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HOW DO WE THINK PANDEMICS?

Encountering the Plague. Humanities Takes on the Pandemic.
Edited by Wojciech Sowa and Tony Whyton. Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2024.

The image on the first page of this volume's introduction shows a Hittite cuneiform tablet created three and a half thousand years ago. The tablet records a prayer to the Anatolian storm god, pleading for an end to a devastating plague afflicting the kingdom. The tone of the prayer is one of fear and incomprehension in the face of a mysterious and unstoppable disease – yet at the same time it carries the hope that with proper words and actions, suffering may come to end. The image usefully points forwards to a number of the themes that recur in this entire volume of essays.

Firstly is the fact that we have records of human reactions to plagues and pandemics for as long as we have written records. The texts and images under discussion in these essays range from the Bronze Age, to medieval and 17th-century Europe, to the post-COVID contemporary world. The specific nature of the plague disease may change over time, but experience of plague and pandemic is coterminous with human history, probably indeed with human evolution. In other words, it is a fundamental and universal feature of being human.

The volume has another recurring theme – the fact that pandemic is an existentially disruptive experience, one that upends the social order, challenges political norms, throws medical practice into crisis, disrupts economic life, and, most tragically, breaks social and family bonds. This disruption in turn tests our systems

of language and communication and knowledge production, but sometime stimulates responses of considerable creativity.

All of the essays in the volume begin with a particular image chosen by the authors, usually connected to a particular text or form of media. We are constantly reminded that the experience of plague generates a world of texts, often as vehicles for powerful mythical, metaphorical and moral interpretations and interventions. Disease not only causes physical suffering and death; it engenders a vast web of language, ideas and metaphysical speculations intended to give meaning to the terrifying unknown. In pre-modern times the shock and horror of deadly pandemics produced was easily translated into supernatural explanations involving divine retribution for moral failings; the contemporary world is less likely to invoke angry gods as explanations for the plague, but still has its own version of allocating moral blame.

For all the common threads that link the essays in this impressive collection, there is welcome diversity in terms of scope and methodologies, and the insights are sometime startling. Standout essays in this regard include Joanna Sofaer's fascinating account of visitor responses to the heritage site of Corfe Castle during the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to certain conventional assumptions that heritage sites chiefly provide people with occasions for education, nostalgia, or regressive escapism, Sofaer's project found that during the pandemic the primary value of visiting Corfe Castle seems to have been the opportunity it gave to (re)connect with family and friends – in other words, cultural heritage became an occasion for health-giving expressions of embodied love and care, a form of therapy and recovery that had went far beyond the precise historical value or cultural specificity of the site itself.

Many of the essays here adopt a more conventional literary analytical approach to their material. An essay on early modern textual representations of plague by James Brown and Gabrielle Robilliard, and another by Charles Giry-Deloison provide highly informative and crisply-written comparative discussions of plague accounts in early modern urban environments such as London and Amsterdam, while in a similar vein Florian Steger's essay traces the way the ancient Greek writings of Thucydides created a rhetorical framework utilised generations later by early medieval and Byzantine writers in trying to make sense of plague in their own day, focusing in particular the consequences of the impacts of isolation and social distancing.

Such literary historical case studies show the resourcefulness with which writers of the past attempted to convey information about the effects of what was happening, while also engaging in speculation on the causes of the crises (were they divine, human or environmental?) and imagining possible remedies. They are case studies

in the toolkit of literary technique, employing personification, hyperbole, satire, metaphor, symbolism and so on in the service of deep and wide understanding. What is particularly striking is the insight these writings give into a complex period when modern medical and scientific explanations for disease were emerging, while at the same time more traditional medical, mythic and religious explanations had considerable power. The struggle over pandemics was more than a physical struggle with a virus; it was also struggle over control of discourse and power. In notable echoes of our most recent experiences with COVID-19, these essays show us that authorities in the medieval and early modern periods also strove to manage public spaces and modes of social contact, and that then, as now, the societal divisions produced by class and wealth were powerful determinates over how people were cared for.

Camus's 1947 novel about an outbreak of plague in Algeria, *La Peste*, features as a reference point in several of the essays, including co-editor Tony Whyton's thoughtful account of the novel's use of the melancholic blues classic "St James Infirmary". In the course of his essay Whyton makes the provocative point that the unpredictable way that art forms such as popular song are continually remade though multiple versions, revisions, contexts and performances ironically resembles the fluid dynamic of "contagion" we associate with disease itself. But, to put a positive spin on this, one can argue that such a performance model reflects the dynamics of creativity, adaptation and experiment that are vital instruments in responding to crisis. Relations between art and pandemic are not just static and representational but can also be transformational.

