

AUDIO ESSAY

Struggle for Air ... an Epilogue to Suffering. [Excerpt From a Found Audiovisual Diary]

Tolis Tatolas

Struggle for air ... an epilogue to suffering is an audio essay that documents the imagined agony of a with Covid-19 patient, a man who is an artist with an academic scientific background in biology. It is conceptualised and written as an excerpt from a fictional personal diary, with a soundscape as a creative extension. At the time of his supposed suffering, the man questions and tries to foresee the future of the Homo sapiens as a species, after the appearance of the Covid-19 pandemic during a period of very critical conditions that concern humanity. The essay is, in fact, an examination of human brain plasticity in relation to current major issues that society faces; of the ways in which the contagion impacted human existence and activity; and of the avenues through which art may act as inspiration for science and vice versa. It argues that, in order to survive, humankind surpasses natural selection and enables an artificial one, by vitally connecting the human body with artificial parts. Science fiction becomes applied and leads to transhumanism. Thus, in an era where dehumanisation has become the norm, the inhuman assumes an even more significant place in contemporary society. The essay comes to a close by questioning the moral issues that arise from the transition from the human to the posthuman concept of existence, indicating that its repercussions are only just starting to be felt.

Keywords: Covid-19; posthumanism; human; scientists; species; transition

It is the year 2022AD and I have been infected by Covid-19. This could mean anything from minor symptoms, to a worst-case scenario. The unknown future causes insecurity and I constantly think of the repercussions. It does not help that I am both an artist and a qualified biologist, as so many stimuli make my mind expand in different directions. I know that infected patients with heavy pneumonia suffer from severe pain in the thorax and difficulty to breathe. They very often say that they feel their lungs are full of glass spikes and hear a hollow and harsh sound these make inside them. Doctors report that patients try to inhale very small volumes of air, quickly and at an intermitted pace, to receive some amount of oxygen and remain alive. The pain is agonizing as people are suffering from asphyxia. Suffocation is a commonly experienced condition, triggered by the feelings of excessive stress and grief. For us Covid-19 patients, this sense has evolved from a psychological feeling to a physical, actual condition. Physical pain and mental anxiety blend and the result is something that fills us with extreme fear. Fear of death. Fear of non-existing. In a state where my personal agony and 'struggle for some air' joins the collective one, spoken words have unconsciously become a soundscape, like a personal and shared aural diary record(ing) of what

humankind is currently going through physically and mentally.

Since it was first identified in December 2019, scientists worldwide have put themselves in a very intense race to find a medicine and a vaccine against the virus. The pressure that the governments applied upon scientists was, and remains, phenomenal. Mutations of the virus have added more problems to that situation. Pharmaceutical companies have, until now, invented formulas that build partial and short term immunity. It is an irony; many addicts before that, used to inject drugs in themselves in order to escape reality. Now we are vaccinated in order to go out and enter reality and normality. This workaholic and egocentric virus has turned humans into 'legal addicts'. In combination with the pandemic's pattern, appearing in periodic waves since the outbreak, it has led the human race to adapt to a tactic also followed by many animals: hibernation. In periods during which our species' activity is almost normal, people circulate, gather, and store essentials in order to cope with their basic needs for survival. These periods alternate with periods of confinement, during which people are isolated and locked up in their homes in order to achieve maximum social distance, until the next remission of the pandemic phenomenon. Movement is strictly limited and, to leave their house, in many places around the world citizens must notify the authorities in advance as to their whereabouts.

Changes are rapid in intensity, form and pace. The inability of the scientific community to entirely decode the microbiology of this ever-mutating virus, has led the human species to revisit its way of existing on the planet. In the years since the outbreak of the contagion, a great deal of possessions as well as established rights have perished, but also millions of lives. This was and remains some kind of war between humans and a submicroscopic infectious agent that replicates only inside the living cells of an organism. It is very bizarre, but the fear of the human race had always focused on the idea of a superior extraterrestrial species that would one day invade earth and eliminate human civilisation. Reality played an ironic game and this immense sense of fear came alive by a tiny non-cellular organism of a nanoscale. This factor exists at the border between chemistry and life; a grey area between living and non-living, and uses the human body as a host. Under such highly stressful conditions, the reactions of human society's new order are driven by such basic instincts as self-preservation and homeostasis.

