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# Quarantine Aesthetics - Reflections on Arts, Visualities and Body Experience in the era of Covid-19

Miriam Oesterreich
Universität der Künste Berlin

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# Quarantine Aesthetics – Reflections on Arts, Visualities and Body Experience in the Era of Covid-19

Miriam Oesterreich*
Universität der Künste Berlin, Germany.

Abstract

Latin America is still considered one of the hotspots of the Covid-19 pandemic. The media coverage is accompanied by un-seen images of healthy, quarantined, sick and dead bodies circulating globally and re-shaping the Latin American imaginary. Therein, globally perceived images of bodies and the global mapping of 'infected individuals' oftentimes contrast with local and individual body experiences. Radical social changes go thus hand in hand with new conceptions of the corporeal as well as with experiences of distancing and proximity being visualized in the images of bodies. Visually transported information on the special threat situation for indigenous communities in Brazil and other regions also evoke the epistemologies of artistic and graphic images of former infectious diseases in the Southern part of the Americas, especially of smallpox in the process of colonizations when the colonial power matrix was also exercised via the control over infections. The paper will focus on Latin America to discuss the entanglements of arts, visualities and body experience in times of Covid-19 and the aesthetics created alongside the pandemic.

Keywords: quarantine aesthetics, imageries of pandemics, Latin American art.

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Latin America is considered as one of the current hotspots of the Covid-19 pandemic. The situation in Brazil had just stabilized to some extent when the 'Brazilian' virus mutation became known and is now spreading its highly contagious horror once again (Oliveira et al. 2020, Kupferschmidt 2021, and Meredith 2021). In actually all Latin American and Caribbean countries, the situation is very critical with regard to protective measures for the populations, the situation of overstretched health systems and funeral homes, and with regard to social and medical side effects such as increased untreated other diseases, poverty and social unrest (Ramos 2020, Rivas Molina et al. 2021, ECLAC/ ILO 2020, Maihold 2020, and Blofield et al. 2020). Indigenous communities, previously often deprivileged in many ways, seem to be particularly hard hit by the pandemic (Darlington et al. 2020, UNESCO 2020).

The media coverage is accompanied by un-seen images of healthy, quarantined, sick and dead bodies circulating globally and re-shaping the Latin American imaginary. Radical social changes go hand in hand with new conceptions of the corporeal as well as with experiences of distancing and proximity being visualized in the images of bodies (fig. 1-5).

Figure 1: Satere-mawe indigenous men navigate the Ariau river during the COVID-19 novel coronavirus pandemic at the Sahu-Ape community, 80 km of Manaus, Amazonas State, Brazil, on May 5, 2020.

Figure 2: Social unrest in El Bosque, Santiago de Chile.

* **E-mail address**
**Miriam Oesterreich:** m.oesterreich@udk-berlin.de

Figure 3: Neighbors wearing masks to curb the spread of the new coronavirus wait in a line for a free meal at the Villa Maria del Triunfo district of in Lima, Peru, Wednesday, June 17, 2020

Figure 4: Workers preparing graves at the Vila Formosa cemetery in São Paulo, Brazil

Figure 5: A mass grave for COVID-19 victims in Manaus, Brazil, April 2020.

The images are straight forward in their informative and all too true shock message: the pandemic even reinforces social injustice, vulnerable people such as migrants, the old, and the poor suffer most from both the virus and the measures taken against its uncontrolled spread. Therein, globally perceived images of bodies and the global mapping of 'infected individuals' oftentimes contrast with local and individual body experiences (fig. 6). As mapping strategies can be understood as useful instruments for producing and classifying knowledge about very specific issues, this knowledge, however, is subject to certain invisible, limiting categories. These criteria for the visualization of geographic knowledge are intrinsically entangled with (social, political, economic) powerful hierarchies[1]. Visualizations of the 'geographies of disease' such as the globally massively clicked Johns-Hopkins-University interactive map reclaim absolute and fact-based evidence without, however, referring to what they do not show: testing capacities, unidentified Corona-deaths, data about the management of numbers, information on specific local political, social, and historical contexts.


Figure 6: Johns-Hopkins-University's visualization of the global spread of Covid-19.

