

NON-CULTURAL MORPHOGENESIS: PLANTS (WITH EMANUELE COCCIA)

Plants are the always open wound of the metaphysical snobbery that defines our culture”, says Emanuele Coccia on the first page of his recent essay in plant studies, *The Life of Plants. A Metaphysics of Mixture* (Coccia, 2019, 3). Nonetheless, the emergence of plant studies as a new current of research and reflection has been caused not only by the anti-metaphysical turn of contemporary humanities, but also by the necessity of fostering the awareness of yet another imperialistic dimension of the contemporary globalized culture: its unstoppable expansion in space, encroaching on the territory occupied by other forms of existence. This is why such voices as Matthew Hall in *Plants as Persons* (2011) have claimed for an ethical attitude toward the vegetable realm, moderating the extent of the human encroachment upon nature. The offensive of concrete buildings, asphalted roads, macadamised pavements and parking lots leaves narrow margin for vegetable deployment. For plants are not only water and sunshine consumers; they are also place occupiers, filigree forms deploying in space, in a way that differs essentially from our own, bulky bodies; plants also live on a completely different time scale, according to rhythms that are hardly compatible with our own. No wonder that the first attempts at overcoming anthropocentrism remained zoocentric; the claim for “personhood” of plants comes long after the movements of animal liberation. It is significant that no major global religion, arguably with the exception of animist and shamanistic believes, ever preached moral obligations of man toward plants. Traditionally, they were not included in the range of compassion due to all sentient beings; their chemical perception of the world differs so fundamentally from ours that it required all the sophistication of the contemporary science ever to be attested. Also, plants live so much slower than us that it is hard to ever notice their movements, or tropisms, and their responses to the world that surrounds them.

Plant studies appear as a new challenge in more than one way. My aim in this essay is to reflect on the morphogenetic potential of plants and their specific relation to space, in parallel to the philosophical stance of the author of *The Life of Plants*. Since 2012, I have been working on an innovative theoretical approach toward the relation between man and the cultural, questioning the penetrability of the outer, non-cultural space in which human cultures are necessarily immersed; this is the reason why I am also interested in the plant-like, non-cultural morphogenesis, the processes of formation, or “shape making”, that are alien and complementary in relation to

our own. Those processes enter in sharp contrast with the culturally transmitted, technical skills that humans use in their interaction with the matter, such as splitting stone or wood, weaving, clay modelling, etc. Rectilinear-perpendicular pattern of development — such as we find in the craft of weaving a textile, in the masonry skill leading to the construction of a brick wall, and even in the way how I write this text, adding line after line to it — differs from the plant-like morphogenesis operating by spiral progression — that we may observe, in spite of quite a different time scale on which such a mechanism operates, when the perianth of a rose slowly opens. Both diagrams of expansion (the spiral and the linear-perpendicular one), contrasting so sharply, gauge the distance between the cultural and the non-cultural (that I use as a broader term, including, but not limited to what is usually called “nature”). On the other hand, plant-like patterns of growth inspire human symbolic creativity in rituals and art, probably because plants epitomise, at an archaic level, the forces of vitality and regenerative powers of the earth. This is why one can find an echo of human fascination with the mechanism of the opening blossom in the whirling pin-wheels still offered to children at Easter, or more generally in springtime, in my native Poland. In fact, the contemporary toy made of a square piece of paper or colourful plastic corresponds to traditional paraphernalia attested throughout the Indo-European culture zone. In its simplicity, a pin-wheel is a technicised translation of much more subtle and complex geometry of flower petals that seem a vortex of becoming suspended in time, as we contemplate it out of our human time scale, that turns slow and constant movements nearly imperceptible. Vertiginous whirling of the pin-wheel brings the blossom to the time scale that we humans find appealing and enjoyable.

The exploration of the technical *versus* organic forms and modalities of morphogenesis has a well established tradition in postmodern humanities due, among other instances, to Jacques Derrida’s essay “Tympan”, included in the *Margins of Philosophy* (Derrida, 1982, ix-xxix). On the other hand, the attempts at philosophising through organic and technical shapes, accentuating such notions as continuity, cuts and segmentation, metrics and other ways of controlling the matter in transformation, are solidly rooted in the classical writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari theorised the plant-like principle of growth, the spiral progression, into the concept of *clinamen*. By the way, it appeared to them as an even more fundamental principle of nature, visible also in atomic and subatomic scale (for instance, the spiral is to be observed on the photographs obtained in the hydrogen bubble chamber in the CERN; as the result of a proton collision, charged particles loop around as they travel a short distance before stopping or disintegrating into new electron-positron pairs). Deleuze and Guattari muse on those fundamental geometries in their characteristic style: “The clinamen, as

the minimum angle, has meaning only between a straight line and a curve, the curve and its tangent, and constitutes the original curvature of the movement of the atom. [...]. One no longer goes from the straight line to its parallels, in a lamellar or laminal flow, but from a curvilinear declination to the formation of spirals or vortices on an inclined plane: the greatest slope for the smallest angle. From turba to turbo; in other words, from bands or packs of atoms to the great vortical organizations [...]" (Deleuze, Guattari, 2004, 421).

