**Lorena Preta**

**The Inhuman in the Human**

*The most precise and acute sensation of anyone living the present, is the unawareness of where one is setting foot, every day. The ground is flaky, lines are split, fabrics fray, perspectives waver. For this reason there is a stronger perception of finding oneself in the “unnameable present”[[1]](#footnote-1).*

(Roberto Calasso. L’innominabile attuale, Adelphi 2017, p. 13)

When we find ourselves confronted by the terrible facts which our present time forces us to face, it would be a relief to stop at the realization that destructivity has always been part of human nature, as a biological feature and as a social construction; freeing us from the need to understand how it has changed in the present and how it manifests itself in particular ways. The reality is that we are confronted with a type of incomprehensible destructivity and inhumanity, if we do not place them in contact with the deep heart of our now global culture.

The question which we must ask ourselves is whether currently and in the more recent past, our civilization has not actively self-produced and whether it is not still producing, models of action which are no longer guided by instincts only but also by technological-bureaucratic ways, which are typically modern but for this reason, no less cruel. Starting from a historic experience which is unthinkable, like the Holocaust, going to the current terrorist attacks, it is conceivable that modern civilization itself offers its own peculiar forms of expression to carry out the destructive act, as it now appears on the world’s scene and to make it possible to organize its diffusion.

Certainly, over the last few years, some forms of experience have appeared in our lives, which are changing the definition itself of humanity. Biotechnologies which alter the customary conception of the body, virtual reality which has invaded the field of daily reality, have totally moved our self-perception and the representation of the world. A sense of loss and transience dominate the scene, in a horizontal time made of simultaneity. We are forced to ask ourselves if the ways given to new forms of communication have a symbolic meaning of their own, as we were used to thinking of any cultural and social expression, or if they are mostly enactments, direct evacuations of unconscious contents, without mediations or elaborations.

*An unconscious which is turned inside out, which no longer needs to be reached with interpretations or deciphering but which takes over the scene right away, imposingly, in a continuous turmoil of completed actions.*

**The body on the scene**

The symbolic capacity appears to be compromised and the body acquires increasing importance, assertively taking over the scene. Indeed it is in relation to the body and its technological manipulations that we measure the most perturbing changes which today’s society offers us, in all countries of the world. A blinding presence of the body and of sensoriality, but at the same time, its elimination in favour of a virtual and disembodied reality.

We could also say that the body is strongly on the scene because there is a tendency to place problems on it, which should rely on psychic elaboration. The desire or drive inhabiting it, find immediate realization on the plane of reality and end up newly repainting, at least apparently so, biological pictures and historic characteristics which are already given, following individual or social drives.

The most reckless issues, which come out as perturbing novelties on the scene, once they have completed their positive function of deconstructing the most rooted and undisputed customs, they then impose themselves as new unquestionable models. Thus they themselves become prejudices which can at times be more constraining than the ones initially challenged. New situations, still in a phase of elaboration impose themselves as alternative behaviours, while still remaining premature and difficult to assimilate.

A situation where orientation is difficult pertains to sexuality and the new forms of family and social organization. The psychic and social container, composed of the Oedipal triad and of the diverse sexuality connected to it, which the scheme representing reality was based on for centuries, at least in western society, has suffered a crisis. This has dismantled, among other things, the sense of time which is no longer defined by generational conflict or sexual diversity. At the moment, it is difficult to say whether there is a replacement of these psychic assumptions, through their transformation or if they remain functioning but disguised by altered forms.

It is nonetheless true that the global circulation to which we are accustomed has made us more sensitive to cultural differences and to accounting for the various mythologies on which are based the diverse psychic organizations of cultures. Sudhir Kakar has been analyzing for years the theme of psychic dimension which presents itself, from the start, as both an individual and cultural construction, in a codetermination which is impossible to separate.

Indeterminate sexuality (such as the problem of gender dysphoria) for instance, does not have the same meaning in the Western world as it does in India and we must therefore consider the forms of distress which are produced in Western society on this issue, as experiences also related to the grounds on which our culture is based.

