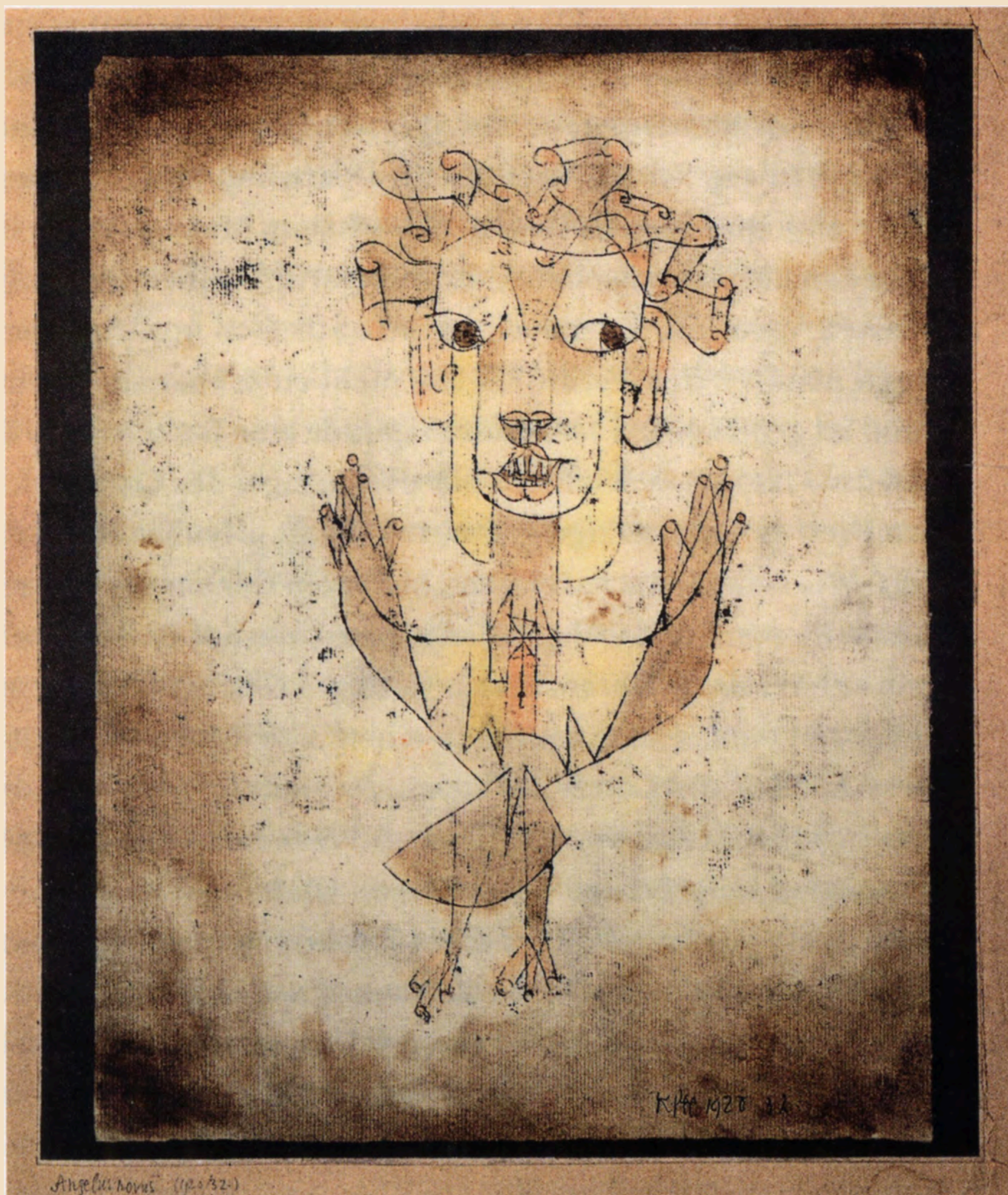


# Enduring the Social Pathologies of (Late) Modernity: *From Diagnosis towards Metanoia*



## The Social Pathologies of Contemporary Civilization

10th anniversary conference  
December 2nd & 3rd 2025  
University College Cork, Ireland