In spite of those precedents, the proposition of non-cultural humanities may still seem highly provocative, paradoxical, even at the brink of absurdity. Yet the exploration of the boundaries of man's cultural condition and the search for extra-cultural modalities of being human appear as paramount not only because of the oppressive character of cultural realities, but also because of their destructive weight over the planet. Arguably, the definition of culture implicit in my approach is reductive and deeply pessimistic. I treat culture as a phenomenon of transmission, a totality of whatever we learn from other human beings, and what we are invited to reproduce as faithfully as possible, at a minimal modification. This static and stabilising potential of the cultural requires critical vigilance. Cultural contents are legitimised passively as received inheritance, by their sheer status of tradition, and invite for thoughtless reproduction. Also, culture is essentially a feature of a group determining, dominating, normalizing the individual; the cultural sphere is opposed, in my view, to whatever an individual may invent spontaneously for his or her strictly private use; it imposes boundaries to channel individual creativity.

Having in mind this oppressive, stabilising, limiting and potentially destructive character of the cultural transmission, I am profoundly interested in exploring the elements that cultures marginalize, reject, disqualify, that accumulate at their silenced and forgotten frontiers. In other words, I am interested in the non-cultural — or the extra-cultural — that may be conceived as a totality of what a human being is able to create by him/herself in response to the deepest, most authentic needs in an intimate interaction with the matter and the non-human organisms; it is the content of this most intimate sphere of thinking, feeling and doing, constantly shrinking under the pressure of the cultural, that makes us truly human. At the same time, the non-cultural dimension accessible to a human individual may share some of those plant-like features of what Coccia defined as "cosmic contemplation" of complete, immersive being-in-the-world. Experiencing and developing a solidarity with plants may provide a non-cultural paradigm of such an attitude. In other words, learning from plants, through direct, unmediated insight might be an alternative to the crushing burden of cultural transmission that risks to overwhelm our spontaneity, authenticity and creativity. Autotrophy — the basic ability of deriving their nourishment from inorganic elements such as solar energy, water and minerals that only plants possess — is obvi-

ously an insurmountable challenge for human physiology (even if, as a technological species, we might one day find a way of doing what the plants do). Nonetheless, what appears as equally challenging to my mind is the vision of metaphysical autotrophy, that Coccia analyses through plants and I would like to see at the level of symbolic existence of man, exploring the human capacity of building an inner reality. This process of building a world of our own, although inscribed in a larger matrix of symbolic potentiality, might be at least partially autotrophic, i.e. independent form received, digested, repetitive and self-referential cultural contents.

Human individual, as I believe, offers at least some degree of resistance against the cultural normalization imposed upon him or her. I am interested in analysing the constant tension and ambivalence involving the cultural in each of us; probably, in some of us (contemplative, maverick, perhaps also autistic or otherwise “neurotypical” individuals) more than in the vast majority. The hypothesis of a non-cultural poiesis (or “making things”) without any articulation with the culturally transmitted ways of using tools, controlling the body, using language, etc., forms an edge where human activity meets other, organic and inorganic, natural — and possibly supernatural — forms of morphogenesis, not only such as the growth of plants, but also such as building activity of termites, processes and transformations on the planetary scale or — for those who admit such a hypothesis — the creation of the universe by a divine instance that might be approached through illuminative, individual insight rather than the repetition of prescribed, imposed, codified rituals.

On the other hand, the non-cultural constantly interpenetrates the cultural forming a liminal zone in which constant renovation of the cultural goes on: for example as a search for ways of contesting and overcoming cultural shortcomings, expanding the insufficient modalities of expression that has been culturally transmitted to the individual, or exploring spheres of human experience yet uncharted by culture. Novel outcomes of such endeavours constantly become a part of the subsequent cultural transmission. Any invention of new forms attacks and undermines the frontiers of the culturally given; any creative act appears as a constant interaction between those learned parameters of culture and the unrestrained, extra-cultural impulses. If creativity is the very essence of being human, thus there must exist an outer space of experience, expression and poiesis, yet uncharted by culture, but repeatedly visited by isolated explorers. There is no doubt that cultures shape human individuals; nonetheless, human individual is the primary maker of cultures; no wonder he or she is constantly attracted toward the extra-cultural in which the cultural grows and expands its moving frontiers.

