Opinion

Quarantine time in Venice: 'Weaving thoughts' looking forward to a place to live together

Luca Caldironi*

Psychoanalytic Society Italian, venice, Castello 1065 30122 Venezia, Italy

"Out of darkness and formlessness something evolves." (W. Bion).

The title of the last Venice Biennale Art was May You Live in Interesting Times, and the title of the next Architectural Biennale is How Will We Live Together?

I found these two topics not only extremely interesting and provocative, but also particularly pertinent to the reality we are experiencing right now. Let's start with the first. What times are we living now?

The experience we are dealing with has traumatic elements that belong to a "familiar" area, although none of what is happening is unknown a priori. At the same time, these elements are expressing themselves in ways that seem to displace our expectations, more closely resembling storylines commonly depicted in certain films or old stories. The experience has gone from "virtual" to "real". This step transforms familiar elements into unfamiliar ones.

On one hand, this phenomenon, which Freud called "unheimlich" (uncanny), fascinates us, like images of powerful natural phenomenon in which nature strongly reclaims its spaces, but it also scares and worries us like every 'Unknown' and potentially dangerous thing naturally will.

We are experiencing what I would call the "forced awareness" of our frailty. It is with this forced awareness that I intend to accentuate how much we are "forced" by events to "force" our psychic mechanisms to defend us from approaching calamities that make us aware of our vulnerability, to examine our relationship with "time" as it relates to the end of life, and more generally, to confront our own fears and suffering.

Very often, despite having achieved enormous and very useful successes toward enhancing the quality of life, even medicine and psychiatry have not helped us keep our eyes on these murkier aspects of our collective psyches, which are part of life as well, after all. Because of our lack of awareness of these aspects, or the tools to use them effectively, they willingly and quickly settle when guided by stimuli and advice from authority figures, or just trusted friends and family, hoping to comfort us with siren songs like "don't think", "distract yourself", "think of something else", etc.

But when this "other" arrives instead, we find ourselves going from a situation where we always felt omnipotent, where anything seemed possible, and where we could challenge every limit, to a situation where we suddenly find ourselves sitting on the ground (or on a sofa at home in this case, if we are lucky!) In any case, it is not a very soft fall, not only because of the health emergency, which of course is the primary concern at the moment, but also for all the subsequent social and economic complications that will arise now and in the unforeseeable future.

We feel as if we "woke up" suddenly and felt lost, the GPS of our life crushed. On one hand, it can be said that this is a discovery of the obvious; it is experiencing a concept dear to Eastern thought known as "impermanence". The irruption of the Real arises as a strong presence in contrast to the Virtual. There is a "catastrophe", an "overturning" of the scene, thus the common description, "Everything is upside–down right now."

As in Greek theater, this experience is a crucial hub of and in the tragedy itself. Because we are experiencing this

Overturning on several levels, we must move from external spaces to an internal one. The interpersonal safety margins must be wider, more expanded. We must live the paradox of feeling closer in facing the problem together, while staying apart to protect ourselves and others.

Allow me to turn now to the title of the next 2020 Architecture Biennial How Will We Live Together? In view of our current situation, this title has become extremely provocative, not only because this Biennale has already been postponed for three months, and we don't even know if it will be open by the end of this year; but above all, because of the interlocution and challenge its title poses for us, right now and for our future.

Once again, we are faced with the paradox I mentioned earlier, a paradox that involves our "global" and globalized life in which contact or touch will increasingly need to take place tactfully and with sensitivity, and with all the attention and care of our heightened sense of responsibility.

Developing a citizenship that cuts through the individual, the community, and the environment can represent a challenge to make us feel like we're part of "something bigger" than ourselves. That does not mean stepping aside but, rather, doing our part. Can the play of words "shared distance" be the space in which we will now live together? And how can such a major shift in thinking and action be implemented? There will be many such "how's" in our collective future, and each time, it will be up to us to deal with them wisely in that moment.

We are living the paradox of simultaneously needing mutual social assistance and being required to distance ourselves from each other. A sense of greater social responsibility has been born in all of us from this catastrophe which is not and cannot be only individual; and though we are necessarily apart, it is a collective experience.

Forced isolation or coexistence in the same space has several definitions – these include the relationship everyone has with himself/herself (self-talk), the condition of his or her mental space, and the unique internal struggles he/she is experiencing.

I associate this image with one that is particularly dear to me titled "Labyrinth".

I think of our minds as labyrinths we all must enter, and from which we inevitably emerge transformed. In the labyrinth, we will encounter horrors, the fears we are able to ignore in the bright world outside but that find us in times of fear or heightened anxiety. In ancient mythology, these fears took the form of monsters such as the Minotaur. Since the journey into the labyrinth is psychological, not actual, the minotaur is of course symbolic. That is, it represents something else within our own psyches. In today's world, it might be this virus we're all hiding from, or the "monstrum", as the Latins called it. The monster can take many forms.

In the labyrinth, we may also have an encounter with ourselves, as Oedipus did when he solved the riddle posed by the Sphinx. That is, "What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?" Oedipus was able to figure out that the only possible answer is "the human being". That answer is still the same today.

What I wonder now is, can this moment become one in which fear does not become panic, anxiety does not become anguish, worry does not become depression, and restrictions do not become persecutory experiences? It's hard to say because we are in a situation that is "uncanny" (strange and mysterious in an unsettling way.) There have been plagues in the past, and we've all had the flu, but never before has the entire world been forced to stay indoors, hiding from an invisible monster. As I said before, it is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

When experiencing a feeling of impotence because of a formidable enemy, whether visible or invisible, man has always developed some form of collective aggregation to ensure his survival. But we also know that these forms themselves can be affected by destructive phenomena. It is a very delicate balance.

