

Angela Dressen, Susanne Gramatzki, Nils Weber

## Editorial: Epidemics and the Arts

Under Michel Foucault's incisive gaze, the "plague city" (*ville pestiférée*) revealed itself as an unprecedented place of repression – segmented, immobile, frozen – a political dream of control.[1] Foucault meticulously described the power dynamics designed to transform the chaos unleashed by the plague into a system of order, and showed how the authorities implemented quarantine, fumigation or public registration measures with a single goal in mind: to drive the plague out of the city. In the face of these hard and frankly crushing restrictions on the individual, therefore, it is remarkable that the forces of the plague city did not also result in the death of creativity. Visual and literary artworks related to epidemics can be found everywhere in the Early Modern period, in every local, transregional and global context. While scholarship on the relation between Early Modern epidemics and their artistic responses has progressed in recent decades, the field remains more fragmented than historical, socio-economic or anthropological approaches. In 2005, the exhibition *Hope and Healing: Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague, 1500–1800* at the Worcester Art Museum made important strides, not only by bringing together works of art representing the responses of the Italian city-states over the centuries, but also by making the strategic decision to focus, on the one hand, on common patterns like the ubiquitous representation of St Roch, and on the other, on local and therefore unique responses of the cities through case studies such as the artistic interaction with the cult of St Rosalie in Palermo.[2] This two-sided approach also characterises the volume *Plague Image and Imagination from Medieval to Modern Times* (2021) edited by Cristos Lynteris, but with an important adjustment: here, the subject is expanded to a global scale and more atten-

tion is paid to visual-anthropological, medical and postcolonial perspectives.[3] However, the volume largely concentrates on the third plague pandemic (1894–1959), with only one article on plague images from the entire period between 1250 and 1630.[4]

Accordingly, this special issue of *Kunsttexte* focuses on the Early Modern period by presenting a methodologically diverse, interdisciplinary and global approach that extends from Europe to the Americas. In her contribution, Daniela Wagner (1) analyses the so-called *Krankheitspersonifikationen* or visual personifications of the plague, comparing them with images that circulated during the most recent COVID-19 pandemic. Wagner argues that the artistic impulse to represent diseases in anthropomorphic form should be understood as another mechanism for controlling the uncontrollable, in this case through an imagined social connection between humans and epidemics. From this perspective, the creatively rich spectrum of visually personified and anthropomorphised images of diseases across time seem to be united by the effort to rationalise the horrors of the plague through comparisons with human actions, desires and grievances. This social dimension of art related to plagues and epidemics is also addressed in the contribution by Nils Weber (2), which focuses on two sixteenth-century plague images produced in Early Modern Venice. Weber demonstrates that the two paintings *Doge Alvise Mocenigo Intercedes with Christ the Redeemer for Plague Victims* by Palma Giovane and *St Roch Visits the Plague Victims* by Jacopo Bassano speak to entirely different audiences, divided by social status and wealth: the Venetian elite on the one hand, and the *popolani* on the other. Both paintings, however, are united by their accurate representation of the buboes, confirming that

the artists were attentive observers of the specific visual markers symptomatic of plague pathology. As such, the images may be regarded first of all as credible products of direct observation, and second as visual evidence supporting the scientific hypothesis that it was indeed the bubonic plague that struck the city in 1575.

The text by Emma Ferrari (3) takes us from sixteenth-century Venice to seventeenth-century Milan, where the 1630 epidemic not only triggered the production of literary masterpieces like Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*, but also set a new course for Milanese visual art. This entailed artworks by a new generation of post-epidemic artists – influenced, trained and conditioned by the epidemic through their compulsory duty as guards of the city gates – as well as the rise of a local tradition of printmaking, with the plague as one of the most popular subjects. Apart from their effects on Early Modern image production and literary output, epidemics also had an impact on architecture and urban landscapes. Fabio Gigone (4) analyses this phenomenon with his case study situated in Baroque Rome. The architect Domenico Castelli was tasked with building structures to control, separate and disinfect goods and people, producing a new cartography of Rome which Gigone considers as a point of discontinuity and rupture in the city's architectural history, documented in a series of engravings still unpublished to this day.

Meanwhile in the Americas, a smallpox epidemic in Mexico City led to the production of a specific type of plague poetry in five-line stanzas known as *quintillas*. Paulina León (5) carefully reads the *quintillas* poems, highlighting not only how the impact of the epidemic on daily life is described with dramatic intensity, but also how the poets explore the reasons for the epidemic, in particular the environmental conditions of the disease. The “sick sun” (*sol enfermo*) that unleashes the disease upon the population emerges as a suggestive poetic image, linking the outbreak to the relationship between humans and their lived environment and drawing inspiration from Nahua mythology.

Finally, it should be noted that the articles in this special issue demonstrate how resilience during and after Early Modern epidemic outbreaks depended not only on a thorough system of public rules imposed by

local governments, but also on the creative efforts of people who found ways to express grief, cope with fear, maintain a sense of community and lay the groundwork for a revitalization of cultural and public life in the face of widespread loss. This continues to hold true not only for the historical experience of Early Modern epidemics, but also for the pandemics of the twenty-first century.

## Endnotes

1. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Paris 1975, pp. 197–201.
2. Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Anthony van Dyck, *the Cult of Saint Rosalie, and the 1624 Plague in Palermo*, in: *Hope and Healing: Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague, 1500–1800*, Chicago 2005, pp. 118–136.
3. Christos Lynteris (ed.), *Plague Image and Imagination from Medieval to Modern Times*, London 2021.
4. Sheila Barker, *Painting the Plague, 1250–1630*, in: *Plague Image and Imagination from Medieval to Modern Times*, London 2021, pp. 37–68.

## Title

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