conceptualised as an interior, a bulk, a closed, intestinal reality. If the fear of contagion brings about the experience of absolute exposure, the actual disease, lived mainly as a breathing trouble, fosters the awareness that the human being is and must remain open to the world around him or her in a constant pneumatic exchange. Visceral closed-ness, creating a body as an inner, intimate space is nothing but an illusion. The onset of the illness forces the deconstruction of the human as an essentially claustrophiliac being. In secular, non-apocalyptic time, we build houses and offices, create interiors in which we spend most of our time; our culture is a way of transforming the world according to the same, claustrophiliac pattern. We construe intimacies, transforming portions of the world that are closest to us into the same sort of material extension of our closed, visceral bodies. This process of interior-making implies as well the symbolic activity, concept production, emotions. Our activity as cultural creators leads to the transformation of the world into an inner space, an interior in which we try to keep all other beings in a tame, neutralized condition. The advent of uncontrollable virus forces a radical redefinition of the human as a maker of controllable interiors. The disease reveals our tragic oneness with the external environment derived from respiratory physiology that excludes any possibility of definite bodily closure.

Unexpectedly, the plant-like features shared by man enable what Coccia defines as the “cosmic contemplation” of complete, immersive being-in-the-world. Experiencing and developing a solidarity with plants may provide a novel insight, a wisdom to be learned from plants under the pressure of the *kairós*. As Coccia remarks, “plants do not run, they cannot fly; they are not capable of privileging a specific place in relation to the rest of space, they have to remain where they are. Space, for them, does not crumble into a heterogeneous chessboard of geographical difference; the world is condensed into the portion of ground and sky they occupy. Unlike most higher animals, they have no selective relation to what surrounds them: they are, and cannot be other than, constantly exposed to

the world around them. Plant life is life as complete exposure, in absolute continuity and total communion with the environment” (Coccia 2019: 5). No human being is able to live on the surface of his or her skin as a plant does; we privilege the volume of our bodies over their surface. It is the other way around with plants. They epitomise absolute absorption, spreading in the environment, penetrating the space that surrounds them not only with their stems, branches, petioles and translucent leaf blades, but also with roots and root-hairs, curling tendrils, rhizomes and runners. They are the very figure of openness, as much as we are the very figure of a visceral closed-ness, creating an inner, intimate space that is vital to us. What is more, also our relationship with the outer world is shaped by this inner, visceral logic. We build houses and offices, create interiors in which we spend most of our time as essentially claustrophiliac beings. In the *chronos*, the non-apocalyptic time, we believe that our capacity of producing interiors may grant us safety. The *kairós* of the pandemic is a moment of anagnorisis, an “opening of the eyes” in which man passes from ignorance and delusion to knowledge, discovering his or her exposure to the environment, the essential impossibility of building a protective interior of any kind whatsoever, since our own bodies are not the paradigms of such safe, isolated interiors; rather to the contrary, our bodies speak of our permeability and oneness with the environment.

In the ultimate instance, culture is a way of transforming the world according to the same, claustrophilic pattern. Our activity as cultural creators is directed toward the transformation of the world into an inner space, an interior in which we keep all other beings in a tame, neutralized condition. All those premises of human culture reveal its shortcomings. Deluded by their world-transforming powers, the humans strive to furnish and control their own environment, while plants, that absorb the resources they need for their growth, give an example of oneness and adhesion to their environment. As Coccia says, they are “the most intense, radical, and paradigmatic form of being in the world; [...] they embody the most direct and elementary connection that life can establish with the world” (Coccia 2019: 5), comparable to a “cosmic contemplation” in which any distinction of object and substance is totally absent. On the other way, in a suggestive chapter featuring *Tiktaalik rosae*, a species