If Covid-19 is a phenomenon of the globalized world, I believe that the globalized world is also the resource for fighting its "dark side". In this sense, the Covid-19 virus can then represent the "negative" which, as in old cameras, can help us understand what is going on. In a wider sense, it can also help us understand globalization itself, and develop a more noble component of/from it.

Therefore, it would behoove all of humanity to rethink not only globalization, but the idea of nature, both of which humanity is completely, intricately, and unavoidably a part of. We must use the immense power of our imaginations to illuminate a myopic, anthropocentric point of view, and give more space to creativity as a way of "listening".

Multiple voices are spreading cloying messages of hope such as "Everything will be all right", and though we are desperate to believe this, we are not so sure we truly can in a situation with so many unknown potential outcomes. Contradictory news reports only exacerbate our worries. Therefore, we have to check for ourselves, and go deeper into the meaning of this message. We must enter our own labyrinths [1-5].

The risk in putting too much trust in reassuring voices can be returning to a previous condition of lower awareness, which might endanger us. On one hand, it is comforting to believe optimistic predictions that our previous version of "normal" will return because, for a moment, it helps us forget the anxieties we are experiencing. But on the other hand, we have to ask to ourselves, do we really want to go back to the previous situation? That is, to our previous, lower level of awareness? Is that a healthy comfort zone? Isn't what we're going through helping us discover something new that can make us stronger? Wiser? Safer?

I believe it is more appropriate to face this pain and try to handle it in the more three-dimensional and deeper space of "suffering". In ancient Greece, there was a sentence, "To pathei mathos". ("Wisdom is achieved through suffering.") In other words, transformation can only take place when the pain is felt, not denied [6-10].

Even the word "suffering" and the verb "to suffer" take us back to an internal space. The word "suffering", which is closer to the ancient Greek word "pathos", derives from the Latin "sufferre", meaning "to put or take something inside", with the consequent implication of a passage from a superficial dimension to a deeper emotional space.

All this refers us to an ontological problem; a problem of life or death. In the broadest respect, it is the relationship that each of us has with our own finitude. This thought sounds depressive on the surface, but it is anything but, because it goes to the core of everything that makes life a unique opportunity for joy and creativity, and it takes us to a place where all our feelings and emotions can converge.

So, let's "Listen"! We must have the courage and strength to maintain our ability to think and, as Wittgenstein says, "could someone fix the price of thoughts? Some cost a lot, others a little. And with what are thoughts paid? I believe so: with courage."

But let's go back. Why talk about all this?

Perhaps precisely because we are realizing that despite the cacophony of expert voices, no one really has all the right answers or can predict the future with absolute certainty. And perhaps we are also a little tired of behavioral decalogues that look more like "presumed knowledge" to us, and what we really need is for a few of the experts to be honest and admit to common feelings of fear and uncertainty about what is going on, so that we can feel less alone in our fear.

For this reason, I would like to conclude with Bion. When reprising Maurice Blanchot's aphorism, he said, "La réponse est le malheur de la question" ("The response is the question's misfortune.") In light of all of the above, I prefer to refrain from giving answers. Rather, I would like to share ideas and keep thinking.

However, again, this is not easy – far from it – and reminds me of the Bion concept of "negative capability", which is very different from "being patient".

Negative Capability defines a mental state that is capable of tolerating uncertainty and doubt. The concept is based on an expression invented by the poet J. Keats, who described his concept of "creative receptivity" as, "I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

Bion wrote, "The incapacity to build a mental space that tolerates ignorance or uncertainty induces the creation of a language of action, from where power can be exercised arbitrarily." He continued, "The capacity of the mind depends on the capacity of the unconscious–negative capability. Inability to tolerate empty space limits the amount of space available."

Being able to take advantage of and strengthen this ability can help us avoid dangerous and precipitous "acting out" – and not only by us, but by those who must make decisions that affect us all!

References

1. Bion WR (1992) 'Cogitations', Karnak Books, London.

2. Bion WR (1970) 'Attention and Interpretation', London, Tavistock Publications. **Link:** https://bit.ly/30SUDcS

3. Blanchot M (1969) L'Entretien Infini, Gallimard, Paris. **Link:** https://bit.ly/2Y6c87P

4. Caldironi L (2018) Psychoanalysis and cyberspace. Shifting frames and floating bodies. In Reconsidering the moveable frame in psychoanalysis, Routledge, New York. **Link:** https://bit.ly/3fs8Txp

5. Castiglioni L, Mariotti S (1970) 'IL Dizionario della Lingua Latina', Loescher, Milano.

6. Freud S (1919) The 'Uncanny'. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, 217-256 . **Link:** https://bit.ly/2N44rJg

7. Keats J, Scudder HE (1899) The complete Poetical Works and Letters of J. Keats. Cambridge Edition. **Link:** https://bit.ly/2Y4uFRU

8. Rocci L (1939) 'Vocabolario Greco Italiano, Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, Firenze.

9. Sofocle (1960) 'Le tragedie', il Mulino editore, Napoli.

10. Wittgenstein L, Gargani AG (1987) Diari segreti. **Link:** https://bit.ly/3e1Hgel