The solutions offered by global society however, seem to dilute all different cultural practices in an equivalent mare magnum, apparently in an attempt to recompose problems into new solutions but ultimately eluding the sense expressed by each culture. They produce technological solutions which are valid for everyone and which initially appear to overcome contrasts and distress but which in fact produce hybrid and unsolved figures within the psyche, the product of juxtaposed experiences, difficult to organize in a coherent whole.

Another experience which is now common to all cultures and societies is the manipulation of the body for health reasons. Transplants and the insertion of mechanical parts in the body force us to a necessary cohabitation which is perturbing to alterity.

In any event, the body we are talking about, is a body, which is increasingly fragmented. Even on a literally physical plane, we can dismantle it and substitute its parts with both human and animal or mechanical pieces. These are life experiences which no longer refer to mythology or to our phantasmatic world but to our daily experience.

At the basis of these practices, we find however, a mythology which glorifies “partiality” and makes it an apparently adequate solution to the demands of time, but which sacrifices the contrasting idea of an “entirety”, where the deep need for integration is further acknowledged.

Just as in a nightmare or in the most extreme horror phantasies, we find ourselves dealing with removed organs, inserted in foreign bodies which must be “convinced” to accept the alien body part with massive therapies.

We use innovative fertility techniques which allow a woman to incubate an embryo created elsewhere, at times in vitro, or in any case a product of material assembled from bodies unknown to each other. To the point of negating the original parental couple, the long and difficult process of the “construction of maternity”, in order to deviate discussion on the result of the process, indeed of the biotechnological procedure, in other words on the baby-object.

We seem to be able to forget the relationship starting within the uterus between the fetus and the mother, as though years of psychoanalysis and neurophysiological researches had not accustomed us to consider the sounds, noises, bodily variations due to maternal emotions, forms of dialogue and knowledge of the mother-baby dyad.

In this complexity which sees as one both deep desires and affirmed social rights, the work of analysis which should especially refer to the *acceptance of a sense of limit*, is increasingly difficult.

Even inside our analysis rooms we find ourselves confronted, at the same time, by maniacal and depressive situations which do not even define the cyclic alternation as we know it but they overlap, in a triumph of both excess and deprivation, which reflect well the manifestations of culture outside.

How can we speak of a necessary mourning in this situation, when youth at least in Western culture seems to have to be eternal, when sexuality is undefined, and death postponed till the creation of suspended states which can hardly still be considered life, as we knew it until now? The limit has moved always further and an obstinacy seems to dominate over everything, which has no longer anything to do with the instinct for survival, nor with the Eros sustaining it.

**The remains of the future**

The present time appears to be characterized by a peculiar form of temporality. It often seems to be devoured by the future, by the speed and whirlwind of technological innovations and from the totally new questions which these changes pose, so much so that a dragging effect is produced which leaves no room for processing while everything, as we said, plunges into action.

After all any image pertaining to the future seems charged with the infinite problems which the inheritance of the past has left unresolved and which weigh on its perspectives, producing a sort of “hooking” of the future which is pulled back, without the possibility of evolution for its many potentialities.

In his last posthumous book, Zybmunt Bauman ( Retrotopia, Laterza 2017) speaks of the current nostalgia for the past which he calls “Retrotopia” and he remembers the beautiful book by Walter Benjamin on the *Angelus Novus,* painted in 1920 by Paul Klee and which you surely know.

[](https://www.google.it/imgres?imgurl=http://www.fucinemute.it/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/alfbenj-2.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.fucinemute.it/2012/04/langelus-novus-langelo-redentore-di-walter-benjamin/&docid=Ivw8J2S1casKxM&tbnid=SyrIjpdphWeQqM:&vet=1&w=600&h=900&bih=699&biw=1231&ved=0ahUKEwj-l4XTnpnYAhVKyKQKHXHQAJQQ__EBCAM&iact=c&ictx=1)

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*This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

The present and the future, history and the project, reality and desire should be in a dynamic relationship but it seems that rather than integrating or maintaining a tension between them, these planes are confused or collapse on each other. As a result it is difficult to find a vertex from which one can consider the events of the present, unless the theories and ideologies of a recent past are applied once again, which established rigid and inflexible popularities, consequently inducing the disasters which we know only too well.