From the beginning of our genus, the human brain has by nature had a functional and structural plasticity which helped it to change and adapt, as a result of experience. This interconnection of stimulus and process is an ongoing cycle of feedback. The human brain's anatomy and function have evolved to be highly responsive to environmental phenomena, especially in the milieu of social interactions. Numerous aspects of human brain development show evidence of specialisation leading to increased plasticity. Analysis of ancient DNA of fossil hominines has shown clear evidence of the evolutionary plasticity of the human brain. However, the rate of present-day scientific discovery is lower than what it has historically been. Nowadays, due to the fact that every day is a small technological revolution, our brain is required to increase its ability to 'transform' at an extraordinary pace, like that of a common modelling material. Natural selection is the mechanism by which nature controls the evolution of organisms, thus rejecting or giving the green light to species, in an absolutely unique way, to either perpetuate and evolve or extinct. In this natural procedure, in recent decades and with increasing interference, a new 'update' is added: a 'human selection' thanks to the technology humans invent and use in all aspects of everyday life.

Until now, scientists have examined past human transition periods from one subspecies to another in terms of biology and social anthropology, highlighting the succinct overlapping between the subspecies in question. I believe that, in a similar way, future scientists will study what we are currently experiencing as such a transition, marked by issues of paramount importance that inextricably prevail and interact: overpopulation, mass urbanisation, climate change, fake news, existence of conspiracy theories, and polarisation of society due to extreme political, economic and social inequalities. We are at a critical juncture of our existence as a species on the planet. Technology and the demonic human mind are transforming dipoles that occupied the 20th century into new ones; what used to be known as a left-right opposition in politics seems now to be shifting to a biological basis,

evolving into bioconservatism-transhumanism. Even the compound of the first word contains explicitly the term 'conservatism', implying that the second is the progressive one. By a very critical observation, one may say that this conflict between progressivism and conservatism is now written in the 'collective DNA' of humankind.

The modern human's mania for novelty and technology is so intense that it seems that he/she does not just want to produce it but to physically connect with it. Humans now seem to embark on creating a new nature, an artificial one, which will completely subdue the existing, created by nature herself. Influenced by our religious beliefs, which define us to a great extent, once more humans elevate themselves to gods, loyal as they are to their struggle to beat death and achieve eternal life. In this 'chain chemical reaction' - evolutionary process, art has always been the catalyst. This new *Weltanschauung* entails extreme societal transformations that are cataclysmic in pace, size, and intensity. These new models are made manifest through art by means of the concept of dystopia, a popular notion that has flourished in literature, music, cinema and the visual arts. Once upon a time all this was fictional and futuristic; nowadays, it is contemporary and informs the new reality.

But this did not happen overnight. Many of the elements depicted and narrated in dystopias gradually took shape. The key element at the present period is the phases of long-term internment. The new way of living generates the conditions for and gives space to the emergence and expression of the basic human instincts. One of the functions of art is to place the viewer in a situation, pleasant or unpleasant, not acquainted with in real life. Reality now overshadows even the most masterful film. What art once introduced, has now become the new reality. Moreover, and perhaps more crucially, the imagination of life surpasses that of art. Certainly, nothing is 'larger than life' any longer, at least in terms of unpredictability and intensity. Hyperbole and irrationality are infused in all of our activities in real time. From the beginning of our species, art has often been, in a definitive manner, a forerunner of scientific achievements.

From the monsters of ancient epic poems and myths, to the hybrid beings of Hieronymus Bosch, but also the works of science fiction in contemporary art, many things that were originally conceived as art later became facts. Through such concepts and their applications, the human species has managed to get to the point of intervening in its own body. Modern man has masterfully blended the artificial with the natural, the inorganic with the organic, thus creating a meta-human.

In this respect and coming to the present, art and science are not competitive but complementary. They feed each other with ideas and solutions and evolve hand in hand in the space-time continuum. Due to the ongoing evolution of the life-sciences, the human body is enhanced with additional artificial parts, thus becoming chimerical. The fusion of materialistic reality and fantasy, aims to create a resilient post-human of enhanced abilities; a man-machine. What elements of *Homo sapiens* are being preserved in this transition? Will the so-called human moral virtues remain in cyborgs? Where does the organic

stop and where does the inorganic start? What is the character of their connection and where is the imaginary crossing line between the two?

Audio

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Tolis Tatolas lives and works in Athens as a visual artist and spatial designer. He was educated at the Vacalo

College of Art and Design/University of Derby (BA Hons, 2008) and at the School of Biology/Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (BSc Hons, 2002). He has had 8 solo exhibitions and participated in 22 group ones in Greece, the UK, Austria, Czech Republic and Brazil. He has written the book *Animals in the Homeric Ages* (2005, Erodios) and has contributed to the edited volumes *Science and Technology in Homeric Epics* (2008, Springer) and *Touch* (2020, University of Westminster Press). He also studied classical singing as a countertenor and is involved with experimentation on the boundaries of the human voice, expanding his practice to media art. Creatively, he employs a holistic approach to aesthetics, within a framework of unity of all arts.

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