This kind of confrontation with unknown pictures can be interpreted as oscillating between perceptions of exoticization and shock about the real in Latin American "Magical Realism" on the one hand, and a form of getting control over these images, a conscient visualization and domestication by picturing the unbelievable. The pictures are both: a shock and the procession of or coping with the shock.

In this, hence, the current pandemic is also to be seen in the larger tradition of the role of infectious diseases in the process of colonization where they had a crucial role. Visually transported information on the special threat situation for indigenous and poor communities in Brazil and other regions also evoke the epistemologies of artistic and graphic images of former infectious diseases in the Southern part of the Americas, especially of smallpox in the process of colonizations when the colonial power matrix was also exercised via the control over infections. It is suggested that minimum 50 % (some scholars suggest up to 90%) of the original indigenous inhabitants of the southern part of the continent have been wiped out – by warfare, enslavement, and – to an overwhelming degree – epidemics such as smallpox, pestilence and typhus (which were deadly diseases in Europe as well), but also influenza, and measles which were relatively harmless for European inhabitants (cf. Balter 2011, Rinke 2005, Austin 2008, 343).

[1] For more information on the premises of critical cartography studies, cf. Glasze 2009.

Historian Stefan Rinke (2005) points out:

> „Das Ausmaß, die Geschwindigkeit und die Dauer des Rückgangs der indigenen Bevölkerung in der für die Europäer Neuen Welt nach 1492 stellten die katastrophalen Epidemien, die das mittelalterliche und neuzeitliche Europa trafen, weit in den Schatten. Historiker haben daher schon frühzeitig von einer Demographischen Katastrophe - manche sogar von einem Genozid – gesprochen. [...] Die Demographische Katastrophe ist eine Grundbedingung für die Entwicklung der Kolonialgesellschaften in Amerika." [2]

And continuing, Rinke (2005) connects the epidemics with the colonial expansion claiming them to be fundamental for the Ibero-American colonization:

> "Teils im Gefolge der Eroberer, teils diesen schon vorauseilend, wurden die Epidemien zu einem wesentlichen Faktor bei der Eroberung der indianischen Reiche [...] Den massiven Bevölkerungsrückgang nahmen die Europäer zum Anlass, ihre kulturelle Überlegenheit gegenüber den Indigenen zu untermauern. Die demografische Katastrophe wurde teilweise von ihnen als Gottesurteil interpretiert und förderte ihre paternalistische Haltung gegenüber der indigenen Bevölkerung weiter".[3]

The intrinsic connection between colonialism and epidemic disease is fostered by Adam Warren (2008, 121), who writes: "Devastation as a result of colonialism and disease was particularly notable in Latin America, where contact with Spanish and Portuguese explorers beginning in the late fifteenth century devastated populations." Evidence of the devastating effect of the epidemics is contained in conquest reports, administrative records and mission church documents from the 16th and early 17th centuries (Alchon 2003, Watts 1997, Cook 1998, Cook et al. 2001) [4]. Many eyewitness accounts have yet to be deciphered.

Often, clinical descriptions are only vague, and it was commonly spoken of the plague or pestilence, as Ursula Thiemer-Sachse (2002) explains, without specifying the respective disease symptoms [5].

There exists even less image material from the time of the early colonization regarding the epidemics, and this in part has to do with the Spanish fervor in systematically burning and otherwise destroying images and the indigenous cultural memory as part of the colonization project [6].

Nevertheless, in some of the rare early illustrated accounts of indigenous life in the Viceroyalties, image information on epidemics and diseases is transported (Greve 2004).

These images had various and diverse functions, among them to inform about indigenous life, to claim legitimacy of the Spanish 'civilizing mission' as well as to accuse colonization as a form of dehumanization, as did Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in his *Historia General* which became to be known as the Florentine Codex, and in the 12th book of which he tells the story of the colonization of the Nahua/Mexica from an indigenous perspective [7]. Especially one often shown illustration exemplifies the harsh effects of disease on colonial societies:


Figure 7. Illustration of a smallpox victim in Fray Bernardino de *Sahagún's Florentine Codex/Codex Florentinus*, 1577.

