

**The Cultural History of a Recurrent Epidemic
The Story of the Plague***

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Abstract: The paper's aim is to outline the profile of the plague and the shift from a terrible disease of the past to a prolific artistic metaphor from a double perspective: medical and cultural. The demonstration will explore the metamorphosis of a recurrent epidemic: the plague. The study starts with a short medical and cultural history of the disease, which is followed by the examination of the presumed alternative causes of the plague in the course of time (in relation to the natural elements) and of the complex imaginary it gave birth to, and concluded with the discussion of plague as a metaphor in different fields and the legacy it has left.

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The crossroads or the identity of the plague

Plague may be seen as a patient of the history, a patient which has undergone many different treatments in the time in relation to the dominant cultural background of each period when the plague staged its entrance. For example, according to Charles E. Rosenberg the “epidemic incident as a dramaturgic event”¹ consists of four phases: “progressive revelation”, “managing randomness”, “negotiating public response”, “subsidence and retrospection”.²

In this context the question “What is the plague?” is determined by a question referring to time: When was the plague? At the same time the recurrence of this epidemic implies a certain pattern behind the varied reception and treatment it received.

The only way that man could approach the terrible scourge of the plague was through interpretation: the signs on the body, the signs on the sky, the signs in society – all which required to be integrated in a system of beliefs and conduct. And because the spectators in the “anatomical theatre” where the plague was playing its act were changing in time, so did the role of the plague, because the new way of understanding or seeing it has changed: time has changed its perspective.

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¹Charles E. Rosenberg, *Explaining Epidemics and Other Studies in the History of Medicine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 280.

² *Ibid.*, 281–286.

The medical and cultural perspectives define the crossroads where the identity of the plague is established through the lens of time. The conjunction of these elements creates an ephemeral identity for the plague, an identity which is in a continual metamorphosis. Beyond this point, because of its metaphorical bearings "Plague means more than plague, whereas influenza means less than influenza."¹

In this context interpreting the plague means to realize that "Plague stamps a clear imprint on human memory", that "The black death stalks history, intrudes in art and literature, and continues to terrorize populations",² and that sometimes history becomes the patient of the plague (history is modelled on the effects of the plague) in this game with interchangeable roles.

Although the plague defined from a medical point of view may not always be the plague described in works of art, or named in every day language, all these representations show the common features of this disease: the power and the capacity of this word as a metaphor to adapt to different environments.

Analyzing the plague

The medical profile of the plague may be considered the stabile form or pattern of the disease in interaction with history. The violent impact of the disease along the history of human life in fields such as medicine, economics, culture, administration are still visible: the legacy of the plague lives on in laws, organisational structures and works of art. At the same time the virulence of the disease is reflected by the imaginary.

Under the mask of the plague we can distinguish two interconnected structures: the first is a medical one where plague is seen through its symptoms, causes, effects, and treatment, the second is a cultural one and defines plague in relation to the historical background. The interactions between these two blocks are translated in the imaginary, this is the reason why in order to access the plague, we need to take a look at both of these components.

The medical (or epidemiological) approach defines plague as an infectious disease determined by *Yersinia pestis* and transmitted to human beings from rodents (such as rats and other wild rodents) with the help of fleas feeding on human blood. The three main forms of the disease are bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic plague.³

From the cultural-historic point of view the plague represents a turning point for society, producing important changes. Susan Sontag demonstrates how the relation between a certain time and the predominant disease of that period contains important clues for the understanding of that moment⁴ and even for the way in which the imaginary is built.

On the one side the disease is the sequel and the reflection of the conditions of a specific period of time; on the other side the disease represents a deposit of specific fears for a certain time, fears that are exhibited with the help of the disease. In this context the

¹ Mary Elizabeth Wilson, "The Power of Plague", *Epidemiology*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (July, 1995), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3702102> (accessed May 18, 2009).

² Ibid.

³ For a more comprehensive look see Joseph P. Byrne, ed., *Encyclopedia of Pestilence, Pandemics, and Plagues*, foreword by Anthony S. Fauci, 2 volumes (Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 2008).

⁴ Susan Sontag, *Boala ca metaforă; SIDA și metaforele ei* (Disease as a Metaphor; AIDS and Its Metaphors), transl. Aurel Sasu, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1995).

plague may be seen as a malade recurrence of history. The reappearance of plague along the time as a pilgrim is responsible for the continuous enrichment and metamorphosis of the plague imaginary.

The disease offers the invisible or the divine the chance to take shape.¹ The profile of a disease becomes individualised when the mystery surrounding it makes it being called contagious.² The exotic origin of the disease also frightens³ and the contact with an ill person is seen as a violation of a taboo where even the name of the disease has magical powers.⁴ The power and the impact of the disease are exhibited once more in the reaction it produces in a society “as a social actor and mediator”.⁵

Although the medical profile of plague appears to be a stable one, the interactions between medicine and the specific cultural background for a certain moment in the history triggers a prolific creation of meanings. The contextualization of plague, plague in history implies the passage from a strictly medical theoretical point of view to a determined time with specific and distinctive features.

