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Thinking with Pathogens. Review of *Posthuman Pathogenesis: Contagion in Literature, Arts, and Media*, edited by Başak Ağın & Şafak Horzum

Pensando con patógenos. Revisión de *Posthuman Pathogenesis: Contagion in Literature, Arts, and Media*, editado por Başak Ağın y Şafak Horzum

Pensant amb patògens. Revisió de *Posthuman Pathogenesis: Contagion in Literature, Arts, and Media*, editat per Başak Ağın i Şafak Horzum

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Pathogenic assemblages

The anthology *Posthuman Pathogenesis*, edited by Başak Ağın and Şafak Horzum, is not dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic per se but it surely is born from the experience of it. Contributed topics range from medieval Turkish miniatures to the cultural role of vampires yet traces of our own viral outbreak can be found in every text, sometimes expressed clearly, sometimes less so. One can also easily discover those traces in the very experience of reading. The global character of the novel Coronavirus outbreak, apart from its geographical omnipresence, consists as well in fact that it has penetrated all aspects of our life, regardless of whether we, or our close ones, actually got sick. To quote Başak Ağın, "contagions have never been matters of medical sciences alone" (Ağın & Horzum, 2023, pp. 230–231). With that in mind, it is hard to separate the critical reflection from our personal experience, to keep the distance—even though we all know now that this is what we should do in the face of a highly infectious disease.

The volume represents a variety of academic voices, differing standpoints, and fields; it is, according to the editors, a "'rhizomatic' compilation" that "offers a non-hierarchised array of essays, composed of a multiplicity of genders, geographies, and generations" (p. I). Although I tend to be vigilant about the (over)use of posthumanist or new materialist watchwords,—such as 'rhizome,' 'non-hierarchy,' or 'multiplicity'—the commonality of COVID-19 experience which engages the reader to be a part of this pathogenic assemblage, makes these terms especially apt.

The tome consists of five thematic parts: "Discontents of the Human and Its Others," "Pathogenic Temporalities," "*Pestilentia Loquens*: Narrative Agency of Disease," "Contagious Networks of Communication," and "From Medical Humanities to Medical Posthumanities." Despite the division, the papers work together with common threads of reflection and authors cite each other, which makes the book actually polylogical. And finally, right before the afterword there is CODA—something I wish I would see more often in academic publications—which, apart from a short summary by Ağın, contains an interview with the authors about their thoughts and whereabouts while working on their contributions.

The conversation straightforwardly brings in both Coronavirus and personal experiences, as the idea for the anthology emerged just several months after the outbreak. This brings in a very material context. It shows that we can never leave out our bodies and environments when it comes to academic writing (or whatever else!); that the posthuman thought comes, at least to some extent, from this experience; and that pandemic—as many crises do—highlighted a number of those intuitions. For COVID-19 not only dissolved the boundary between work and home (apparently, we can be reminded that private and public is a fictitious division over and over, and relive it anew). The outbreak turned the world inside out and upside down, deepening entanglements of facts and fiction, disrupting the linearity of time and geographical order of space. Likewise, it made the invisible visible—for example a virus—and rearranged the relation of self and other, placing the other right there, in our bodies, both metaphorically and not. All of this is why the volume stress that pandemic was, and is, a deeply posthuman experience.

Against the Perfect Hygiene

In the opening essay, "Yearning for the Human in Posthuman Times," Stefan Herbrechter warns against the belief that the pandemic, as a global humanitarian, economic, political, and existential crisis, will make the world a better place. People are bound to turn back to

"essential and timeless truths and celebrations of the tragic but heroic beauty of human (self-)sacrifice", and humanity will be "(re)united in confronting an 'evil' and invisible enemy, a deadly virus" (p. 24). The author presents a compelling reading of Albert Camus's *The Plague*, which serves as a proper beginning of a volume devoted to critical cultural analysis since the 1947 novel quickly became a bestseller for the new pandemic times in Western countries (Earle, 2020). At least from the perspective of anglo- and francophone media, as well as the readers who stormed the bookstores and bought out their stocks, Camus had become an old oracle and a guide for the new world (Jones, 2020; Malka, 2020; Mcintyre, 2020). It is hard to be surprised that people had started to look for guidance in literature, especially that many of us suddenly faced an undiscovered time-space of lockdown, blocked away from outer world stimuli that needed some kind of a replacement. As many of the journalists were proving, the tragic humanism of Camus was a great answer to that need.

