

## COVIDeology in Four Parts

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*For any true Vancouverite, Tso learned later, proximity precluded introductions and served  
as the larval stage of acquaintanceship.*

Kevin Chong, *The Plague*<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Plague of COVID-19 Fantasies

COVID-19 is a fantasy in that, as Žižek argues, fantasy teaches us what to desire; is concerned with the desire of the other (is radically intersubjective); as primordial form of narrative replaces some originary deadlock; stages, rather than transgresses, the Law; involves an impossible gaze; and maintains a distance from the explicit Symbolic.<sup>2</sup>

*COVID-19 teaches us what to desire:* who knew that hand sanitizer, toilet paper, and surgical masks were subject to panic buying? COVID-19 is *concerned with the desire of the other* (is radically intersubjective)—here the *Che Vuoi?* (What do you want?) question is most crucial—we are all, when confronted with the other, wondering what their desire is. Do they want to spread their sickness to me? And, then, more unknowable: what is my desire? Do I secretly want to catch a disease and, through no fault of my own, have a quick end?

*COVID-19 as primordial form of narrative replaces some originary deadlock;* hence the fixation on China as origin of the virus (filthy habits of eating wild animals that accord oddly with paleo bro fantasies) rather than seeing the spread of the virus as a symptom of the impossible-Real of our connected, globalized planet. Only with COVID-19 are we finally a planetary society, a global village. *COVID-19 stages, rather than transgresses, the Law:*

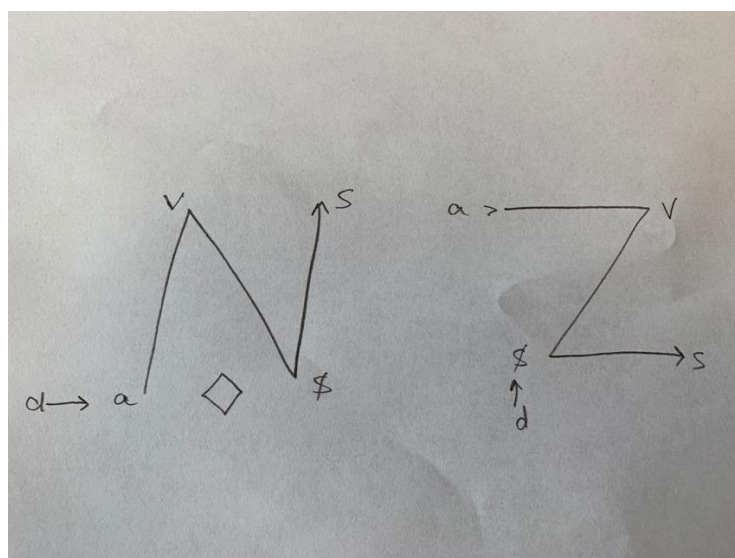
finally, we have a reason to follow orders, to obey countless regulations, to regress to our childhood and be told to wash our hands (and even, in the early days of the pandemic, told HOW TO WASH OUR HANDS, in countless memes that happily appropriate punk rock and hip hop to the service of social order). In the same regard, feckless youth who keep partying during spring break or other “transgressors” are only doing so because it is forbidden. Before the coronavirus, we mocked compulsive handwashers. We said they were obsessive. Here we might want to think of a “Lacanian proposition” that Žižek is fond of repeating (it first appears in *The Sublime Object*), regarding “the pathologically jealous husband: even if all the facts he quotes in support of his jealousy are true, even if his wife really is sleeping around with other men, this does not change one bit the fact that his jealousy is a pathological, paranoid construction.”<sup>3</sup> Handwashing, that is, is still an obsessive behavior. As Jameson argues, the subject of obsessive neurosis occludes desire, wonders if he or she is alive or dead.<sup>4</sup> *COVID-19 involves an impossible gaze*: images of Wuhan or empty Italian piazzas recall nothing so much as the apocalyptic fantasy book of photographs *The World Without Us*: the fantasy/impossible gaze of who is looking at our empty world, post-Anthropocene.<sup>5</sup> COVID-19 is ideology at its purest. We are told to self-isolate and maintain social distance—are not the demands of the virus also the opposite? The coronavirus shows we need each other, with even the most vile of right wingers now calling for socialized medicine and widely available testing. And the reverse is also true: we are all now global neighbors. “Love thy neighbor” has never proven to be more of an impossible-real, loving what’s in you more than you. Finally, *COVID-19 maintains, via the “empty gesture” (always accompanied by a forced choice) a distance from the explicit Symbolic*. Like military hazing or Abu Ghraib, which obscenities support the official legalistic culture of imperialist adventurism, the virus and its plethora of hygienic discourses support each other, with public health officers—at least, in functioning social democracies like smug Canada—suddenly social media heroes.<sup>6</sup>

