

Noli me tangere: The Art of Parasitology in the Time of Coronavirus

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With this duplicity we are at the heart of the 'logic' of contamination. One should not simply consider contamination as a threat, however. To do so continues to ignore this very logic. Possible contamination must be assumed, because it's also opening or chance, our chance. Without contamination we would have no opening or chance.
—Jacques Derrida¹

Touch me not. The injunction comes no longer from the Gospel's account in John 20:17 of Mary Magdalen's attempted gesture to touch the flesh of a resurrected Jesus, speaking to the dual nature of spirit and flesh in the oneness of the divine and to the faith that such belief demands. Instead, it comes from the body of the other, the other of intimacy, which we are no longer allowed to embrace or even to brush by in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic. The danger of contagion is too high, and the potential spread of death too real. The immediate effect of the COVID-19 crisis has been etched in the flesh, drawing a firm boundary between the *inside* of our bodies, whose fragile and permeable borders are located on skin and in orifices, and the *outside* of the world, from where the danger can easily penetrate us. The feeling is one of potential invasion by the foreign agent of illness, captured by Denys Arcand in the representation of cancer in his 2003 film *Les Invasions barbares (The Barbarian Invasions)*.² In such a climate, anybody could be the enemy. Even a casual listening to news, interviews with members of the public, or informal conversations show that suddenly *the geography of the body has been territorialized*. Different bodily territories have emerged, for the pandemic is hitting, in different ways, the elderly, the poor, the sick, the marginalized, "essential" labourers and health workers, or those who struggle with mental illness. Similarly, reconfigurations of relations to power have

also produced their own bodily territories: the body of health concerns, the body of the citizen-subject following or contesting governmental injunctions, the body of the responsible co-citizen caring for neighbourhood and city, the body of quarantined individuals and families living through “physical distancing,” the body of physical exposure, and the body wired to the virtual space of remote work. And where territories depend on the production of borders, conflicts are their natural consequence. The event of the pandemic has made visible a public and social language of conflict—let us think, for example, of the descriptors “war on the virus” and “frontline workers” which pervaded the news in the first months of the outbreak—a language that speaks to the embodied nature of space and the spatial nature of bodies.

In this short paper, also a space of embodiment despite its meditational nature, I am interested in addressing the significance of the spatial coordinates that the language surrounding the virus has brought into visibility. I read such spatiality as a symptom of the anxiety experienced by the subject in the singularity of her/his subjectification through the COVID-19 experience, as well as in the link or failed link that such experience produces with the collective: “We are all in this together!” Anxiety also signals the repression, individual as well as social, of the necessarily disjointed relation that we hold toward knowledge. In the midst of a crisis—hardly a new one or the last one but a crisis nonetheless—the logic of reason-oriented argumentation falls short of the affective dimension investing our body with a surge of emotions, the same body that might be attacked by the invisible enemy, the virus. Hence, the exploratory and meditational tone of this paper, retaining the signature of the moment in which it was written—a moment that demanded with insistence that we attempt to understand the event in its very midst but also demanded a different, reflective form of exploration. In this writing process, I follow the possibilities opened up by the philosophy of Derrida’s parasitology, also a virology,

and Lacan's discourse about anxiety and desire. I am interested in reflecting on the language about the virus and the virus as language, and what individual and collective anxiety about contagion can tell us about knowledge and truth. To this effect, I want to ask what possibilities of relation to the current moment art or culture can offer by way of addressing anxiety.

Who are these creatures, invisible to the naked eye, that slowly take over our bodies unless adequate measures are taken? Unlike bacteria, which can either be "good" or "harmful," viruses seem to be, to dub the title of an online lecture I recently followed, "hijackers of our bodies."³ While bacteria are single cell components with the minimum material to stay alive and reproduce, viruses are "life forms whose genetic material, either DNA or RNA, replicates inside living cells using the other cells' synthetic machinery."⁴ After having been synthesized, components of the virus are "re-assembled" (how Deleuzian this sounds!) and shifted to other living cells or to the environment. What science so lucidly explains can hardly assuage the feelings of deep anxiety that the invisible presence of a virus is eliciting individually and collectively. We accept it calmly only when the presence of viral agents is not felt so close by.