But what Herbrechter shows is that without transgressing the tragic humanism of Camus that seemed to be so alluring back in 2020, we are bound to fail in responding to today's world's needs and pressures. What narratives such as *La Peste* do is calling for human solidarity *against* the inhumanity of the world. It is tempting, as Herbrechter convinces, to fall back on humanism's tracks while confronted with 'inhuman' times, but such oppositions build a shortsighted perspective where humans remain essentially alienated from the inhuman world they live in. Following the author's argument, as well as many ecologically-oriented analyses of SARS-CoV-2, I would stress that what the past years have showed is that the solidarity we need is the one *with* the (more-than-human) world, and against the politico-economic violence, inequalities, and other forms of power abuse.

The following essay by Kerim Can Yazgünoğlu, *Viruses as Posthuman Biocultural Creatures*, stresses that thought even more, indicating how viruses—counter to people's typical connotations–are a creative force, carriers of life-death, crucial participants of the evolutionary change; they transform and rebuild our bodies "from the beginning", making us, humans, more-than-human—or posthuman—at our core (Ağın & Horzum, 2023, pp. 44–45). Referring to Karin Moeling, a virologist, Michel Serres, and Roberto Esposito, the author argues that a virus, or a homologous parasite, in its ambivalent and intertwined nature, points at the parasitic mode of human existence.

One one part, it is not merely by analogy but because of the role viruses had played—and are still playing—in what we are. The most compelling example, mentioned by Francesca Ferrando in the afterword (249), is the one of placenta which has evolved in proto-mammals due to a retroviral infection (Chuong, 2018). The case of virus participation in the mammalian reproduction—queering it by itself, let us note—seem to have inspired two novels analysed in the volume, Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite* (1992) and Greg Bear's *Darwin's Radio* (1999). In both novels, viruses are presented as pivotal material-textual actors of human biology, history and culture. *Ammonite* (the fascinating interpretation of which was contributed to the volume by one of its editors, Şafak Horzum) tells the story of an extraterrestrial virus that affected a whole population of a colonised planet, eradicating all males and changing the human reproduction system into parthogenetic one.

The second book, *Darwin's Radio*, presents another fictional virus that interferes in human reproduction by mutating carriers of pregnancies and fetuses, enabling future mothers and their offsprings a new kind of non-verbal communication. Here, the authors of the paper, Jayde Martin and Ben Horn, follow this specific trait of the afflicted and

focus on how the virus, environment, human DNA, etc., create an autopoietic network of communication. As the authors explain, according to their proposition "autopoietic systems are a group of nodes in a rhizomatic structure, which communicate cybernetically about their interactions, and through such interactions, they augment, lose, or add various other nodes as the system continues to exist" (Ağın & Horzum, 2023, p. 146). Viruses teach us then how deeply we are entangled with other beings, and how evolution never is a work of one, or even two. I'm not convinced by the scholars' use of Timothy Morton's concepts. Morton positions himself against the relational ontologies (Morton, 2013a, p. 20; 2013b, p. 56). He underlines that hyperobjects are not systems nor assemblages, and adds (ironically referring to new materialist rethorics) that "Hyperobjects force us to acknowledge the immanence of thinking to the physical. But this does not mean that we are 'embedded' in a 'lifeworld'" (Morton, 2013a, p. 2). Martin and Horn don't bring up Morton's critique of relationalism yet in its light, the authors' aim to "demonstrate how hyperobjects and autopoietic systems are the same" (Ağın & Horzum, 2023, p. 147) seems at least puzzling. Otherwise, the essay is great in juxtaposing cybernetics, genetics and literature. In my view, the notion of hyperobject here is redundant and the text would work great without it, but it could be as well my own reluctance toward Morton's theory.

On the other part, humans are parasitic because of their relations to the environment and other organisms. Novel Coronavirus is a perfect example of human active involvement in the viral outbreaks. *Posthuman Pathogenesis* tries to show that the aim is not to blame humans for the destructive diseases (although the anthropogenic source of most epidemics, especially those related to wars and colonialism, is well known). Critical posthumanism ought to evade simplistic (and dualistic) moralisations of naming good and evil, and focus rather on ambiguities that we tend to ignore. We are often prone to suspect foreign governments, secret agencies or, as Arda Gedik and Zeynep Arpaözü remind in their linguistic study on COVID-19 stigmatisation practices on Reddit (pp. 180–183), specific social or ethnic groups for consciously acting in our detriment, instead of focusing on the consequences of our unconscious entanglements and power relations that can never be reduced just to the opposition of us and other(s). With publications such as *Posthuman Pathogenesis*, the aim is to show that sustaining the opposition of the human race against the inhuman virus—or inhuman in general, whatever its current denotation—is simplistic, and therefore impossible. According to the pervasive claim of the whole volume, the sooner we learn this, the better.