that palaeontologists regard as a fossil link between fishes and the earliest tetrapods coming out of the primordial ocean to colonise the dry land, Coccia claims that we have never ceased to live an existence of immersion: “The relation between a living being and the world can never be reduced to one of opposition (or objectification) or to one of incorporation (which we experience in nourishment). The most primal relation between the living being and the world is that of reciprocal projection: a movement through which the living being commissions the world with what it must make of its own body and whereby the world, on the contrary, entrusts the living being with the realization of a movement that should have been external to it. What we call *technique* is a movement of this type. Thanks to it, the soul [*esprit*]’ lives outside the living being’s body and makes itself soul [*âme*] of the world; conversely, a natural movement finds its origin and ultimate form in an idea of the living being. This mutual projection takes place also because the living being identifies itself with the world in which it is immersed” (Coccia 2019: 33-34). This is why we construe intimacies, transforming portions of the world that are closest to us into some sort of material extension of our bodily existence. This process of home-making implies both the manipulation of the physical matter and the symbolic activity of creating concepts, associations, emotional investments. Yet our way of living in the world, as Coccia claims, still does not differ from that of the primordial organic molecules in the fluid medium that fostered the beginnings of life on Earth.

Apocalypse may be defined as the onset of a specific time (*kairós* of Christian eschatology, yet also of Giorgio Agamben’s commentary on the St Paul’s Letter to the Romans; cf. Agamben 2005) in which the broadly accepted cultural distinctions, categorisations, as well as procedures, i.e. the usual ways of doing things, lose their validity; they belong to the secular time of *chronos*. Apocalypse may thus be seen as a suspension of culture and cultural distinctions, including those between man and animals, other living beings (cf. Agamben 2003). No ritual, no paradigm, no procedure corresponds to eschatological events. The human confronted with the pandemic as an immersion in the *kairós* lacks not only an efficient

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\* The distinction *esprit* – *âme* that appears in the French original of Coccia’s essay is blurred in its English translation.

bodily cure, but also adequate strategies of fear management, solidarity, mourning, etc. Nonetheless, the *kairos*, i.e. the suspended, a-cultural time, offers an opportunity of novel insights, fostering the transgression of hitherto respected cultural limitations.

My reflection focuses on the individual experiencing the fear of contagion and the actual disease, rather than collective phenomena accompanying the pandemic. Its onset isolates human destinies, puts in the limelight the solitude as the central aspect of human condition. Alone with his or her body, human individual experiences what I call the trauma of permeability, in which the closed, subjectivised, culturally produced body becomes a space open to biological fluxes and viral replication. Certainly, the experience of being infected and the trauma of permeability are not positive in themselves, but they can lead to a post-traumatic growth, fostering a new awareness of an immersive being-in-the-world, the predominance of the pneumatic existence over ingestion and incorporation. This is how, in my reflection, the pandemic opens the boundaries of man's cultural condition and enables the search for extra-cultural modalities of being human.

The extra-cultural stance that I postulate may only be a momentary insight derived from the acute experience of our existence as pneumatic, i.e. open, permeable bodies that do not occupy space excluding other forms of existence, but rather create space that may be invaded by other forms of existence. The extra-cultural mode of human existence, complementary to the usual cultural condition, is related to apocalypse as a liminal time of exception and transition. Undoubtedly, culture will prevail. Apocalypse is characterised by suddenness rather than duration. Repetitive procedures, such as vaccination, will put an end to the pandemic, re-establishing full efficiency of cultural paradigms. Nevertheless, the extra-cultural insight achieved in the *kairos* may durably transform and enrich our awareness as humans.

My departure point is the understanding of culture as a repertory of transmissible (learnable) paradigms and procedures that constantly mediate the relations between the human and the world. Culture acts as an extra-organic integument, performs a protective closure, separating the body from its environment and fostering an exclusive, secluded subjectivity.

Under normal circumstances, humanness is almost consubstantial with cultural condition. Only the extreme, liminal experiences and states, such as madness, senility or incurable disease reveal the denuded human, stripped of his or her cultural carapace. Also the current pandemic may be treated as a liminal event revealing the human stripped of the cultural. It offers an occasion of rethinking the secluding, encompassing character of the cultural, and in particular, the culturally produced illusion of closure of our bodies. As a consequence, it may lead to a new conceptualisation of human subjectivity as permeable, open, exposed to fluxes.

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