Too, the most radical act is to behave as if the fantasy were true. We should wear masks 🤡 at all times, when making love, brushing our teeth, eating French fries (recall that scene in *Sex & The City 2* where a New Yorker asks a Muslim woman how she eats fries with her veil on). But fantasy is also itself a plague, works in a viral fashion. Fantasy is what connects us, spreads without any human effort and reminds us we are not isolated individuals.

## 2. What does it mean to enjoy your symptom in the current conjuncture?

We can approach this question in two ways: first, to break down the phrase “enjoy your symptom” into two component parts (what is enjoyment? what is our symptom?) and then to ask *who* is doing the enjoying. In the first analysis, we actually have to confront three questions: what is enjoyment, what is our symptom, and ... what does it mean to *demand* that we enjoy our symptom? Enjoyment, or *jouissance* in Lacanese, is always *fraught*. For Nabokov, Freud was a quack, a fraudster; Lacan is a *fraughtster*. Reading Lacan is always a fraught enterprise because of the thickness of the language and the velocity of concepts, their instability, the speed with which they are discarded. As Jameson remarks of Gertrude Stein, “Do we trust her, or is she a charlatan?”<sup>7</sup> *Jouissance* is both a Lacanian concept and a way of reading Lacan, it is an unbearable pleasure that we cannot endure, that we are unsure about. And it always has to do with the other. We are always troubled by the enjoyment of the other—by the “subject supposed to enjoy” and this is what Jacques-Alain Miller and Žižek have argued is the underlying structure for racism.<sup>8</sup> We suppose or imagine that the ethnic other has an access to enjoyment that we do not—their smelly (or tasteless) food, their inscrutable folk customs, their laziness or stealing of our jobs—and we hate them because we have a conflicted relationship with our own enjoyment (or consider the feckless youth who kept partying during spring break 2020 in Florida). Then, what is our symptom, and what

does it mean to enjoy it? Freud comments on how Dora enjoys her symptom, meaning that the hysteric does not want to let go of what afflicts her. What are our symptoms now—the penchant for different paraphernalia (masks, gloves, wipes, unexpectedly both the *objet petit a* of our consumerist/hoarding desires and, perhaps, eroticized) that are suddenly part of everyday life? The medical symptoms of either being afflicted with the coronavirus or a common cold or flu, all of which send us into a panic that we unconsciously enjoy *because now we are confronting life and death*? Or the symptoms of what we endure with our quarantine, lockdown, self-isolation and social distancing, from the mundane (boredom, lack of exercise) to the work-related (scattered focus, innumerable emails whilst attempting childcare) to more extreme pathologies (from depression to higher risks of domestic abuse) to the bare life under which refugees, the urban poor, or Indigenous people live under conditions of camps, slums, reserves *that were already unacceptable*. The demand to enjoy our symptom then means we are confronting the obscene super ego, which is to say not the big Other qua Law but a plethora of regulations. 250 people gatherings? 50? 10? 5? Go outside or don't? Wuhan foot bump or is no contact better? Mask or no?