The plague through history: a chronology

Plague may be understood and defined in two different contexts according to Cartwright and Biddiss:⁶ in the first case plague is a generic name for a family of diseases in the Antiquity, a group of non individualised diseases; in this case plague means disease, epidemic, or scourge; in the second case the term plague refers to a specific disease, there being no doubts in identifying it.

In the first case plague stands for generality and in the second one it is limited to something specific. The metaphoric constructions are built at the intersection of the two cases because usually the specific and identifiable features of the disease are translated and attached in a metaphorical way to represent a new idea.

Here are some examples for the first category: the plague of Egypt (1500 BC mentioned in the Bible when all the newborns except for the Jewish babies died),⁷ the plague of Athens (430 BC which influenced a great deal the fall of the Roman Empire)⁸.

The second category is focused on the chronology of the recurrent plague outbursts along the history. The most virulent eruptions were: the plague of Justinian (540–590), the Black Death (1346–1361), the Great Plague (1660–1676), the Plague of Asia (1855–1900).⁹ The devastating effect of these epidemic outbreaks was felt on every level, especially in the case of the Black Death: prices fell, the scarcity of labourers, the feudal system was destroyed,¹⁰ and the church authority declined.¹¹

¹ Ibid, 5.

² Ibid., 16.

³ Ibid., 105.

⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵ Rosenberg, *Explaining Epidemics...*, 312.

⁶ Frederick Cartwright and Michael Biddiss, *Bolile și istoria* (Disease and History), transl. Gabriel Tudor, (București: Editura All, 2005).

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Ibid., 14–15.

⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 49–53.

¹¹ Ibid., 57–59.

The chronology of the plague underlines some critical points when the impact of the disease was the most influential in all aspects of life.

The causes of the plague: a composite imaginary

The essence of plague lies in the plurality of its faces. The multitude of masques this disease wore hinders a rapid interpretation and this is the reason why it is never viewed as a totality, but in successive sequences and sometimes as a palimpsestic writing.

The same instability can be detected at all levels of the plague's medical profile: causes, prevention, treatment. The real or presumed causes of the disease can be visualised as a kaleidoscope which has developed a composite imaginary course when often the medical intuitions were developed in the artistic medium. The meaning of these causes was overshadowed by the attempt to discover the secret mechanism situated behind the pestilence.

The fear, the insecurity and the wish to dominate the scourge made people look for natural, palpable causes, close to them in their effort to produce concluding explanations. The cultural background of the age when the plague appeared in people's lives along with the lack of the causes which could have clarified and justified the complexity of the disease, determined the construction of a composite imaginary, an imaginary almost alchemically built with the help of all the elements of nature.

Earth, water, fire, air¹ were all implied in the attempt to reveal the causes of the plague. The distinctive feature of the structure is the contamination and the state of disintegration between the constitutive parts. The fluctuation in the causes of plague betrays an uncertainty which hides itself behind a plurality. The major and violent impact of the plague on human history can be observed on the succeeding causes accepted only during a limited period of time.

The earth and the air were assimilated in the effluvium theory and astrological theory. These theories work together and the main idea is that the bad emanations of the earth spread through the air, thus air becomes a source of contamination. The reason for the appearance of this polluted, corrupted air lies in a series of previous events implying changes in the atmospheric level. The signs of the change suffered during this malignant planet conjunctions are the frequent earthquakes, severe drought, torrential rains, or volcanic eruptions.² In this case the malignant planet conjunction leads to tectonic movements and the elimination of poisonous vapours scattered with the help of air.

The water became a means of contamination through a forced assimilation. It is the only cause–element relation associated with the human being. The predominant theory states that the Jews are responsible for poisoning the fountains with the germ of the plague wishing to exterminate the Christians. The only proof to this theory was a series of testimonies obtained through torture. The presumed poison made of “holy

¹ For the symbolism of the elements and the connected images see *Dicționar de simboluri. Mituri, vise, obiceuri, gesturi, forme, figuri, culori, numere* (Dictionary of Symbols. Myths, Dreams, Customs. Gestures, Forms, Figures, Colours, Numbers), Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, (București: Editura Artemis, 1994).