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 claustrophilic beings.

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. Humans 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, as well as — obviously — any form of subjectivity, is totally absent. In parallel, Coccia muses on the “cosmogonic” role of plants as creators of the aerobic atmosphere that radically transformed the anaerobic gaseous integument of the early Earth into the crucial element of the planetary system that supports and fosters life. The plant-like manner of absolute being-in-the-world is creative and transformative, overcoming, at the same time, the traditional dualism of contemplation and action. 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).

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.

Symbolic activity at the frontier of awareness, indistinguishable from the sheer "default mode" of the human brain, that constantly generates images, associations, pre-conceptual insights and glimpses of understanding as well as pre-verbal elocutions may be seen as an analogy of the vegetable photosynthesis, a process occurring by the sheer coincidence of chlorophyll and solar energy. That proliferation of intimate symbols that is consubstantial with the very existence of the human being cannot be resumed neither under the category of "contemplation" nor that of "action"; what is more they are only partially covered, absorbed or transmitted by intersubjective culture.

Apparently, there is no greater distance than the one separating vegetal way of existence from the reality of the human thought. Nonetheless, that extreme distance seems to form a symmetry of the opposite poles that Coccia resumes as follows: "To the abstraction of creation and technique — which are able to transform the forms only at the cost of excluding the creator and producer of the process of transformation — the plant opposes the immediacy of metamorphosis: to generate always means to transform oneself. To the paradoxes of consciousness, which does not know how to conceptualize forms without first distinguishing them from oneself and from the reality of which they are models, the plant opposes the absolute intimacy between subject, matter, and imagination: to imagine is to become what one imagines" (Coccia, 2019, 12-13). Perhaps the only instance in which human consciousness may approach similar status is the unity

of imagination and becoming in a dance, such as the dance of the *butoh* master Min Tanaka on which Guattari commented in his Japanese writings (Guattari, 2015, 43).

Becoming cultural, i.e. sharing and transmitting accumulated experience as an “exosomatic inheritance” (Coccia, 2019, 42), massively increased our chances of survival in our remote beginnings as a species. At the present time, our cultural identities may have an opposite effect; they decrease our potential of adaptability to the conditions of contemporary world. Cultures as internalized sets of unyielding norms and automatic responses tend to diminish not only the potential of human creativity, spontaneity and authenticity, but also the ability of living with non-cultural organisms, as well as fellow human beings attached to quite different sets of norms and learned behaviours. A minimal ability of transgressing culture is implied in every successful interaction with strangers, animals, non-human and finally, also the non-organic forms of existence. Certainly, the cultural serves as a repertory of ready-made solutions; but it is also a source of hindrances and limitations. This is why the idea of transgressing or overcoming the cultural, without going as far as postulating total liberation from culture, appears as attractive to me. I do not dream of obliterating cultures; rather of harmonizing the spheres of the cultural and the extra-cultural for the benefit of non-essentialist human individual and the planet as a whole.

As I claim, it is possible to overcome culture understood as a totality of transmitted and automatized habits; cultural condition, although it seems inherent to every human being, may be transgressed; cultures may be unlearned, de-essentialised, transformed from bulk identities into a filigree. Such a process of unlearning, de-automatising of the reactions that are usually channelled through culturally determined paradigms, may bring about progressive growth of the sphere of insight, awareness, autonomy and choice. The “metaphysics of mixture” that Coccia derives from his experience with plants may be inscribed in such a sphere. The ideas exposed in *The Life of Plants* are due, as the author confesses in the foreword, to the fact that as a teenager he had frequented an agricultural high school that provided him with quite a different sensibility and competence than his subsequent career in the domain of humanities. Even more significantly, he confesses to have conceived the idea of his essay during a visit to Fushimi Inari shrine in Kyoto. The location does not appear as completely accidental or merely picturesque. Fushimi Inari shrine is a Shinto temple dedicated to the spirit (*kami*) of rice; its most striking feature are thousands of *torii* forming pathways and corridors winding through the forest. The quintessential architecture of those gates, composed by vertical pillars and perpendicular beams, curving organically under their own weight, is supposed to mark the passage from the profane to the sacred sphere. It may also epitomize the cultural, a human inscription in space, standing out of the non-cultural, just as their bright orange colouration stands out against the background of greenery.