The distance of infectious diseases altogether, at the temporal or spatial level, makes the difference in our reactions. *At the temporal level*, history tells us of countless waves of epidemics, of either bacterial or viral origin, in the lives of humans. The most renowned is the Black Plague caused by the bacterium *Yersina Pestis* and transmitted by infected rat fleas. It exploded in the province of Yunnan, China, in 200 BCE and was brought to Europe most probably by Italian merchant ships in the early 1300s. It took 400 years, after a series of pandemics and a drastic reduction in population size, for the whole continent to eliminate the plague almost completely and for the whole globe to contain it effectively.⁵ The devastating effects of the Black Plague in Europe and Asia are not the only story. On the continent of Africa,

many archaeological sites testify to the presence of epidemics that were dealt with by the population by distancing settlements (an ancient form of “physical distancing”) or by burning down settlements and moving elsewhere. In the current COVID-19 crisis, such accounts deliver useful knowledge, helping us to link the eruption of the pandemic to different historical contexts to understand the nature of the events at stake and the social action involved, and not to fall into the illusion that we are facing “unprecedented” circumstances. Humanity has always had to face epidemics. The question is, can we find solace in such knowledge? *At the spatial level*, we have seen the example of the Ebola virus disease (EVD), which was discovered first in 1976 in South Sudan and the Congo and which later plagued different areas of the African continent, especially West Africa, during the severe 2014-16 and 2018-19 outbreaks.⁶ We have learnt much from science and from historical accounts of such outbreaks—for example, about the role of human and wildlife interaction, of increasing encroachment into the natural environment through deforestation, of social unrest or conflict, the importance of strong state institutions in the implementation of effective measures of control, the importance of adequate sanitary conditions, or simply of correct social behaviour. Is the usefulness of such scientific knowledge enough to relieve us from the anxiety the pandemic has unleashed?

These episodes embody a sense of distance in time and space because of the very fact that, despite their magnitude, they either were near eradicated or the significance of the threat was met by effective measures beyond early expectations. Plague cases still exist in the American Southwest but are effectively contained; the influenza pandemics that disproportionately affected Indigenous people in the Americas are now controlled through vaccines; the potential magnitude of Ebola has been met by effective responses in health care under the aegis of the World Health Organization, despite the high number of casualties. We

can't forget that geopolitical privilege may slant these conditions—is the influenza vaccine available to all communities in the world? But this virus is somehow different: global, fast, unknown, upsetting anything we have taken for granted so far. Is the breach of this sense of false security, caused by COVID-19, at the origin of our anxieties? Do we feel anxious because there is no place to hide any more, if there ever was? Is it enough to explain such anxiety by (rightfully) critiquing neoliberal politics and the unsustainable economic globalization of the planet? We do need knowledge, be it historical or scientific, and we do need to interrogate the dominant discourses and institutions of our time not only to understand but also to find solutions. *But does knowledge equal truth?* What is fundamentally lost in these albeit necessary trajectories? The search for knowledge has turned into a search for originary causes. Its very modality, its “questioning,” seems to point implicitly to a “problem,” to be located at an originary point in order to identify possible solutions. Where did the epidemic originate? What causes it? Who spread it first? How can we shift its direction toward a somewhat positive resolution? The assumption underlying such questions is the idea of the existence of a time and space uncontaminated by the virus—even if just this virus—and thus, in essence, *the corruption through contagion of a pure origin*. This obsessive search for origin, which also involves the tracking of the dissemination of the virus—from region to region or from patient 0 to patient 1—may indeed be necessary to implement effective measures of containment, but also constitutes a discourse replete with symptoms of collective anxiety, for it reproduces in turn the idea of origin as pure presence, uncontaminated by language and knowledge, a pure presence now firmly located in the body.⁷ That such location can only be imaginary does not matter. The threat to our living *corpus* as embodiment of the self may precisely be the source of the anxieties that *plague* us. Such an obsessive search for origins, which Clint Burnham, following Slavoj Žižek, reads as

social fantasy produced by ideology, brings us back to the operational logic of viruses, these life forms that in order to function act through the paradigms of *guest* and *host*, and in so doing defy the very idea of uncontaminated origin and essence.⁸

Guest and host—you can see the direction that my paper is taking—partake of a common etymology, the Indo-European *ghos-ti*, which unfolds the oppositional logic of their denotations. A similar slippage is contained in the Latin *parasitus*, which means both guest and parasite, while the Latin *virus* defines a liquid and poisonous substance (a pharmakon of sorts). These designations were to be altered by the scientific knowledge of the modern age and today we are well familiar with their differences, meant to describe the precise factual behaviours of these elemental forms of life. Knowledge, however, is constructed through a language that is not only necessary for working together and for disseminating our findings; language is also structurally functional to the way in which phenomena appear to us (perception is not independent from the way in which I conceptualize the world, decide to set up my lab, do my research or any sort of work) and in the way in which we decide to deal with them, be it scientifically or in political choices and social action. While the neat separation of guest and host is disturbed by the traces of their ancient significations, its constitution in modern languages brings to the fore the fear of penetrability and the invasion of what constitutes the sense of our innermost and inviolable self; that is, our body. Hence, the imperative force of the demand: Touch me not!