In collaboration with:  
UCC Collective Social Futures UCC  
Radical Humanities Laboratory  
and UCC Future Humanities





Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) is the image for SPCC 2025. "This is how one pictures the angel of history", Walter Benjamin wrote about the monoprint in his ninth *Thesis on the Philosophy of History*. This artwork was a cherished possession of Benjamin until his flight in 1932 from Germany to Spain and then France, where it was brought back to him three years later in Paris. He left it there when he fled again in 1940 (and ended his life a little later), confiding the angel to George Bataille. After the war it returned to Germany and was received by philosophical fellow traveller Theodor Adorno, who finally passed it on to Kabbalist scholar (and Benjamin's friend) Gershom Scholem, who had emigrated to Palestine in 1923. In 1987, five years after Scholem's death, his widow donated the drawing to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where it still is.



A telling journey of the print, and a pregnant 'framing' of it by Benjamin. A pessimistic framing, one could think. The angel, Benjamin wrote, has his back turned to the future and "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage". The angel's wish to make whole what was smashed seems vain, because a storm from Paradise keeps on pushing him into the future. "What we call progress is this storm", so the final sentence of the ninth thesis goes.

Are we in a similar shape today? Is it difficult to see the future, a future, any future at all? Do we mainly see wreckage piling upon wreckage around us? How to keep on resisting pessimism or even fatalism? How to keep on being hopeful, seeing possibilities of change? Benjamin's angel radiates with the ambivalences and ambiguities that move this conference.

'It's not dark yet, but it's getting there.' (Bob Dylan 1997) New fascism and a neo-monarchist robber-barons' restoration; extreme socio-economic inequalities; gender and racial violence; institutions of the republic, democracy, justice and law undermined and usurped; the planet burning, and drowning in new floods; wars in the East, the Middle East and other hot zones, 150 million people in flight; epidemics of depression, anxiety and mimetic contagions of envy, hatred and scapegoating; pervasive materialism, meaninglessness and nihilism... a cascading polycrisis. It has become very difficult to see the light. We are in need of a *metanoia* – turning towards the light, and for this, we will need not only critical diagnoses of the epidemic social pathologies of contemporary civilization. For viable emancipatory praxes, that is a combined socio-psychotherapeutics, we will need a *logos* – a horizon of radiant ideals, we will need an imaginative-critical pedagogy, and, because learning is by imitation, we will need good models to emulate. More than ever Beckett's proverb seems to apply: "The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess". Although we are looking for new emancipatory horizons addressing the contemporary challenges, we begin with a reminder that to transform our world and ourselves, we need to bear in mind that "good ideas are already anchored in a deep tradition, in ways of life which have already been lived. ... The validly new is a recreation of a tradition." (Taylor 2007; Mouffe 1989) In emergency conditions that seem to demand entirely new 'disruptive' thinking, we need the presence of mind to know that "imagination is nothing but the working over of what is remembered" (Vico 1999); "Imagination is memory" (Joyce) and rather than more disrupting 'thinking is remembering and rearranging what we have known all along ... like tidying a room' (Wittgenstein 1994).

K/KC 1920 31



With this in mind and drawing from anthropologically deep-seated and morally anchoring models of the human being – *Homo mimeticus* (Nidesh Lawtoo), *Homo resonans* (Hartmut Rosa), and *Homines curans* (Joan Tronto; Kathleen Lynch) we are interested in remembering human qualities and practices of empathy, and care, and friendship; in gifting and reciprocity; in the communicative actions, discussions, conversations, understandings and agreements that formulate and propagate substantive values; in celebrations, humour, laughter and collective effervescences, *joie de vivre* and social solidarity; and in imaginative representations and performative enactments of these human institutions and phenomena, for whereas ‘by logic and reason we die hourly; by imagination we live!’ (Yeats)

