

## In a Time of Plagues

Guest editors, Hilda Fernandez-Alvarez and Ted Byrne



Image: "Clothing against Death in Rome, Anno 1656." Copper engraving of Doctor Schnabel, otherwise known as Dr. Beak, 17<sup>th</sup> c. plague doctor.

On March 12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2, better known as COVID-19 or simply as the coronavirus, a spectrality invisible to the naked eye that has affected us intensely, in ways that we are still in the process of understanding. The COVID-19 event can be thought of, from a psychoanalytic perspective, as an encounter with the Lacanian Real, a concept that refers to that which is outside the Symbolic and Imaginary and that has a compulsion to repeat itself. This pandemic, our modern plague, has traversed our experience and has impacted, materially and fantasmatically, notions such as space, time, body, affect, culture, and politics. This collection of 15 essays, written during the first wave of the pandemic and taking on renewed significance now that we are in a second wave, presents theoretical and critical psychoanalytic responses to the pandemic from one of three perspectives: clinical practice, culture, and politics.

From the perspective of psychoanalytic clinical practice, we start with Dan Collins' discussion of Sigmund Freud's loss of his daughter Sophie, who died as a consequence of the Spanish Flu in 1920, in order to highlight the importance of mourning and grief in moments in which the viral death toll might prevent us from giving death its dignity and commemoration. Hilda Fernandez-Alvarez is discontented with the absence of others' bodies in social life during the pandemic and she reflects on the *letter*, its symbolic and imaginary proliferation, to inquire into what aspects might be persistent in current social bonding. Michael McAndrew, training in psychoanalysis in the US, presents a few vignettes of other analysts in formation from Italy and Brazil, to question whether or not psychoanalysis is in crisis during this pandemic. He concludes enthusiastically that psychoanalysis thrives on impossibility. For her part, Eve Watson presents a rich meditation on the illusions and disillusions brought about by the pandemic, taking us on a journey to reflect on our current subjectivity ravaged by the real.

In the cultural section, Jack Black deploys the term *in-human*, echoing the Freudian uncanny, to refer to both the virus and to current subjectivities marked by impossibility as our universal condition. Clint Burnham, following Žižek's tropes, tackles the pandemic from the perspective of ideology as fantasy in relation to symptomatic enjoyment rendered as sado-masochistic, as well as through the notions of fetishization of the Lacanian non-relation. This brings him to a reflection on the ways in which we read pandemic literature. Alessandra Capperdoni explores the expression *Noli me tangere* (touch me not), which refers to the injunction in John's Gospel that forbids Mary Magdalen to touch the body of the resurrected Jesus. She offers a rich Derridean exploration of the relations of guests and hosts that culminates in a discussion of the body through the works of visual artist Bill Viola. Sanem Güvenç engages with Catherine Malabou's "To Quarantine from Quarantine: Rousseau, Robinson Crusoe, and 'I'" in order to consider the possibilities found in both solitude and writing, and the type of community that, on the side of the feminine *not-all*, would be an alternative to the phallogentric social bond which, she argues, involves a community without exception. Jerry Zaslove guides us through a proposed curriculum on the plague and a manual of piety, after Brecht's *Hauspostille*. His is a tour de force that incorporates short meditations of Brechtian, Benjaminian, Bakhtinian, Freudian, and Brueghelian inspiration that reflect on history and culture in light of our current times.

In the last section, on politics, Matthew Flisfeder retakes the notion of universality as a ground for emancipatory ethical thinking and argues against critics of biopolitics. He does not see this political model as inherently oppressive since it can function democratically as responsibility instead of discipline. Am Johal's treatise follows Badiou's thesis on the event and proposes that the pandemic is not an event, as its liberatory potential is not yet determined and its

truths can't be universalized. He provides a sharp critique of the interventions of the state. David Pavón-Cuéllar shares with us a number of Lacanian reflections on the isomorphous nature of the virus and capital, rendering capitalism as a deadly and compulsive repetition based on the imperative of capitalist enjoyment, which he presents through the figures of the hoarder, the capitalist, and the labourer. He proposes, considering our doomed ecological devastation, to bid for life, which involves straying from the short path to death that capitalism proposes. Todd McGowan discusses how the US has sacrificed the sacredness of human life in the name of late capitalism, which is addicted to senseless sacrifice. He expands on this form of sacrificial relation, reflecting on children mining cobalt in the Congo for the assemblage of our digital gadgets, in order to highlight how our complicit destructive enjoyments play a part. Wayne Wapeemukwa proposes that settler-colonialism is a contagious sickness of the land, and supports his claim with the Lacanian concept of extimacy and the Fanonian concept of sociogeny, advocating for the latter as a more powerful approach as it allows an ecological perspective that sees the environment—not the subject—as racist. Finally, Zahi Zalloua inquires about the “subject supposed to know” in the context of US politics and, from a Žižekian perspective, renders the big Other, which does not exist, as the federal government guiding us through the pandemic, relying primarily on private industry. He advocates for a passionate commitment to the commons.