In the virological musings of this paper, I follow Derrida in the interchangeable use of terms such as parasite, poison, and virus as a signal of their common logic of *undecidables*. At the same time, the conceptual undecidability of guest and host is also identifiable in the scientific description of the virus's behaviour—that which replicates inside the penetrated cell, stealing the cell's machinery for its synthesis, and that which reassembles and disseminates to other bodily

cells or the environment. But isn't such operational logic displaying a kind of action similar to the one of language? In reading these scientific definitions I cannot but think about the sliding of significations and the citationality (a kind of *para-citology*) of language, a citationality (a citing, siting, parasiting ...) that speaks to the multiple chains of signification that un-anchor speech from the illusion of stable meanings, producing a flight of sense in the metonymic work of language before the metaphorical capture of meaning, or the *point-of-capiton* in Lacan's discourse, puts an end to such flight. What does such logic entail? Throughout his work, Derrida speaks at length of the aporia at the very heart of the law of hospitality that the common etymology of guest and host uncovers: what "appears as a paradoxical law, pervertible or perverting, [...] seems to dictate that absolute hospitality should break with the law of hospitality as right or duty, with the 'pact' of hospitality."⁹ The two nouns are anchored in a crossing of territories, be they country, language, home, or bodies, that impede the congealment of clear-cut signification. Guest-host (*ghos-ti*) is an *undecidable* which, not any differently from viruses hijacking the smallest living units of our bodies, defy the assumed oppositional nature of guest versus host, for it is the guest (the virus disease) who becomes master of the house.

I am perfectly aware of the danger of bringing the domain of the social and the law to bear onto the domain of the medical and the physical. The danger, in part, is a simplistic alignment of the human guest—the foreigner, the stranger, the outsider, or the other-than-human—with the near-deadly nature of a virus, and we have witnessed a surge in the materialization of such assumptions in the last months as anti-Asian and anti-immigrant racism. But the discursive dimension of guest-host that we see in the territorialization of affect (insider-outsider of nation or community) and its simultaneous transgression also signals a material reality in the body. On the one side, at the cellular level, the infectious nature of the virus

disrupts the idea of the social pact of hospitality by taking hold of its host and by modifying its very essence against itself at the risk of annihilation. On the other side, our apprehension of the virus, and our coming to terms with it as extimate object, is not independent of the chain of significations that the notion of the virus generates.

The operational logic of a virus, then, is not any different from that of language. Its action of invasion, occupation, taking over, reassemblage, and movement outward is predicated upon its potential of reproduction with a difference as well as risks of misapprehension, failures, annihilation, or just self-extinction. But the very idea that the slips generated in the process of coding and recoding, that is, the *différance* at work in language against the oppositional logic of the dialectic, also operate at the very basic level of our cells does not make us feel any better. If the virus does not allow for any *Aufhebung*, for the resolutive step forward and also a step “outside” that the *Aufhebung* presupposes, will there ever be an end to this nightmare? The operational logic of the virus is, precisely, a logic that can be felicitous or infelicitous but that also brings forth the possibility of the death of its host. Although we hope for cures and for vaccines, if at all achievable, we know that no matter what we will have to live with this thing that made it into our lives. We can learn valuable lessons from history and from the critical investigation of the ways in which capitalist systems have been implicated in the unleashing of the virus. At the same time, we also know that viruses have always existed and constitute a reminder of the fragility of our human species and the impossibility of absolute control over our lives. Yes, we do want a Master telling us that this will be over if “correct” steps are taken.¹⁰ Yet, at the end of the day, the very possibility that such a large-scale event produces a piling of death upon death, of which we are reminded by daily enumerations in the media, constitutes an unaccountable remainder that refuses symbolization. I am watching the news from my country,

Italy. As I follow in suspension, because one can hardly breathe in those moments, the sight of army trucks that move in long lines through the city of Bergamo and carry away the countless caskets for which no room is any longer available for ritual burial, a hole gapes open inside myself for which no words are available. In this tiny province, as in many others, the language-like structure of the virus has replicated without constraints and, in a parallel logic to the semiotic sign, it has killed the body.

