

The empty signs of the plague Los signos vacíos de la peste

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From a philosophical, historical and critical reading, the XXIX Symposium *Virus: Historias: Umbrales (Virus: Stories: Thresholds)* (2020)² focused on the transculturality and timelessness of the COVID-19 health crisis. How do the discourses, their visualities and permutations or their replications frank perceptual archaisms of the body and civility associated with plagues in Europe and the new continent?

The multifaceted threshold of reality, accentuated by technology and the specific neoliberal context of Latin American societies, was shown with the rhetorics and futures of a thematic selection of films and debates on the contemporaneity of the virus. In the master lecture *Medicus politicus: Por una historia política de la medicina (Medicus politicus: For a political history of medicine)*, Rafael Mandressi (2020) presented the interweavings in the public and political order of medicine and the sciences wielding a logic that goes from the scientific and social to the global. The question of roles would determine the current contact methods alongside the historical-cultural representations of the body. The keys to the close relationship between medicine and politics can be traced back to four episodes between the 13th and 18th centuries. What is palpable are the overlaps between “political powers and the sphere of words or expert intervention,” where “action, decision and medical knowledge” would govern the early control of societies and the institutionalization of this knowledge. A rich “research questionnaire” of varied examples would reinforce the historical question about the political role of medicine and the importance of the “transmissions” between medical practices and authority: the jurisprudence on forensic examinations for the public domain, “anatomical dissections,” exorcisms for “demonic possession,” etc. There, the instructing magistrates in charge of typifying and punishing the events considered anomalous, and the emerging experimental and speculative field

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2 This review is the second edited version of the testimony of participation in the XXIX International Colloquium Virus: Histories: Thresholds, June 29-July 4, 2020. Keynote speakers: Rafael Mandressi (Paris), Vladimir Safatle (Sao Paulo), Saskia Sassen (London), Sergio Villalobos Ruminott (Ann Arbor). Artists: Mario Espinosa, Mario de Vega (Berlin). <https://17edu.org/xxix-coloquio-internacional-virus-historias-umbrales/>

of knowledge and beliefs stand out. The abundance of tactical documents on creating a control system articulated with information networks of the monarchic power would offer “clearly and explicitly the expert problematic and diverse forms of political power” beyond the sanitary. However, prioritizing a biopolitical perspective would “flatten” the historical singularities of medical power. Instead it would be about bringing the singular of the complex closer together (Mandressi, 2020).

The panel discussion on *Black Death* (Christopher Smith, UK, 2010) was based on political theology, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and cinematography. Nicolás Panotto (2020) said that “the grace of God” in medieval times depended on how medical knowledge and superstition marked bodies and illnesses on a supernatural and moral level: “On whose side is God? The configuration of the divine and otherness during European obscurantism corresponded to the taboos and execrations of bodies by virtue of faith. In the plot, a group of necromantic people immune to the plague will suppose a strong semantic and discursive split among Christians; only “suffering” could restore the symbolic order, “the forest was like a historical lapse, an amoral limbo...”. Hence the constant clamor for atonements and repressions of bodies predestined to salvation and sacrifice through pain. On the other hand, within a “pristine community” whose leaders equally betrayed for the control of knowledge, necromantic practices evoke life after death and subvert the eschatological view of time and Christian salvation staked on the future. According to the film, the plague marks both ideological extremes, non-salvation, and the eternal damnation of non-knowledge: Osmund, the young monk, will eternally atone for his guilt and give literal death to his desire reflected in the archetype of the witch after killing his lover. He will be an inquisitor, regardless of his beliefs about the plague; in this, the paradox of irrationalities will allow him to survive by dyeing the signs of death physically and symbolically. Alfonso Herrera (2020) discussed historical antecedents of the Black Death and its apocalyptic narratives between the sixth and eighth centuries. By default, the inoperability of knowledge would be reiterated, the ghostly course of the unknown, as ontological enchainment. Despite the massive devastations and secularizations in time, there would always be a moral prerogative for its containment, given the idiosyncratic flows of society according to the dominant economic system. Camila Joselevitch (2020) expressed that the force of religious dogma dimensioned the lethal power of the plague in the absence of scientific knowledge: “Where there is life... it is because God is absent (the necromancer village), the presence of God assures death.”

What can we reflect today on the systematicity of contagion as a pattern of social behavior? For theology, to think about rationalities and subjectivities would be to reevaluate our position in the face of what is considered objective without losing humanity, which would not refute the causal knowledge of science. José Pérez Arce (2020) commented that the film successfully transmits what is central: salvation in a context of illness. Where does the evil reside? Evil God or humans? What is the sign of death within the fact of death? The scene of the discovery of the non-living body of Osmund’s beloved and the subsequent execution (salvation?) constitutes an interpretation of the epistemic values of Christianity

and its morality: killing would justify the (in)corruptibility of the soul within a desecrated and resurrected body against its nature. What is the true sign of death?

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