[2] „The extent, speed, and duration of the decline of the indigenous population in what was the ‚New World' for Europeans after 1492 far eclipsed the catastrophic epidemics that had struck medieval and modern Europe. Historians have therefore early spoken of a demographic catastrophe - some even of genocide. [...] The Demographic Catastrophe is a basic condition for the development of colonial societies in America." (translation mine). See further: „Ab der Mitte des 17. Jahrhunderts verlangsamte sich in Hispanoamerika der Bevölkerungsrückgang. Schließlich stiegen die Bevölkerungszahlen nach einer Phase der Stagnation wieder an. Entscheidend war dabei die Entwicklung von Resistenzen gegenüber aus Europa eingeschleppten Krankheitserregern." (Rinke 2005, translation mine).

[3] Rinke 2005 („Partly in the wake of the conquerors, partly anticipating them, the epidemics became an essential factor in the conquest of the indigenous empires [...] The Europeans took the massive population decline as an opportunity to substantiate their cultural superiority over the indigenous peoples. The demographic catastrophe was partly interpreted by them as a judgment of God and further promoted their paternalistic attitude towards the indigenous population." (Rinke 2005, translation mine).

[4] Many of such artefacts of epidemics (though mostly later ones) can be found in the Harvard University Library collection Contagion: Historical Views of Epidemics and Diseases: http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/contagion/colonialism.html, (accessed January 21, 2021). More detailed descriptions of epidemics and more accurate documentation of population sizes began to appear during the second half of the eighteenth century (Austin 2008, 344).

[5] Further: „Da die Seuchen in Amerika zum Teil andere Symptome aufwiesen als die aus Europa bekannten und die Berichterstatter so gut wie keine medizinischen Kenntnisse hatten, sind die Informationen ungenau. Bis zum Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts verwandte man die Bezeichnungen für Masern und Pocken undifferenziert nebeneinander" (Thiemer-Sachse 2002). There exists even less material information about pre-colonial epidemic diseases in South America (Warren 2008, Verano 1997). Furthermore, there exists evidence about an endemic South American contagious disease called Bartonellosis or Carrión's disease which, to the contrary, was feared by Spanish conquerors and colonizers, among them Francisco Pizarro's soldiers who got afflicted severely when they invaded Peru (Maguiña Vargas 1998).

[6] Not only the description of the genocide of the indigenous (author's comment: and the enslaved Black) population which Fray Bartolomé de las Casas criticized in his *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (1552) can be interpreted as part of the systematic colonial destrucción, but also the destruction of codices, images, cultural memories, and indigenous epistemes (Cummins 1996, Gruzinski 2001, Velandía Onofre 2018).

[7] Fray Bartolomé de las Casas seemingly neglected the epidemics in favor of the illustration of brutal warfare and torture of the Spanish against the colonized in order to accuse the colonizing system.

The illustration shows a person sick of smallpox with his/her whole body covered by pustules lying on a petate mat (fig. 7). When in the first picture she/he still addresses her/his nurse and says something, she/he sinks down on the floor and supposedly dies, having the eyes closed. The corresponding text reads:

> "Chapter Twenty-nine, of the pestilence of smallpox that broke out among the Indians after the Spaniards left Mexico. Before the Spaniards who were in Tlaxcala came to conquer Mexico, a pestilence of smallpox struck among all the Indians in the month they called Tepeilhuitl, which is at the end of September. Very many Indians died of this pestilence; they had their whole bodies, faces, and limbs so full of pocks and damaged by them that they could not stir, or move out of their place, or turn from one side to the other. If someone moved them, they would cry out. This pestilence killed innumerable people. Many died of hunger, because there was no one who could prepare food. Those who escaped from this pestilence were left with their faces pitted, and some lost eyes. The force of this pestilence lasted sixty days, and when it began to slacken off in Mexico, it went toward Chalco" [8].

Also in Theodor de Bry's *America* volumes, the cure of non-specific diseases is dealt with: Both vol. 2 which shows "how the Indians [in Florida] cure their sick" and vol. 3 which represents a Brazilian Tupinamba chief being ill while Hans Staden is held kept and the rituals being carried out in order to cure the head of the family demonstrate the rather spiritual than scientific or medical handling of such incidents (fig. 8-9) [9].

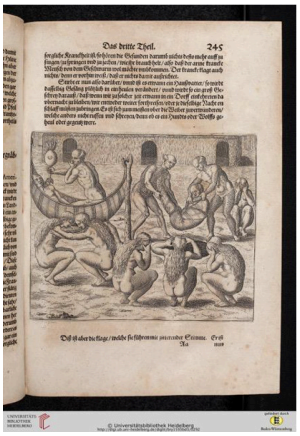


Figure 8: Theodor de Bry: Diß ist aber die Klage/welche sie führen mit zitternder Stimme, woodcut, in: *America*, vol. 3.