What strikes me as a valuable opportunity of our times is the emergence of a new level of symbolic complexity born from the interference and interaction of a great number of cultures under the globalized conditions. As the result of this transition from the world of well-delimited, self-sufficient cultures to the stage of permanently interfering cultural codes, we reach, as I believe, a stage of post-cultural condition that differs in several crucial points from the historical condition of man immersed, as a rule, in a single cultural system. What I would like to accentuate once again is my focus on the individual. Interference of numerous cultures is not only a social phenomenon of a globalized metropolis; even more crucially, such an interference of cultures criss-crossing and competing in a single consciousness defines a new human condition and establishes a threshold of complexity in the inner life of the human individual.

I try to construe the emergence of complex patterns of cultural interference in neomaterialistic terms, as a new level of organization that appears in the organic world of which we are part. In my optics, there is no ontological difference between symbolic constructs of man and any other form or structured information in the natural world; as certain scientists try to conceive it, the universe is an infinitely complex computational machine, and the reality is nothing but the outcome of those complex operations on data. Certainly, our mental constructs do not exist independently of the material support of our brains, of the neural patterns translated into outcomes transmitted in multiple ways, but obviously, on material, decipherable supports. The relative level of complexity is the only difference between those culturally produced data and any other phenomenon going on in the universe. As cultural beings, we exhale symbolic contents creating and transforming the environment in which we live, just as plants create and transform the aerobic atmosphere in which they deploy their filigree structures.

Both gaseous and symbolic atmospheres are dynamic realities in constant recreation. As Coccia says, “The origin of our world does not reside in an event that is infinitely distant from us in time and space, millions of light years away; nor does it reside in a space of which we no longer have a trace. It is here and now” (Coccia, 2019, 28). Local, multiple, transitory, constantly returning to the first scratch. In this anti-foundationalist vision, we are able to cross the limits of the cultural transmission, and yet recognize human experiences that we have no “cultured” means to verbalize, since we live immersed in a highly complex, finite yet expanding matrix of human and non-human potentiality. We still live in a shared symbolic space, also when we move beyond the cultural frontiers. Yet more and more often we deal with freely circulating, and yet meaningful elements that cannot be reduced to or inscribed in any culture in particular. They seem to float in the extra-cultural, deriving their potential of conveying meaning from some other, not exactly cultural source. I would say that such wandering elements resonate with

the very matrix of human potentiality; they appeal to our universal intuitions rather than determined, stabilized structures of cultural meanings.

Proliferating complexity of that symbolic matrix, that in my optics has to be debated not only as a sum of cultural systems of the humanity, but also as an interferogram of their clashes and encounters, constantly projecting human individuals into the extra-cultural spheres of inexpressible, certainly implies a conceptual challenge for the humanities that are now expected to become a meta-discourse not only of the cultural, but also of the non-cultural. The conclusions that Coccia derives from his reflection on plant-like existence point out toward “universal transmissibility and translatability of forms” and “perpetual contagion” (Coccia, 2019, 68). The central importance he attributes to the basic — and at the same time universal, also beyond the range of human or zoocentric existence — physiology of breathing leads to a philosophy of the world that operates by a constant inversion of container and contained. What the ancients called *pneuma* introduces a permanent overlap between the organism and the environment, and thus the principle of permanent circulation, transmission and translation. This reasoning leads to a major modification of the way how the world — and also the cultural — used to be conceptualized: “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 in the world both produces mixture and is produced by mixture. 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).

My notion of penetrability of the cultural frontiers, their openness not only in the direction of the cultural systems created by other human being, but also in the direction of the non-human ways of existence, coincides with Coccia’s conclusions. Nonetheless, it remains a major methodological question how to speak about the liminal experience as something that is, by definition, a penetration into uncharted, undetermined, non-verbalized territories, occupied only nomadically, *ad hoc*, by individuals contesting their cultural inscription; such an endeavour contrasts with the simplicity of essentialist approaches, operating inside well-delimited and well-defined entities. Abstract tools, as culturally neutral as possible, appear to be the first conceptual option; dynamic, spatial metaphors, such as matrix, (atmo)sphere, edge, movable frontier are the first to come to one’s mind. Philosophical reflection on plants and their peculiar way of existing in space appears as a promissory contribution. Perpetual morphogenesis epitomised by plants is tantalisingly situated on the boundary. A boundary that we constantly have in front of us, just like in the corri-

dor formed by the long row of hundreds and thousands of *torii* gates in the Fushimi Inari shrine, through which we constantly *fail* to penetrate from the profane into the sacred sphere. We are invited to remain, at every subsequent step of our progression, in the liminal.

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