How then can we confront this intricate dimension of time and history? Indeed we must finally actualize the experience of personal, interior time and socially shared time, so that the present may have a space which is not flattened on reality but on the contrary, a *space of turbulence and tension* which may be thought and lived again, if it was frozen by trauma or experienced for the first time.

Nonetheless, if we preside the present too closely, its evidence may crush the experience which we may derive from it, much like what happens when we feel overcome by reality.

A short poem by Oscar Wilde, tells the story of a fisherman who was very loved in his village because when he returned from fishing he would tell wonderful tales of fauns and beautiful mermaids that he had seen on the seashore. One day he saw right before him on the beach a mermaid who was combing her long hair. On his return, everyone gathered around him waiting for his tales, as always and they asked him: “What did you see?” but this time he replied: “Nothing”.

The (presumed) reality of the vision had left him speechless, it had taken from him any possibility of narrative transformation. Entering the tale completely, stops phantasy from emerging in that space between the subjective and objective world, which guarantees full symbolic activity, which makes creativity possible indeed because it is not overcome by reality. The imaginary which comprises and nourishes reality and constantly transforms it, may lose its function because it comes to coincide with it.

So the question arises of how much reality can be sustained by the psyche.

With reference to new technologies and their impact on the psyche, we know well, that our constant bombardment by news, whether they be fake or real, reprocessed facts or direct takes, as well as the excessive use of video games which are only simulations, has at least two effects: either a threshold of possible perception is established, beyond which any possibility of further access is denied, and therefore negation or indifference step in; or on the contrary, one is dramatically overcome and information piles without the possibility of absorbing anything or giving it sense.

Increasingly in the analytical treatment we find forms of life which force the therapist to keep a precarious balance between the necessary work on the patient’s biography and history, often perceived by the patient as the pile of wreckage described before and the whirlwind of experiences due to the new means of communication which crush habitual customs and languages. These new means seem to delete the past and prevent a pause in that intermediate area of experience, the transitional area of Winnicot, which allows growth and processing of the interior reality that is in contact with the external one.

In any event the question remains: in this acceleration how do we assimilate the new and contradictory forms of life?

At the same time, we must make the effort to read these events as “documents” of a time to come. Perhaps these fragmented and dislocated parts which seem to be the outcome of disintegration, are what Paul Valéry called *“Remains of the future”*, unaccomplished anticipations *of material in evolution*, which must also be read through their potential besides their taking place.

**Chimeras. To host the irreducible**

If we can speak of a *co-determination* of the individual and society, we must also define how these two elements relate to each other and we must ask ourselves if something *irreducible* remains of one in relation to the other.

It seems that the human psyche may not be completely socialized. The original insufficiency which the individual carries places him as a being in need of others but it also decenters him, *dislocates him towards a place of non-belonging.*

Indeed we are dealing with that diversity-foreignness which far from being applicable only to the other, we see instead appearing in the heart itself of belonging: *our own contains the alien within.*

However, this is not about the *unheimlich* *which occurs due to ambiguity, an undecidability between what is foreign and what is familiar, human and inhuman, oneself and the other*. Rather I mean those *parts of “irreducibility”* *which belong to us and which we can in no way transform but only “host” as our own constituting elements, though they are foreign.*

*Chimeras* exist in biology, both in the animal and in the human world, based on which an individual may have different cell populations which are genetically distinct and so produce beings who keep alterities that are co-present in the same individual. At times they become monstrous forms which contain different and overlapping bodies but alterities often cohabit without an external physical evidence.

By insisting on this irreducible alterity, we are brought to consider the work which happens in the psychic so that those *“immunitary”* operations may take place which guarantee psychic survival.

In contacting the other, a *hybridization* always spontaneously happens which produces a new identity “formation”. Yet at some levels, some foreign nuclei necessarily remain which ultimately co-exist with what is new, or in some cases they propose themselves dramatically as an alternative.