Figure 9: Theodor de Bry: How the Indians Cure Their Sick (after Jacques Le Moyne), woodcut, 1591, in: *America*, vol. 2.

Paradoxically, sacral baroque images, especially devotional pictures of saints as specifically Catholic icons in the era of the Catholic counter-revolution, circulated en masse in the Vice-royalties[10]. In the popular depictions of Santiago Mataindios, for example, the Spanish imagination of Santiago Matamoros is transferred to the colonial context and the saint used to represent the (political, social, spiritual) oppression of indigenous peoples by the colonizing power (fig. 10, please note that in this example the assumed indigenous people being conquered by Santiago resemble very much their orientalist counterparts of Matamoros depictions).

[8] Translation of the Spanish text (left-hand column) by James Lockhart, in: University of Oregon, Early Nahuatl Library: https://enl.uoregon.edu/fcbk12ch29, (accessed 25 January 2021).
[9] Art historian Amara Solari (2016, 484) proposes that "within Spain's colonial project, th[e] medical metaphor not only became particularly effective because it resonated with the horrific ubiquity of epidemic disease but ultimately affected the way that Spanish colonists came to conceive of the supposed idolatrous practices of the resident indigenous population." She argues that idolatry was rhetorically brought into a direct relationship with epidemics and was treated and prosecuted alike.
[10] For the context of the current pandemic, Sabine B. Vogel (2020) has published on the connection of epidemics and the arts, though her article does not include any non-Western artistic perspectives.

Figure 10: Unknown artist: Santiago Matamoros, Cuzco, late 17th century, oil on canvas with gold brocade applications, 1,35 x 1,31m. Museo Pedro de Osma, Lima.

Those as 'Andean Baroque' canonized pictures not only legitimized indigenous suffering as part of a spiritual concept, but were also part of a "cycle of money and art" that formed an accumulation process which is possible to be seen as the foundational moment of 'modern capitalism' (Creischer et al. 2010). Hence, images have played an important role in the process of modernization built on the colonial oppression as its intrinsic other. Alongside the assumption that coloniality/modernity form two sides of one phenomenon and none of them can exist without the/its other as Walter Mignolo (2011) and the *Grupo Modernidad/Colonialidad* (Quijano 2000, among others) have analyzed, we can assume that the trade, the migrations, and the entanglements of images have been of major importance in the colonizing process – and that images, just as contagious diseases have helped to establish the colonial hegemonic system.[11]

Luisa Elena Alcalá, Patricia Díaz Cayeros, and Gabriela Sánchez Reyes (2020, 66) address the semantics and relevance of such traditional image uses up to today:

> "In the XXIst century then, the images of the past continue to be relevant for many, and the age-old means of intercession through procession persists even as new, and now safer means of circulation are emerging: new media and alternative modes of passage for a path to good health". They refer to the ways in which religious and social communities are struggling to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic situation and find new old forms to use baroque imagery. "During the last months, miraculous images and their copies have assisted faithful believers just as they did in the past." On March 17, 2020 the Virgen del Pueblito, saint of a church outside of Querétaro, Mexico was taken on procession in the city towards the Cathedral. In this case, the procession marched despite of the recommended social distance to be kept; in other occasions in Mexican cities, in Argentina, Ecuador, and El Salvador, a form of procession was invented that complied with the need of social distancing in order to minimize contagion when the saints' images were flown over cities and towns in helicopters and even zeppelins (fig. 11).
>
> "Such aerial processions took place with the replicas of El Señor del Nicho (Tepotzotlan, Estado de México) from the Parish Church of San Pedro, on May 11th, and the Virgen de los Dolores de Soriano, at the municipality of Colon, Querétaro, on Good Friday […], In both cases, the faithful were able to have contact with the image, either directly as witnesses from the ground, or virtually through the internet" (Alcalá 2020, 66).


Figure 11: The Virgen de Dolores de Soriano in Querétaro is situated in a helicopter and will be flown over the city, 9 April 2020.