If there is an ethical direction in the book, it perhaps lays in the awareness that, while keeping a distance remains important for everyone's safety, raising hermetic walls—such as the one built during the pandemic on the Polish–Belarusian border to stop the refugees (Cielemęcka, 2023)—is more dangerous, partly because of the impossibility of keeping such a blockade actually effective; every border will always be porous, as it holds its past and future transgressions; the border will continue to be a part of refugee routes and ecological trails, no matter what abstract ideas we will try to force onto it. But making a direct analogy between the geopolitical border crisis and a human body prone to infection would be an abuse, hence the awareness I am talking about should be as well attentive to material details and differences. For me, posthumanisms, or new materialisms, teach us about caring for difference and meanings carried by matter, not the ones we impose on it.

Being Every-when at Once

In the second part of the book, "Pathogenic Temporalities," Ruth Clemens and Max Casey propose in their chapter a persuasive concept of viral temporality which relates to temporal disjunctions emerging when "humanist linear time collides with nonhuman, cellular, pathogenic, and epidemiological temporal framings" (Ağın & Horzum, 2023, p. 64). Through analysis of Tory's Dent Poem "Fourteen Days of Quarantine" (1999) and Virginia Woolf's essay "On Being Ill" (1925), authors describe an illness as a disruptive state that, for good and for bad, throw us out from the linear and progressive capitalist timeline, or rather, induce on us the experience of "simultaneous temporalities exist[ing] alongside each other" (p. 67). In a way similar to Herbrechter's critique of Camus, the authors argue that the viral temporality force us to confront the illusion of being autonomous, self-governing subject: while ill, we can no longer follow our daily path of tasks, the body is no longer transparent and therefore cannot be ignored, and the time-passing changes its speed and density.

Similarly argues André Vasques Vital in "Pathogenic Hugs and Ambiguous Times". The author analyses an episode of the animated series *The Amazing World of Gumball* in which parental hug becomes a source event of a pandemic of joy that starts to spread through Gumball's high school. Following Jane Bennett, Vital indicates how in the series the virus of joy reconfigures past, present, and future. Earlier, Clemens and Ruth point to Virginia Woolf calling illness a "hieroglyphic misery"—that is, something of an ancient origin that is still here to subvert our futures. Vital extensively recalls, among others, an interview with the philosopher Achille Mbembe on COVID-19 pandemic in which he reflects: "Not knowing what is to come is what makes states all over the world resurrec[t] the old terminology utilized in war" (Bercito & Mbembe, 2020). In his reading, Vital indicates that the pandemic brings us "a change in the consciousness of time," especially of the future, since we start to ask questions about our continuity (Ağın & Horzum, 2023, p. 91). Human continuity, however, is not only the matter of what is to come but also of what we could bring in from the past.

While we tend to focus on the future as the most vital—especially in regard to different kinds of catastrophes, the Anthropocene being a crucial case—I would stress, following the reflections present in *Posthuman Pathogenesis*, that our experience of pandemic is an experience of the overlay of multitude of timelines: a viral temporalities. On the one hand, there is of course the craving for causes and culprits that force us to fall back into the past. But, as the case of Camus shows, in times of crisis and fear of the future, the past may become equated with both a safe place to go back to, and—rightly or not—a guidebook for present troubles. Stian Kristensen in "HIV, Dependency, and Prophylactic Narrative" shows that linear structure of time enables to call certain events closed and belonging to the past while marginalising their continuities in the present. Her reflection on HIV epidemic shows how a specific intensification of time and space in the past can become a carrier of, in fact, a never-ending phenomenon: A "memorialisation has a tendency to conceive of AIDS as a past issue, while UNAIDS reports that in 2019, around 38 million people were living with HIV" (p. 189). When we speak about Covid pandemic from an enough privileged (or uninformed) perspective, we are willing—I certainly do—to call it a past event. The COVID-19 lockdown was such an unprecedented and inconceivable experience that once it was lifted, we closed it away in the past. Yet for many, this experience continues. While I am writing these words, yet another wave of Coronavirus slowly comes down in Poland, having taken a surprisingly big number of people from my surroundings

under its arms[1]. At the beginning of December 2023, the fourth dose of vaccine was introduced into the distribution. I am so caught up in my current matters that I forget it is time to remind my body that we are still fighting this thing. I also forget that the issues I am dealing with now—economic difficulties, asociality, delays with my dissertation—are all Coronavirus-related.