The virus, as event, has dissolved what Lacan calls the scene of the world and the symbolic-imaginary construction of a reality which, in the present age, is none but the product of the Master discourse of capitalism.¹¹ Remember Fukuyama's fantasy of *The End of History and the Last Man*?¹² The piercing of the veil of the Real, which the virus has made possible, does not consist of the revenge of the natural world but of the realization of the impossibility of knowledge, of the non-One.¹³ The ideological apparatus of what has ironically defined itself as the "knowledge society" has repeatedly asserted, perhaps convincing us, that knowledge is a rising ladder and eventually it guarantees a life of security, enjoyment, material benefits, and self-betterment, if not happiness. Even the discourse of science, suspicious of this posture, is implicated in the same logic, the logic of the One, for which absolute knowledge, if not altogether possible, can be at least approached. In prescient fashion, perhaps nostalgic fashion, Heidegger had warned that the technological enframing of the Earth of late modernity cannot succeed for the Earth gives by concealing. Truth itself, for Heidegger, is unconcealment resistant to the world.¹⁴ We could say that the virus has dissolved the scene of the world which sustained the imaginary-symbolic illusion of endless growth, resource extraction, and resource manipulation, which has itself sustained, in particular, this last age of hypermodernity. In turn, the recalcitrance with which we have met the idea of non-knowledge, of a hole in knowledge,

has trapped us in a symbolic-imaginary transformed by ideology into a fantasy. A sign of this recalcitrance has come in the form of stress, depletion, depression, or the many forms of addiction riddling our age. It has manifested itself as the lack of lack. Yet the forms of anxiety that have been on the rise for a long time are perhaps better explained as anxiogenic forms that are still hiding the truth behind the scene of the world. As the virus hits—suddenly, unexpectedly, globally—a different dimension is revealed by the torn veil: knowledge is defective because knowledge is not truth.

I am far from claiming that the virus was not produced by specific causes and we should not bother with urgent solutions, or that knowledge is unattainable. Naturally, we need to work to expand knowledge and to reflect carefully. But no matter how much knowledge we accumulate, we will never master the intricate matrix of causes and effects, or the unconcealment of the truth of the earth. In addressing the necessity of the heterogeneity of knowledge in the process of decision-taking, Derrida comes very close to Lacan's idea of the necessary dismantling of the logic of the One through the analytic process. Decisions, as Derrida points out, will have to be taken but decisions cannot be applications of a rule:

But, however long this process of maturing lasts, however careful one is in the theoretical preparation of the decision, the *instant* of the decision, if there is to be a decision, must be heterogeneous to this accumulation of knowledge. Otherwise, there is no responsibility. In this sense only must the person taking the decision not know everything. Even if one knows everything, the decision, if there is one, must advance towards a future which is not known, which cannot be anticipated. If one anticipates the future by predetermining the instant of decision, then one closes it off, just as one closes it off if there is no anticipation, no knowledge 'prior to' the decision. At a given moment, there must be an excess or heterogeneity regarding what one knows for a decision to *take place*, to constitute *an event*.¹⁵

What is the role of art in the current state of affairs? Change will be difficult and imperfect but it will be necessary. The logic of contagion has brought death and endless

devastating consequences, but it has also brought a chance for change. Should art in the present moment point to this chance? Should it provide an archive of the emotions around the loss of intimacy we are experiencing? Of individual and collective anxieties? Healing? Redress? Can art help us shift social discourse from knowledge to the truth of the not-One, excess or heterogeneity to knowledge, through the aporia of parasitology? As a practice of suspension or piercing of the scene of the world, can it help us to reposition social discourse in relation to the Real? In short, can we move from the Master discourse to the Analyst's discourse?

In 2017 the Museum Strozzi, located in Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, Italy, a palatial location which also reminds us of the Italian Renaissance's root in mercantilism and banking systems, featured the works of Bill Viola in the exhibit *Bill Viola: Electronic Renaissance*. The provocative American artist of New Media has worked for a long time on emotions, consciousness, and (self) knowledge through a study of past, especially Renaissance, art forms. The juxtaposition of works from the Renaissance with his electronic *mise-en-scènes*—citations with a difference—can certainly be read through the paradigm of the Renaissance *paragone* (comparison), as Ingrid Rowland points out.¹⁶ But in Viola's works it is the contamination of past and present, a logic of contagion, through the performative representation of emotions that strikes the audience. Recently, after the outbreak of the pandemic, some of these works have been proposed anew as part of the virtual project "In Contatto" (In Contact).¹⁷ It is the contact between past and present through which the artist works, re-staging famous Renaissance paintings through the electronic medium as tableaux-vivants with a difference and as refigurations of the present. But it is also the wealth of forms of bodily contacts permeating these works that draws our senses to them: hugs, caresses, acknowledgments, kisses, erotic sparring, or embraces of death. In featuring a phenomenological study and a re-staging of past imaginaries,