**Fig. 1. Lacan's two schemas of the Sadean fantasy**

We also can think about who is doing the enjoying: here Lacan's two schemas of the Sadean fantasy (rendered in my crude drawing above) can help us. Benvenuto reminds us, in *Conversations with Lacan*, that for Lacan, sadism and masochism are "two moments of the same dynamic."<sup>9</sup> Lacan called desire "the henchman of the subject's split"<sup>10</sup> and we can see how desire works in these two graphs commented upon in Lacan's essay "Kant with Sade." On the left-hand graph<sup>11</sup>, desire works through the *objet petit a*—which is the sadist as object of our fantasy. We enjoy sadistic videogames, novels, or films by hiving off the sadistic protagonist from an appreciation of the aesthetics, the world-building. Desire works through the sadistic *objet petit a*, via V or pure Kantian will (*volonté*), and pushing through the divided subject \$ to a fantasy of a pure S, a victim who cannot be killed. In this sadistic fantasy, the coronavirus is that *objet petit a*, an improbably colorful image that looks like a dog's chew toy or infant's teething ring, which we watch, fascinated, as it wreaks havoc around the globe. Our position as subjects of the coronavirus is then the masochistic one, the graph on the right: now, we CHOOSE to submit.<sup>12</sup> "Sade delegates a right to jouissance to everyone in his Republic," Lacan notes.<sup>13</sup> Thus desire moves through us as divided subject (\$), even, Lacan goes on to say, as if describing this virus that is "in us more than us," that is already everywhere: "the molecules that are monstrous insofar as they assemble here for an obscene jouissance awaken us to the existence of other more ordinary jouissances encountered in life."<sup>14</sup> Enjoy the coronavirus! Enjoy social isolation! Enjoy life as we approach death!

### **3. Lacanians should stop fetishizing the non-relation**

In a podcast at the end of March, Dany Nobus made the heretical remark that Lacanians who act as though psychoanalytic theory should not be affected by the pandemic are merely

presenting a version of Lacan qua religion, or gospel.<sup>15</sup> That is, they proceed as if Lacanian theory has a compromised immune system, and should be distanced from the Real. In the spirit of this auto-critique, consider the valorization of the non-relation, which, with the work of Žižek and Zupančič, threatens to ontologize negativity. Žižek's turn from "there is no sexual relation" to "there is a non-relation" in *Less than Nothing*, echoed by Zupančič in *What is Sex?*, is perhaps a gentrification of Lacan's radical argument (and here I paraphrase Zupančič) that ontology is related to the master, playing on the pun of *m'être* and *maître* and that the non-relation is not so much the opposite of a relationship as the condition of different kinds of social links. However, while Zupančič does reference, in these discussions, Žižek's discussion of the "sexual non-relation" in *Less than Nothing*, it should be noted that if in those passages Žižek agrees with Zupančič that the concept "there is no sexual relation" is not merely a Lacanian take on the battle of the sexes, he (Žižek) also argues that the non-relation implies "the positivization of this impossibility of the sexual relation in a paradoxical 'trans-finite' object which overlaps with its own lack."<sup>16</sup> Further, Žižek adds, "sexual difference in a way precedes the two sexes ... so that the two sexes somehow come (logically) later, they react to, endeavor to resolve or symbolize, the deadlock of a Difference, and this deadlock is materialized in the pseudo-object called the *objet a*."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the calls for social distancing and self-isolation demonstrate the dangers of such an ontology. What does it mean to call social distancing an ideologue? This "smallest intelligible unit of social analysis" (Jameson) is, on the one hand, a pseudo-idea, that which bears a contradiction, has a repressed unconscious; on the other hand, the ideologue expresses the contradictions of the antagonisms of the social.<sup>18</sup> So there are, of course, well-founded medical reasons for precautions during this plague, to flatten the curve, etc. But social distancing mistakes those (physical) precautions for a negation of the social bonds that constitute us, aptly illustrated by Kevin Chong's *aperçu* that Vancouverites use proximity to substitute for knowledge. And it

may be that Lacanian theory, in its fetishization of negativity, of the non-relation, symptomatically *disavows* the very social link that it finds so difficult to account for (usually relegating it to the sexual non-relation, the clinic, or the neighbor). Alberto Toscano has floated the proposition that “a certain dislocated, maladaptive, voided subject – the subject of psychoanalysis – has been rendered normative and congruent with the institutions” of the neoliberal state.<sup>19</sup> Like the neurotic who is glad to finally have the big Other validating their obsession with social distancing, Lacanians should get over themselves.

#### 4. How to Read Pandemic Literature

There exists in the current conjuncture a sudden eruption, like the bubos in Camus’ novel, of literary journalism on pandemic literature. *La Peste*, we are told, conveys the everyday heroism of medical workers—ignoring the Arabs, it is true. Or let us return to Boccaccio—didn’t he have it right? But such squibs ignore the question of what it means to read during a pandemic and, second, what it means to read pandemic literature. That is, first of all, meaning in a text, we have long known, does not reside solely with the author’s intent or the text’s signification. The anti-colonial readings of Camus not only bring out what is repressed in his portrait of Oran, but create the space for a collective subjectivity—the Arab world.<sup>20</sup> These forms of reader-response criticism (here given a post-colonial gloss) can be thought of, if one desires a Lacanian through-line, as a form of *point-de-capiton*, a retroactive reading, a matter of Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*. This is to make the argument that *all literature is pandemic literature*. If by “all literature,” we mean anything we are reading under the conditions of the pandemic. Consider two very different books: Kevin Chong’s *The Plague*, a retelling of Camus’ novel but set in 21<sup>st</sup> century Vancouver, and N.K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*, the first of a trilogy of fantasy novels set in a land/planet called the Stillness, where earthquakes