From this point of view, more than being an assimilation, the impact with alterity can become a form of internal *cohabitation*.

It is sufficient to think about the dramatic problem of refugees and immigrants which currently distresses various parts of the world and which causes ancient waves of rejection and violent attack, often escaping any attempt of accepting the other. At the same time, we often see attempts to impose an assimilation which is equally violent as it is aimed at eliminating differences.

On the other hand, the alterity inhabiting us in a substantial way, represents the aporìa around which we define and build our self and possibly, it should in some measure, remain unresolved. We are engaged in a constant process of acknowledgment or alternatively, expulsion of parts of the self which are negated or unexplored, in both the internal and external world. It would possibly be more convenient to take into consideration the tension between them rather than attempting to solve it by delegating to action, the task of confronting it.

**The drive of humanity**

From the description made the figure of a decentered subject emerges, dislocated, eradicated from his usual references but still uncertain about which he will follow, unless he adapts and conforms. This uncertainty and confusion lead to the type of distress and to the passive or violent solutions which we know.

Overall it would appear that humanity is undergoing a progressive process of *dehumanization*. It seems that now more than ever man must come to terms with what André Green called “the work of the negative”, constantly divided between the psychic and physical forces of life and death, between “objectualization and de-subjectualization”[[3]](#footnote-3). While Eros connects the drives of life and destruction, the death drive is pure disconnection, *déliaison*.

Freud conceived the death drive as an opposing force to the life drive. The two instincts fused would give birth to the instinct of aggression, which would be deviated towards the outside in order to protect the group and the individual.

In the 1931 correspondence between Freud and Einstein, over the question if war could have been abolished, Freud replied: “T*here is no likelihood of our being able to suppress humanity’s aggressive tendencies… what we may try is to direct it into a channel other than that of warfare…”*

In the while, the Nazi genocide had already started with the “technological” solutions of the concentration camps. War as it had been know until then, had only recently been including the “scientific” abomination of mass extermination. Since then this experience was unfortunately repeated in Europe and other countries of the world.

In a condition similar to the maniacal state, genocide would portray an unfused instinct for destruction which is not followed by any link, and this would apply, in part, to terrorists and kamikaze who sacrifice themselves, killing other people (in this case however the situation differs in many aspects which we have no time to discuss at the moment).

This would also be the case of any form of present violence which we see appearing, unrepresented by the known icons of conflict fought with weapons, even those of mass extinction, but rather as actings without any thought possibility, which derive from an unprocessable area of darkness.

Yet Freud warned that there could be no Thanatos without Eros, that the two instincts caused each other producing that fusion of hate and love which we call humanity.

In many ways man has tried to imagine what his future would be like if one of these elements, for example aggression, could be eliminated through genetic and technological manipulation.

Many science fiction books go in this direction, they contain inventions of a new nature based on the production of replicants and for this reason lacking emotions. Yet always, invariably the point is reached where one must choose between the order of a rigidly organized society with no more Eros and the affectivity, possibly uncontrolled but reviving of a humanity which carries everything inside in the contradictory way that we know, with its light and shadow.

So much so that we could hypothesize that besides the death and life drives, there may be a drive which combining these, makes us who we are, *the humanity drive*.

We can still hope that we will never be able to do without it and that the awareness of its complexity and the need to keep in contact with it, will allow us to survive without sacrificing necessary parts of the self.

Psychoanalysis can still have a function in this sense and as Bion said:

*If psychoanalytic intuition does not provide a stamping ground for wild asses, where is a zoo to be found to preserve the species? Conversely, if the environment is tolerant, what is to happen to the ‘great hunters’ who lie unrevealed or reburied?[[4]](#footnote-4) (W. R. Bion)*

1. Unofficial translation, provided for reference only; the book has so far been published only in Italian [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Benjamin, *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p.249 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. André Green, *Le travail du négatif,* 1993, 2d. de Minuit, pp. 321-322 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wilfred Rupert Bion, *Memories of the future, The Dream*, vol.12, Karnac Books, 1991 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)