Besides the above-mentioned functions in their respective contexts of being produced and perceived, the baroque images can be interpreted as a form of domestication of and process of understanding the threat of the pachakuti events (as Mignolo (2006, 2011) coined for the radical changes accompanying the colonization)[12] which were threatening for both colonized and colonizers. Just like William Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988) has described, the picturization of the demon in the form of a fetish as a form of getting control over the demon/the arbitrary and the irrational on the part of the indigenous fetish believers, so did the frightened colonizers accept the assumed power of the fetish and had to destroy it in order to claim control to themselves (Pietz 1985 ,1987, Freedberg 1989). It should not be forgotten that in 16th century control over assumedly powerful images was an important tool

[11] More recently, Rolando Vázquez has analyzed the importance of images, visual media, and aesthetics for the construction of modernity (Vázquez, 2020).

to control people in Europe just as well (in the form of protestant iconoclasm); and the Spanish from the very beginning used the colonization of America as an instrument of catholic counter-reformation (thus turning upside-down the protestant battle against images of the spiritual into a battle of the 'right' pictures against the 'wrong'/indigenous ones).

During the current Covid 19-crisis, the cultural sector in Latin America is "one of the most affected", as Unesco Central America states[13]. Thus, it is those creative communities that produce images themselves and reflect their surrounding and experiences in an oftentimes visual artistic form, which are to a huge degree silenced by the measures against the spread of the virus with the closing of museums, galleries, other exhibition formats, festivals, and performances. Unesco states that, nevertheless, many artists have chosen to exhibit their artwork in digital exhibition formats, thus creating grassroots exhibitions that help re-formulate the status of original artworks compared to reproduced ones, edited editions, and mass cultural images. I quote: "muchos trabajadores creativos de todos los países de la región [centro-americana] mantienen una actitud positiva y participan proactivamente en actividades en línea para transmitir su creación en forma digital y comunicarse con el resto de la sociedad."[14] These artists transport quite different pictures of the pandemic compared to media images.

In Panamá, for example, the Ministerio de Cultura has launched the #MiCulturaEnCasa project, which offers cultural content via mass communication and social media (fig. 12). Here, reflections on the Covid 19-situation in Central America are collected and shared. However, it should strongly be reflected, that this kind of alternative digital showroom is available mostly to even formerly digitally created art media, such as photography, video, or – beyond the visual level – streamed music and does not work in the same way for genres such as painting, performance, dance, or theatre.


Figure 12: Mi Cultura en Casa-project, Ministerio de Cultura, Panama, summer 2020.

Several street artists in Latin America use the public space for artistic expression, but also help raise awareness of Corona-related health issues by addressing and visualizing the pandemic and measures to protect oneself against infection, especially for illiterate groups, in large-scale graffiti (Piernas 2020). Maybe the most visible and transregionally acting project is COVID LATAM, an informal union of eighteen photographers from thirteen Latin American countries reflecting their subjective impressions of the pandemic situation in their respective surroundings (fig. 13-15).

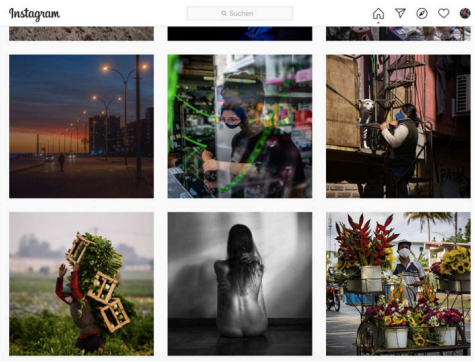


Figure 13: Screenshot from Covid Latam Instagram site

They exhibit on the social media platform Instagram as a low-barrier, cost-neutral form of exhibiting their work. The images encompass some directly related to the pandemic, some rather poetic ones as visual reflections of emotions of distance, loneliness, or empathy. Some are more documentary style ones, some are hyper realistic or surrealist in style, some are purely aesthetic. Some refer directly to the pandemic, while others are more abstracted.

[12] Mignolo defines: "Pacha Kuti then becomes the disturbing alteration of the order of things. At its extreme, Kuti is a 'violent turn-around', a 'rollover' […] Pacha Kuti […] belongs to an imaginary of cyclical repetitions and regular transformations of the natural/social world. Pacha Kuti is a third element that introduces the colonial difference, the negated knowledge that can no longer be recovered in its ‚purity:' but that allows us to see the limits of ‚final judgment' and 'revolution:' The Spanish conquest was perceived and described in Quechua-Aymara as Pachakuti" (Mignolo 2011). For a theory of pachakuti also see Kusch (2010).