devastate the world every few generations. Reviews of *The Fifth Season* at the time usually discussed, on the one hand, the felicity with which Jemisin went about her world-building, “how much sumptuous detail and dimensionality she's packed into her premise,” as Jason Heller put it,<sup>21</sup> and, on the other hand, the revolution she represents in terms of incorporating black and female subjectivities into the traditionally white male world of fantasy—Jemisin’s own “viral” essay [“How Long ‘Til Black Future Month”](#) lays out the argument in an unassailable fashion.<sup>22</sup> But reading the novel under our present lockdown, we come upon the following passages:

A curfew starts at dusk, and all businesses that aren't crucial for protection or supply of the town are required to close ... following rules and procedures that are simultaneously meant to be practical and to keep a large group of anxious people busy ... You walk the path around the green's edge – during lockdown no one walks on it. [and] At the mansion's gates they hand off their horses to a stablehand and kneel in the forecourt to have their hands soaped and washed by a household Resistant servant, which is a local tradition to reduce the chance of spreading disease to the comm's leadership. [and] The ashfall only gets heavier over the next few days, until you finally do pull the masks out of your runny-sack – you have four, fortunately, horribly – and hand them around ... Other people have broken out their masks, too, you see when they materialize out of the grayness, their skin and hair and clothing hardly distinguishable from the ash-painted landscape, their eyes grazing over you and away. The masks make everyone equally unknown and unknowable, which is good.<sup>23</sup>

These moments in Jemisin’s novel grab me by my lack, for any number of obvious reasons. Handwashing, of course, early on in the pandemic (say, February and March in Canada), was suddenly an ethical imperative, a care-of-the-self, which not only, as noted above, made the obsessive neurotic the subjectivity *du jour*, but also meant that we now noticed such moments, whether scenes from pop culture (in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or *Jackie Brown*) or in pandemic-adjacent texts like *The Magic Mountain* (five handwashing scenes in the first hundred pages!). But the explanation of handwashing in Jemisin or of the various rationales and procedures during the “lockdown” suggest more than the work of fantasy world-building,



or the behind-the-scenes justifications for the novel's action, plot, and characters. Or, rather, *our noticing* of that world-building at this particular moment is evidently overdetermined. Not only, that is, do we notice it because of our present conditions, but we suddenly realize, in metaleptic fashion, how our interpretive practice is world-historical. And then, we think that *the conditions of the pandemic lockdown are themselves a kind of world-building*. If this is so—and the implications are beyond the scope of this essay—then we must consider if the opposite is true: what is left *not built* in the world-building of our current pandemic? Žižek has discussed this intrusion of the Real in a way that video game critic Markus Rautzenberg uses to analyze the limits, both imposed and fabricated, of world-building in games.<sup>24</sup> The “not built” of our pandemic world-building, which is to say the unconscious, then might take on a social dimension: provisions for drug users and the homeless, already suffering under crises of opioid overdoses and the market economy of housing, for instance.

If such deliberations are the result of a pandemically-inclined interpretation, what of its negation: reading a pandemic text outside the conditions of the pandemic? Here Chong's reboot of Camus is useful both because we can survey reviews from before the present day, and also think about what it means to read a pandemic novel under pandemic conditions. In the first case, reviews and interviews from two years ago focus on what Chong has done with the Camus “original” (generally: multiculturalizing the characters to reflect Vancouver's Asian demographics) and how he skewers Vancouver's middle class privilege. Here is Chong in an interview: “Vancouver is the city version of the guy who doesn't check out that funny mole on his neck until it's advanced too far and he's got two weeks to live. It's a city in denial about its problems: inequality, racial divisions, its treatment of Indigenous people, homelessness.”<sup>25</sup> Reading Chong's novel under conditions of the pandemic, then, is less a matter of spotting the references to handwashing or masks and more a realization that the pandemic qua form operates in a parallel fashion both to his novel and to our present day

situation. That is, in both cases, the pandemic brings to the surface such social antagonisms that normal, everyday life had previously managed to obscure. But this revelation does not simply work as a kind of political unconscious: it also works at the everyday. Like the novelist who seeks to depict a different condition of life, the pandemic requires that we operate in our social reality, in our everyday, in a new fashion. No less so than the realization that big government *can* find the resources to tackle, say, climate change, the pandemic has taught us to look anew at everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Chong, *The Plague* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 3-44.