Viola's works provide an archive of gestures and bodily encounters in which the erotics of the body, be it the body of love or of mourning, create an affect that produces meaning by stopping, albeit for the here and now, the endless (metonymic) sliding of signification in its (metaphorical) hold. Among these, two video installations are particularly interesting to consider, by way of conclusion, for our moment: "The Greeting" (1995), inspired by "The Visitation" of Mannerist painter Portormo (ca. 1528-1529), and "Emergence" (2002), inspired by the 1424 painting of the Pietà by Masolino da Panicale.¹⁸

Here, anxiety is of the order of the Real and no longer of the scene of the world. Reread through the time of COVID-19's physical distancing, the works speak of a need of bodily vicinity that could hopefully embrace a renewed social bond of human and non-human life: broken embraces which nonetheless speak of a desire to come.

¹ Jacques Derrida, Interview with Richard Beardsworth, "Nietzsche and the Machine," in "Futures of Nietzsche: Affirmation and Aporia," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 7 (Spring 1994), pp. 7-66: 56.

² Denys Arcand, director, *Les Invasions barbares (The Barbarian Invasions)*, released in 2003.

³ Barry Fox, "An Introduction to Infectious Diseases," The Great Courses (online video lectures), Lecture 1, download April 15, 2020, <https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/an-introduction-to-infectious-diseases.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Frank Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 2019). See also, World Health Organization, "Plague," download May 15, 2020, https://www.who.int/health-topics/plague#tab=tab_1.

⁶ Ibid. See also, World Health Organization, "Ebola Virus Disease," web May 15, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ebola-virus-disease>, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Ebola (Ebola Virus Disease)," web May 15, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/history/distribution-map.html>.

⁷ The history of Western philosophy has notoriously struggled to account for "the body." With few and scanty exceptions, it is perhaps only with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that the body re-enters the discourse of philosophy. Feminist theory, in privileging the singularity of sexed experience of embodiment, has from the very start reclaimed the body as a primary matrix of selfhood.

⁸ See Clint Burnham, "COVIDology in Six Parts," in *Listening to COVID-19*, Website Lacan Salon Vancouver BC, download May 15, 2020, <https://www.lacansalon.com/listening-to-covid-19/covideology-in-six-parts>.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, with Anne Dufourmantelle (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000): 25.

¹⁰ A tongue-in-cheek reference to Hilda Fernandez-Alvarez, "So, You Want a Master?: Psychoanalytic Critique on the Intellectual's Responsibility in Light of Traumatic Residues," in *Spectres of Fascism*, ed. Samir Gandesha (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2020).

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar 17: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007).

¹² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹³ See Jacques Lacan, ... *Ou pire / ... Or Worse: Book 19, 1971-72*, trans. Cormac Gallagher: <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-19-Ou-pire-Or-worse.pdf> (Web download

September 1, 2020); and Jacques Lacan, *L'Étourdit*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, download April 15, 2020, <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/translations/ecrits/>.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2013).

¹⁵ See Jacques Derrida, Interview with Richard Beardsworth, "Nietzsche and the Machine," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 7, Futures of Nietzsche: Affirmation and Aporia (Spring 1994), pp. 7-66: 37-38.

¹⁶ Ingrid D. Rowland, "Facing Off with the Old Masters," *The New York Review of Books*, June 21, 2017 (download May 31, 2020): <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/06/21/facing-off-with-the-old-masters-bill-viola/>

¹⁷ Ludovica Sebregondi, "Abbracci spezzati: sacri, drammatici, sensuali" (Broken Embraces: Sacred, Dramatic, Sensual), download April 15, 2020: https://www.palazzostrozzi.org/abbracci-spezzati-sacri-drammatici-sensuali/?utm_source=Palazzo+Strozzi+italiano&utm_campaign=8ee9b49913-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_03_11_01_32_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_33d755129e-8ee9b49913-74699509

¹⁸ See details of the paintings in Sebregondi's and Rowland's articles, *ibid*.