Has the pandemic ended? Officially, on the 5th May 2023, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the head of WHO, declared the end of "the public health emergency of the international concern." (I had to look for this information as I did not concern myself with this question before writing this review.) But does this mean the pandemic is actually over? At the media briefing on this day, after the declaration, Ghebreyesus said, rather than end of health crisis confirming an end to the linear times:

> Last week, COVID-19 claimed a life every three minutes – and that's just the deaths we know about. As we speak, thousands of people around the world are fighting for their lives in intensive care units. And millions more continue to live with the debilitating effects of post-COVID-19 condition. This virus is here to stay. It is still killing, and it's still changing. The risk remains of new variants emerging that cause new surges in cases and deaths. (Ghebreyesus, 2023)

Ancient story-tellers

But the phenomenon of viral temporalities is not limited to their phenomenology, so to speak. They are disruptive on the ontological level as well. The head of WHO predicts that COVID-19 is to stay in our bodies, as viruses do. Referring back to the placenta example, the novel Coronavirus has written down its traces in our DNA that won't be easy—if possible at all—to erase. The way viruses spread, they are the ontological disruptors, changing the structures of organic systems, being the creators of difference, or maybe a difference as such.

The virological entanglements, as the whole volume demonstrates, are the perfect posthuman subject whereas they situate a virus in the in-betweenness of life and death, inside and outside, meaning and matter, past and future. In its dynamic, paradoxical status that plays with oppositions, it reminds of Derridean *différance*. Virus had never become a concept for Jacques Derrida but the authors of the anthology bring in the notion of *pharmakon* to expose a virus' philosophical heaviness: it is mentioned at the beginning by Kerim Can Yazgünoğlu and brought back at the end by Ronja Tripp-Bodola in her essay "The Vampire as Posthuman." To quote Derrida:

> The pharmakon is the movement, the locus, and the play: the production of difference. It is the différance of difference… Contradictions and pairs of opposites are lifted from the bottom of this diacritical, differing, deferring, reserve. (Derrida, 1981, p. 127)[2]

Tripp-Bodola turns to vampire narratives as stories of social attitudes towards contagions. Vampirism, according to the scholar, is often a reservoir of social and cultural imageries and fears related to infectious diseases, as well as to the (ambiguous) role of medical science and physicians in their containment. Surprisingly—and a bit disappointingly—there

[1] As we can read in the WHO report from 22 December 2023: „Globally, the number of new cases increased by 52% during the 28-day period of 20 November to 17 December 2023 as compared to the previous 28-day period, with over 850 000 new cases reported. The number of new deaths decreased by 8% as compared to the previous 28-day period, with over 3000 new fatalities reported. As of 17 December 2023, over 772 million confirmed cases and nearly seven million deaths have been reported globally"; to add a personal detail, Poland is mentioned as a country with one of the highest score of new cases in the European Region, next to Russia and Italy (WHO, 2023, December 22).

[2] The quotation appears in Tripp-Bodola's "The Vampire as Posthumanist Pharmakon" in the volume, p. 209.

is no reference to the role of bats in viral outbreaks (Letko et al., 2020). The author, however, makes a more general argument about virus by comparing vampires to *pharmakon*, indicating that in most stories vampires bring death and life simultaneously: they are "an ambiguous figure of the poisonous 'trans-human' magician" (Ağın & Horzum, 2023, p. 208), offering both cure to the limitations of body and death of one's humanity. Similarly, virus is a carrier of both life and death, and thus cannot be horsemen of the apocalypse—virus (and parasite alike) needs a host to prevail. Therefore, it cannot be deadly all the way through and it has to offer something in return.

Going back to Yazgünoğlu's contribution, viruses "as 'non/life' actors, illustrate the imbrication of life and death, the corporeal and the incorporeal, and the human and the inhuman in affirmative and negative ways" (p. 43), they are "both textual and material", "both material and inscriptional" (p. 42). The origin of *pharmakon* is in writing; in "Plato's Pharmacy" Derrida analyses *Phaedrus* where Socrates expresses his anxiety that writing, being a memory-enhancing tool, will at the same time weaken the memory by relieving it from the task of memorising. Hence the double nature of poison and remedy.