² Justus Friedrich Carl Hecker, *The Black Death and The Dancing Mania*, B. G. Babington, trans., (London, Paris, New York & Melbourne: Cassell & Company, 1888), in The Gutenberg Library: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1739> (accessed April 20, 2008).

bread, secret herbs, urine and human blood”¹ was put into the fountains by Jews and their accomplices: the lepers. According to this theory these two peripheral groups wanted to destroy Christianity.² The measures taken against these supposed crimes were the imprisonment, torture, and burning alive of the Jews not willing to confess or to renounce their fate in countries such as France and Germany, the edict of Pope Clement VI (September, 1348) which declared them innocent being ignored.³

Fire was considered a cause of the plague from the point of view of the apocalyptical imaginary. In this context Elana Gomel states that: “The contagious body is the most characteristic modality of apocalyptic corporeality”.⁴ The plague was considered a divine punishment for the inflation of sins. The burning and death of the bad people were considered the will and judgement of God, a way of cleaning the earth and separating the believers from the non-believers, and a last call to repentance. The fire signs on the sky, the apocalyptic fire from the Bible and the cathartic fire are reunited under the sign of the plague as a purifying punishment. In this context the parallel between the physical signs of the plague and the sinner was obvious.

The relation between plague and theatre⁵ or plague and carnival is beyond the catharsis implied in this case. In the first case the two terms meet in the field of delirium, catharsis, contamination, potentiality, and liberation.⁶ The second relation implies a celebration of life and death beyond social hierarchy, the carnival being “a white celebration” and the plague “black celebration”⁷ according to their repercussions and tone.

The metaphor and legacy of the plague

Fighting the plague or trying to understand it, people found a new way to approach the disease and eventually to make it familiar as well as in some way useful, the violence and the impact of the plague standing for Disease or for other outer attacks.

The way in which the plague names the evil which stands behind it is different in each case: there being a wide range of possibilities from ambiguous to clear meanings. Writing the plague is a new way of analyzing it, on top of the medical profile, a metaphorical body of the plague is outlined by writers.

Talking about plague implies a certain common experience. When writers choose the plague as a metaphor they appeal to the reader’s understanding: the plague

¹ Carol Iancu, *Miturile fondatoare ale antisemitismului, Din antichitate până în zilele noastre* (The Founding Myths of Anti-Semitism, from the Antiquity up to the Present), transl. Țicu Goldstein, (București: Editura Hasefer, 2005), 58.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 58–60.

⁴ Elana Gomel, “The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Winter, 2000, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0403/is_4_46/ai_75141042/ (accessed May 10, 2010).

⁵ For more detail on the relation between plague and theatre see “Teatrul și ciuma” (The Theatre and the Plague), in Antonin Artaud, *Teatrul și dublul său urmat de Teatrul lui Seraphim și de alte Texte despre teatru* (The Theatre and Its Double Followed by Seraphim’s Theatre and Other Texts on the Theatre), transl. Voichița Sasu and Diana Tihu-Suciu, epilogue and text selection by Ion Vartic, ed. Marian Papahagi, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Echinox, 1997).

⁶ Iancu, *Miturile fondatoare...*, 20–29.

⁷ Anca Măniuțiu, *Carnavalul și ciuma: poetici teatrale în oglindă* (The Carnival and the Plague: Theatrical Poetics in a Mirror), (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, 2003), 83–89.

speaks to us all, it is the reference point, the evil, the catastrophe, the last step to catharsis by definition.

The literary works treating the plague may be categorized with the help of the classification proposed by Charles de Paolo who distinguishes four types of writings about the plague in function of the perspective through which the plague is observed: “the pre-conceptual modality”, “the observational modality”, “the investigative modality” and the “eyewitness reporting, language, and imaginative writing”.¹

But not only literature adopted the metaphor of the plague as Cooke observes: “plague is wielded as a political or rhetorical weapon in the service of social discrimination or stigmatisation”.² This affirmation is made in relation to surveillance, the *pharmakos* or the Holocaust.

Artaud’s theatre of cruelty was also inspired by the metaphor of the plague, movies have a long history in screening the plague, and even computer science talks about viruses.

Somehow the plague has made its way in different fields; after contaminating literally mankind, it infiltrated language, contaminated the ways in which we perceive different things, and established new categories of scapegoats (*pharmakos*), new ways of imprisonment.

Plague has become a reference term because everybody can access it, everybody understands the suffering, the pain, the disaster reflected in the medical profile along the history. But ironically and paradoxically, the metaphorical valence of the plague speaks no longer of a disease at all, but is a way to point out to different categories as scapegoats: the non-discriminative was substituted for the discriminative.

If in the past the plague was a way by which society was unified, now the metaphor of the plague accentuates the differences, the discriminative factor.

The plague as a recurrent epidemic along the history was imposed on people’s lives: first through the medical dimension and second through the cultural dimension. The second dimension is in fact a way of coping with the plague, a way of trying to make sense of the disease by inscribing it in a system of metaphors. The leap from the first dimension to the second one turned history into a story. The dilemma of the new way of dealing with the plague remains still in the process of telling the history as a story.

¹ Charles de Paolo, *Epidemic Disease and Human Understanding: A Historical Analysis of Scientific and Other Writings*, (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 3–5.

² Jennifer Cooke, *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film* (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.