‘Wherever I go I find that the poets have been there before me!’ Freud says, and so one of our conference themes will be the ‘power of art’ in these times of voicelessness and (seemingly) hopelessness, and again, Beckett’s words resonate for us: “To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.” Just to spark our philosophical-sociological-aesthetic imaginations consider some examples: Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who lived through dark times that bear striking resemblances to our own – recurring and intensifying economic & political crises, culminating in a repressive authoritarian regime that Pessoa ‘survived’, in the sense of lived through, endured, and lived beyond by cultivating his imaginative mimetic faculties in the form of his ‘heteronyms.’ And Elena Ferrante’s novel *My Brilliant Friend*, and her other books, on mimetic frenemies and *metempsychosis*, with the city of Naples (like all of our cities) in spite of the squalor and social inequalities and violence as also being the wellspring of the eternal recurrence of the lifeworld of communicative action and recognition, reciprocal gift relations of friendship and care, and inter-generational solidarity – the *ur-phenomena* sought by Goethe and Benjamin, Vico and Joyce. Naples is *Neopolis*, ‘new city’; with Vesuvius spitting fire Naples has always lived ‘on the eve of destruction’, and this is, paradoxically, essential to the vitality and the morality of the collective life of the city, for ‘the tacit presence of mortality is a limit horizon that gives form and meaning to life.’ (Simmel) Naples is also Vico’s city, a city of refugees and blow-ins; a city of tyrants, and a city of subversions, and renewals. But today we are ‘on the eve of (quite illocatable) destruction’ on Planet Earth, giving rise to the widespread embracing of fascism, racism, misogyny etc. Because people refuse to ‘see the mess’; this ‘mess’ being - among other things - that we have moved beyond (certain) possibilities of renewal? Vico’s key theme is History as ‘*corso i ricorso*’ – eternally recurring cycles of civilization, barbarism, and renaissance, sublimating and solidifying like molten lava into Law / legal institutions / human rights, justice. If Vico were with us today (which he is, of course) in the context of present crises and recurrent barbarisms, he would say to focus on the emancipatory potential in struggles for justice and human rights, conserving our hard-won legal institutions. Unlike many who yearn for a restoration of a whole – and the totalitarianism that all too often lurks in that desire, Pessoa and Ferrante, like Vico and Joyce and other artists, writers, poets and musicians can show us how we might endure the ruination of the world and redeem beauty, truth, justice and the good life even amidst all the shattered glass and toppling masonry, for Pessoa and Ferrante resonate with Leonard Cohen (1992): ‘Forget your perfect offering / There’s a crack, a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in.’



Another cracked model is suggested perhaps by Srečko Horvath's *After the Apocalypse* (2020) and *Poetry from the Future* (2021): we are already in the apocalypse, already well into the death-spiral of modern civilization, dreaming that we are awake while we are sleepwalking into the End, or at least into a beginning-again of a possible future when 'even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins, and this enemy has not ceased to be victorious!' In such a nightmare context Benjamin talks of 'fanning a spark from the ashes of history as it flashes up in a moment of danger...'. What historical sparks can we see in our accelerating-de-symbolizing-amnesiac culture? Horvath hears / listens for a 'first voice from liberated Europe', a voice that doesn't come from New York, Paris, or Brussels, but from Vis, a small Croatian island at the margin of Europe. Are there some things that come to us today as poetry from the future, faint voices in the wilderness, small signals from the waste land that are 'hopeful while not optimistic'? Voices and signals perhaps from people like Benjamin's shipwrecked castaway who 'climbs to the top of a mast that is already crumbling. But from there at least there's a chance to give a signal leading to rescue.' We are 'hospicing modernity' (Machado-Oliveira), and in our vigil we are attending and attuning to voices and signals from histories that intimate possible futures. But also, and in keeping with Benjamin's spirit of being hopeful while not optimistic, we are not looking for just any 'wishful thinking' and naive utopianism; we do not want to pretend that the marginalised, fragmented islands of emancipation or hope can all of a sudden become mainstream. Instead we are interested in the whole 'dialectical process':

- what are the promising models?
- what prevents them from becoming widely known?
- how to overcome these structural obstacles?
- do all of our cracked models fail?

What matter. 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'

**We invite contributions that speak to the themes and topics and ideas suggested above.**

Kieran, Domonkos, Sabine and Bert

**For further details on abstracts, venue etc, see our website:**

**<https://socialpath.org/>**