[13] https://es.unesco.org/news/como-crisis-covid-19-afecta-al-sector-cultura-america-central

[14] Ibid. ("many creative professionals in all countries of the [Central American] region still have a positive attitude and proactively participate in online activities to digitally broadcast their work and communicate with the rest of the society." (translation mine)


Figure 14: Screenshot from Covid Latam Instagram site.

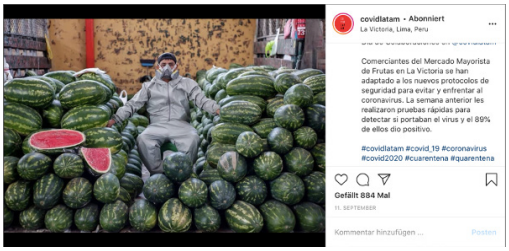


Figure 15: Screenshot from Covid Latam Instagram site.

Fred Ramos, famous photographer of the migrant tracks in Central America, is part of COVID LATAM and visualizes the precarious situation of migrants being stuck in campamentos at the Mexican side of the border to the US, having no space to distance from one another, nor sanitary and hygienic possibilities to protect themselves and others (fig. 16-17).


Figure 16: Photography by Fred Ramos, screenshot from Covid Latam Instagram site.


Figure 17: Photography by Fred Ramos, screenshot from Covid Latam Instagram site.

Another artistic and curatorial project is the Instituto de Investigaciones Est ticas de la UNAM's "s*erie de videorelatos*" (fig. 18): in four short video sequences [4] curators present material of photographers related to the term vulnerability and specifically dealing with the risk of "vulnerable" people in the Covid-19 situation: migrantes, la comunidad TRANS*, los artistas indígenas and personas con VIH.

Figure 18: Filmstills from IIE's Historias sobre Vulnerabilidad, no. 1: Migrantes (Luis Várgas presents Héctor Guerrero), no. 2: La comunidad TRANS* (Benjamín Martínez presents Jair Cabrera), no. 3: Los artistas indígenas (Deborah Dorotinsky presents Maruch Sántiz Gómez), no. 4: Personas con VIH (Sol Henaro presents Óscar Sánchez Gómez), June 2020.

The videorelatos refer to Judith Butler's (2020) use of "vulnerability", I quote Butler in March 2020:

> "What if the situation of those deemed vulnerable is, in fact, a constellation of vulnerability, rage, persistence, and resistance that emerges under these same historical conditions? It would be equally unwise to extract vulnerability from this constellation; indeed, vulnerability traverses and conditions social relations, and without that insight we stand little chance of realizing the sort of substantive equality that is desired. Vulnerability ought not to be identified exclusively with passivity; it makes sense only in light of an embodied set of social relations, including practices of resistance. A view of vulnerability as part of embodied social relations and actions can help us understand how and why forms of resistance emerge as they do. Although domination is not always followed by resistance, if our frameworks of power fail to grasp how vulnerability and resistance can work together, we risk being unable to identify those sites of resistance that are opened up by vulnerability."

Butler thus converts the concept of passivity of the so-called 'vulnerable groups' into a possibility of persistence, resistance, and agency. I want to suggest to interpret the discussed images produced by those living under the condition of vulnerability in the existentially threatening situation of the Covid-19-pandemic in this Butlerian sense: as persistent, resistant, active – also when paralleled to the

convolute of daily media images. It is a form of agency and of coping with not only the situation itself but also the threatening images surrounding the individuals. The state of vulnerability becomes diversified and subjectively perceivable. Thus, artistic approaches and their visibility are able to show the broad, diversified, and complex entanglements of subjective (body) experience and image productions in this very situation.

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Fig. 14: Screenshot from Covid Latam Instagram Site, https://www.instagram.com/covidlatam/?hl=de

Fig. 15: Screenshot from Covid Latam Instagram Site, https://www.instagram.com/covidlatam/?hl=de

Fig. 16: Screenshot from Covid Latam Instagram Site, https://www.instagram.com/covidlatam/?hl=de

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