A word like "contagion" reminds us that the language we use profoundly shapes the way we think of and respond to disease. Not surprisingly, therefore, language use as a social phenomenon is a focal point for a number of the essays. Rūta Petrauskaitė and Darius Amilevičius provide a deep analysis of the public discourse deployed in Lithuania over the two years of the COVID-19 crisis. They trace the tension between what they call confrontational and consolidating discourses. Evoking the critique of language manipulation in the dystopian fiction of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, they track precisely the shifts towards confrontation in the vocabulary and tone that accompanied the progress of the crisis in the public media, and demonstrate how powerfully language can mobilise of emotions like anger, hostility and fear – which in turn can lead to social fracturing.

Other essays in the volume similarly focus on the particular experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Agnieszka Jelewska's essay helpfully reminds us of how many different types of discourse and language were in operation to meet the needs of our data-hungry society during the crisis: "not only the virological experts who gave numerous media interviews … but also computer scientists, mathematicians

and AI modellers, who predicted the next waves of infection, and experts responsible for visualizing data on the spread of the virus." Jelewska notes that the latter tool of data visualization – dataviz – which became familiar on our screens on a daily basis, was a major interface for public understanding of the pandemic. Aesthetically pleasing and easily assimilable as these may have been, however, these mainstream data visualisations tended to conceal the sources of their data and methodologies, which meant that they could be misused, misunderstood or pressed into the service of political polemics. This problem is all the more clear when set beside alternative forms of dataviz such as one based in Kerala, India, an innovative and highly-reflective project in which "the process of data curation was carried out with the understanding that data are neither raw nor objective, so a specific culture of analysis and visualization needs to be created for them". Ultimately for Jelewska, the dominant models of data visualization that over-simplify run the risk of widening rather than closing the epistemic gap between science and societies.

Nacher, Pold and Rettburg's fascinating essay on the "pandemic imagination" explores some of the ways experimental digital media have been engaged in "remembering" the COVID-19 pandemic. Their examples demonstrate the multiple ways in which "hyperobjects" like pandemic crises can be mediated and remediated – from official statistics and visualisations, to the "collective imaginary" produced by controlling algorithms and software platforms that are also deeply connected to relations of power. The works produced by those digital artists featured in the essay remind us how complex and unsettling these mediations are – but also hint at the capacities that exist for challenging them through alternative digital creativity.

While primarily European focused, the volume does open out to consider the wider world, and raise the question of the meaning and impact of plague in unevenly developed and inequitable world. One of the artists featured in Nacher Pold and Rettburg's essay is Brazilian artist Giselle Beiguelman and their challenge to the (ab)use of language under the Bolsanaro regime. Sara Brandellero's essay also takes us to Brazil for a close reading of the dystopian film *Bacurau* (2019). The film predates COVID-19, but eerily foreshadows many of the issues that would be accentuated by the pandemic crisis – health equity, social justice and the legacies of colonial, gender and racial violence. But here too, Branellero argues, out of the film's darkness there come possibilities of resistance.

Finally, two of the volume's essays deal specifically with the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on the use of public space, and the ways in which epidemiological issues inevitably connect with much larger issues of politics and spiritual practice. Grażyna Baranowska and Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias in their essay "Protesting in Defence of Human Rights in the Time of Pandemic:" chronicle the Polish government's response to anti-government protest protests that arose in

during the COVID-19, arguing that public health restrictions were in fact used for political purposes to clamp down on anti-government dissent – for them (as activists) "it is often not clear whether the imposed limitations are indeed absolutely necessary measures or whether they have been introduced to consolidate power and silence the critics of those in power." Piotr Roszak and Piotr Paweł Orłowski in their essay on the "Ritualization of 'Distance' in Christian Liturgy" analyse the impacts of "distancing" at multiple levels in Catholic ritual during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the ways in which physical distancing protocols prompted creative adaptations and work-arounds such as elbow touching and, more interestingly, renewed attention to non-tactile modes of engagement with the spiritual. They remark: "piety ceases to be identified with 'place' and begins to be dominated by 'relationship'. Paradoxically, this turns out to be closer to the classical understanding of *devotio*".

As a whole, this wide-ranging, timely and unique collection registers in a powerful way the diversity as well as the commonalities of the experience of plagues and pandemics. It makes clear that art and creativity can provide some of the deepest insights into such experiences, and any analysis that ignores this will be impoverished and misleading. And as co-editor Wojciech Sowa writes in his thought-provoking concluding chapter, humanities research is an important tool for retrieving and assisting our understanding of this creativity, and enabling us to put it to productive use for society. As Sowa succinctly puts it, the humanities "are not merely an academic pursuit but an essential part of our intellectual and emotional growth, empowering us to create a more inclusive, empathetic and harmonious society." We need the humanities – and this volume (inspired by the work of the Humanities in the European Research Area consortium) eloquently testifies to the truth of this.