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), 103.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martins, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> British Columbia's public health officer, Bonnie Henry, while lauded for her sensible advice and wardrobe (Fluevog shoes), has also been the subject of death threats and online trolls, no doubt due not only to Covid-skeptics but misogyny. See Xiao Xu, "Death threats among abuse reported by B.C. Provincial Health Officer Bonnie Henry, other officials," *The Globe and Mail*, 23 September 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-death-threats-among-abuse-reported-by-bc-provincial-health-officer/>. Accessed 24 September 2020. See also Tacey Whalen on the "rhetorics of reassurance" mobilized by public health officials, <https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/crics/covid-19-and-cultural-studies/rhetorics-of-reassurance-during-covid-19.html>. Accessed 24 September 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), 342.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, "Extimity" June 20, 2008. <https://www.lacan.com/symptom/extimity.html>. Accessed 24 September 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Sergio Benvenuto, *Conversations with Lacan: Seven Lectures for Understanding Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2019), 146.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2007), 652.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 653.

<sup>12</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 657.

<sup>13</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 656.

<sup>14</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*, 658.

<sup>15</sup> *Rendering Unconscious* podcast, March 30, 2020, <http://www.renderingunconscious.org/psychoanalysis/ru67-rendering-dany-nobus-unconscious/>. Accessed 24 September 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 796.

<sup>17</sup> A question for further deliberation, then, is how does Zupančič's use of ontology compare to Žižek's of positivization? For key to both Žižek's formulation here, as well as Zupančič's in *What is Sex?*, is the role of logic (in these pages Žižek draws on Frege), a substratum of Lacanian theory that any recent reader of his fourteenth seminar (on *The Logic of Phantasy*) will have already noted. Finally, it is worth circling back to the connection Zupančič makes between the sexual non-relation and social links in general, in order to see the social and political resonances of these all-too-timely thoughts in post-Lacanian theory. Please see Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), e-book, introduction and chapter 2, and Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 794-802.

<sup>18</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 76.

<sup>19</sup> Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: The Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010), 150.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague* (London: Penguin, 2007). To read *The Plague* this way is not only to miss what the novel is doing in terms of its actual business – describing the change in daily routine ("the plague was only

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an unpleasant visitor which would leave one day as it had entered” [72]), the separation of lovers, the gross details of the bubonic afflictions, the empty gesture of masks (“he opened a cupboard and took two gauze masks out of a sterilizer, offered one to Rambert and asked him to put it on. The journalist asked if it served any purpose and Tarrou said no, but that it inspired confidence in others” [160-161]) – but also its heavy-handed allegory of Nazism—which reaches its peak with bulldozers pushing bodies into mass graves. Such an allegorical reading is only possible if the novel’s setting, in the Algerian city of Oran, is treated as incidental, and misses how Camus sets up that contingency early in the novel, when his journalist character, Rambert, says he is in Oran to write about the health of the Arabs, and is challenged by the doctor, Rieux, who asks if he will tell the truth. This is a sort of inoculation the novel carries out, for we will see almost no details or engagement with the Arab population again: as Edward Said remarks, Camus was “a novelist from whose work the facts of imperial actuality, so clearly there to be noted, have dropped away.” In *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, Vintage, 1993), 172.

<sup>21</sup> Jason Heller, “*Fifth Season* Embraces the Scale and Complexity of Fantasy,” 4 Aug., 2015, npr.org.

<sup>22</sup> N.K. Jemisin, “How Long ’til Black Future Month?” 30 Sept., 2013, nkjemisin.com.

<sup>23</sup> Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (New York: Orbit, 2015), 234-5.

<sup>24</sup> Markus Rautzenberg, *Framing Uncertainty: Computer Game Epistemologies* (London: Palgrave, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Trevor Corkum, “The Chat with Kevin Chong,” 5 April, 2018, 49thshelf.com.