Virus, taken as *pharmakon*, maintains the double function of generating positive and negative outcomes. By making us sick, it also leaves us with something, although from the perspective of epidemics of Coronavirus, Ebola, or HIV, 'positivity' of the outcome should perhaps be perceived mainly in terms of the emergence of something surplus and "new." Anyhow, the virus is here to stay—it is an inscriptor that, quite literally, signs in our bodies, and it is—as a common warning about tattoos, repeated often by my grandmother, goes—forever.

Risking an anthropocentric projection—but how can we know who is inspired by whom?—I want to delve deeper into the homology of viral gene coding and writing. In *Posthuman Pathogenesis*, Z. Gizem Yilmaz Karahan calls DNA an "ancient story-teller." In the essay entitled "Power or Despair: Contagious Diseases in Turkish History and Miniature Paintings," she looks into the work of Şerefeddin Sabuncuoğlu, fifteenth century Turkish surgeon who created illustrated books that were records of his medical treatments, experiences and experiments; Yilmez Karahan, aside from pointing out the similarity of anti-epidemic practices of now and then, proves that story-telling practices are, in fact, appropriate responses to crises: "Survival is the real story itself that we can trace in our DNA" (p. 137). This statement is formulated against the British novelist Scarlett Thomas who, in spite of her own line of work, asserts that in face of the world's collapse, people will abandon writing for survival. This does not appear clearly in Yilmez's text but claims such as the one of Thomas keep on relying on the opposition of destruction and creation. Survival is seen as a practice of mere endurance, brutal and not at all poetic. Yilmez Karahan, on the contrary, makes a compelling argument that surviving is an equally creative practice, not so distant from writing. She does so, among others, by pointing out to the inscripting nature of viruses that exist through changing the host DNA; viruses are what they *write down*:

> Strictly rejecting being categorised as living or non-living, viruses not only cross but also blur all the boundaries set by human discourses. Their agential recalcitrance to being defined and categorised takes a more amazing step when we look more closely to their formations. Lacking "a metabolism of their own," they are material instantiations of intra-bodies porosity, telling a very posthuman story in their porous formations. (p. 127)

Literature, being the main cultural medium represented in the book, with some notable exceptions, proves to remain, perhaps paradoxically, pivotal in the times of crisis. It

may be of course a question of privilege: Who has the time and space to read when a crisis arises? Who can keep a literary distance during the pandemic? And does keeping the distance means "staying out of trouble"? As I reflected earlier, not necessarily—past years have shown us that distance, isolation, silence and not acting can become vital engagement practices. The past years (and I mean not only the COVID-19 pandemic) have also shown us that the world may be collapsing more slowly than we could imagine, and in a way easier to ignore. Even if the beginnings of change may seem sudden and abrupt, catastrophical temporality is far from fantasies presented in catastrophic movies. Projects such as *Pamiętniki pandemii* [Pandemic Diaries] (Głowacka, et. al., 2022) in Poland, or the international, USA-based Pandemic Journaling Project, show that writing (and reading) can help us in daily survival. Importantly, it is not about inscribing oneself in history. I would venture a thesis that the prior function of writing is not to last but to *spread*. Something similar is shown in the posthuman linguistic study of Gedik and Arpaözü, in "Entangled Humans, Entangled Languages: A Posthumanist Applied Linguistic Analysis of COVID-19 on Reddit" (Chapter 8 in the anthology). We write with words that come to us from others, to share and involve others—be them human or non-human—with our material realities. The writing—what internet and social media represent so well—can be used to get rid of something from our systems, to bestow it on others, and then, to spread it farther, out of our control, for good and for bad—as a virus.

The risk with studies such as this, especially when it comes to deadly viruses, lies in turning back against the humans altogether, and become a spokesman for destructive forces. I think that within posthumanism, there is a risk of abandoning all of what we associate with humanity, and therefore noxious—for the planet, for the non-human, etc.—in the name of total deteritorrialization, that is of final freedom from the harmful order, stagnation, hierarchies, and boundaries. But how much we want to deterritorialise, decentralise and deconstruct the human should be in the end dictated by the striving for our *shared* well-being. Which is, let's add, not always what it seems. The Covid pandemic has shown that there are boundaries that need keeping, that isolation can mean solidarity, or, as Tripp-Bodola puts it in the CODA, that keeping distance can be "a moral imperative rather than neglect of care" (p. 233). Instead of building up fences against what we perceive as danger, or of giving up to it entirely, we need to think-with it, write and read through it, to better understand its far-reaching influences. Although I would prefer some political and ethical stances to be more articulated in the book (they can be found mostly in the metacommentary), at the end I think that *Posthuman Pathogenesis* takes part in that process.

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