

# LACANIAN REVIEW ONLINE

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## COVID-19 2020

## #1 to #6

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### Coronavirus and the Hole in the Other

By *Thomas Svolos* (USA)

This pandemic has struck, and unlike prior epidemics and pandemics, we – scientists, physicians, the general public – do not know a lot about it. The infectious agent is new, new to science, in addition to being a novel infection in humans. Obviously, scientists are acting fast to learn about the organism, and infectious disease specialists are acting fast to learn how to treat it, and public health experts are trying to develop means of preventing or minimizing spread of the organism, but all that said – we just don't know a lot now.

So, we are confronted with a big lack in the Other. And, speaking beings have a difficult time tolerating this kind of lack of knowledge, this void. So, as happens in so many other situations, people fill up this hole with something, often that very thing which defines how they engage the world. In the psychoanalytic community, we call this fantasy, and we see these fantasies, these opinions, these perspectives about what is happening take so many different forms. For some, this is a catastrophic event, an apocalyptic event, leading to a great deal of fear of the unknown. For others, feeling immune from any possible impact of the Other on them, this is no big deal, something that will pass, nothing to worry about. And, then, there are those imagining agents of one sort or another as the actor behind what is happening. These individual perspectives on what is happening often say more about the person with them, obviously, than the situation that the person is describing.



And then, regarding the issue of what to do in response to this thing, we see a similar range of approaches. In some cases, people will decide to do nothing, change nothing in their lives, in response to the pandemic. Others figure that they will just get it, accepting infection as a necessity or destiny that they will face. Then, others will take action. Some obviously follow the public health recommendations that are given. Others jump into action, stockpiling supplies of food, water (without reason for that), and household goods. Then, still, others take unusual precautions or follow the advice of scientifically discredited people selling one cure or another that can be found all over the internet now.

We see too, taking the matter socially, that in the face of a decline in the place of authority in the big Other, manifested, in the United States, in the lack of confidence or trust in the government (and the intense divisiveness in American politics today), that the national authorities that should drive the response struggle to act. This leaves municipalities, corporations, health systems, and universities organizing the response at

more local levels. In these situations, some public and private institutions do what should be done in the face of a pandemic, which is to rely on infectious disease and public health expertise to guide response on the social level. For, while much is unknown now, the scientific and medical communities have remarkable abilities to gather together and develop coordinated responses to events such as this.

But, meanwhile, we can observe a blossoming of personal fears, anxieties, or irrational exuberances, and a broad range of choices of action, as people struggle to direct their attention to this pandemic.

If psychoanalysis has something to offer here, it is to recognize – in the process of the unveiling that occurs in the analytic experience – the proper place of the lack in the Other, and the very personal nature of the fantasies we make to cover over it, so that people can soberly address the unknown and ineffable aspects of the human experience.

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## When the Fantastic Becomes Normal

By *Gustavo Dessal* (Spain)

“What surprises me is not so much what is going on as how familiar this story is to me, a story that is no less fantastic for being real”, writes Daniela Danelinck<sup>[1]</sup> about what is happening with the coronavirus pandemic. This “foreign virus”, as renamed by Trump and his followers, because they are aware (something that I insist on) that the name given to things determines them.

Here in Spain, this country that has not got over its astonishment, some neo-fascistic leaders have become infected and are taking advantage of the circumstance to put their chest out. They have identified their body with the unity of Spain, declaring that with the force of their patriotism they are going to fight this foreign element that has invaded us, as if we did not have enough to do with everything that invades us from within. These cretins are not stupid. The equation body = homeland is easily sold.

Meanwhile, there are theories for everything. Boris Johnson declares the impotence to control the virus and considers that it is better for the British to get infected all at the same time in order to generate antibodies and to avoid any measures that might affect the economy. A form of Darwinian selection at the service of the survival of the species, the species of big capital, of course. May the strongest be saved, those who by pure chance happen to live in Kensington.



There is a video showing an astonishing uproar of monkeys in a city in Thailand. Due to the shortage of the tourists who usually feed them, they are fighting over a yogurt container that one of them has found lying in the street. You can see why we are so fascinated by monkeys: they are our best mirror. With a bit more cruelty they could almost be human.

The techno-scientific discourse, which boasts about overcoming impossibility, can do little against this real that has broken out and from which (as Agamben has already warned) capitalism will take a good share: a golden opportunity for the majority of the world to become a gigantic testing ground, where the methods of population surveillance, the closing of borders, shutting down of cities and forced detention of citizens can be tested and perfected. New treatises on ethics will be written: who to save in extreme situations? Women and Children First is a motto that has already expired. It doesn't even have interest as a vintage item. Of course, these exceptional measures are unavoidable. But the exceptional tends to become familiar, and very quickly becomes part of everyday life.

*That the fantastic becomes normal* could very well be the imperative of our times. Would it have been better if no security systems had been established at airports following 9/11? Probably not, but the important thing is that security has also become an instrument of political manipulation.

The pandemic is wonderful. It satisfies those who believe that God sends us His punishment from on high as well as those who are convinced that the foreigner is to blame. Both theories are true. God sends us his punishment for the arrogance of believing in progress, and the foreigner that we all are and which we cough out is responsible for the plague that kills us every day and that does not cause flu-like symptoms, but comes out of the immense hole that has opened up in our world view.

Meanwhile, the Italians confined to their homes lean out of their balconies and sing to life. This is also part of the globalized madness, which to a certain extent has always existed. We already knew this from the *Decameron*, which Boccaccio, also Italian, wrote in response to the bubonic plague of 1348 and in which he showed that even on the brink of the end of the world there is always place for the desire to live.

[1] Danelinck's essay "*You Should Be Ashamed*"<sup>[1]</sup> is a piece that I recommend to understand the world.  
<http://www.grupoheteronimos.com.ar/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Deberia-darte-verguenza.pdf>

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## Miasma

By Alasdair Duncan (UK)

We don't so often speak of miasmas now, but they once explained all kinds of illnesses the causes of which were not quite clear. Miasmas were invisible vaporous emanations, or "bad air" from decaying organic matter on those foreign parts of moorlands or urban areas. A miasma has never been detected. Whilst miasmatic explanations of disease held sway for centuries, we have other theories about the spread of disease now, and so we don't take miasmas to be a material reality. None the less, the expression remains.

Lacan mentions miasmas in the second chapter of Seminar XI in talking about causes,<sup>[1]</sup> and which Jacques-Alain Miller takes up in his 1988 seminar *Cause et consentement*,<sup>[2]</sup> with the emphasis of a separation of cause and effect, with a cut, stumbling block, distance, deviation, or hole in continuity there, this is what Miller draws from Lacan. Those things where a continuity sustains, such as gravity, may be known as a law except in so far as distance may take its effect there, such as the gravitational pull of the moon effecting the tides.

"...miasmas are the cause of fever—... there is a hole, and something that oscillates in the interval."<sup>[3]</sup> This is how Lacan describes the miasma - that cause of fever which is characterised by a hole, by an effect of something oscillating in the interval between cause and effect.



It seems to me that miasma could be one name of something which may be apparent in our experience, in our clinic, now, in the suffering which the coronavirus brings aside from any material infection. Miasmas could be understood in some regard in the manner of something else which fell out of scientific use - the gaze. Being that which is not the seeing or being seen, not that which can be traced in a continuity, but that which evades, drops out of the laws of visibility, a cause, not a law. And which we attend to in our clinical work, localising, dissipating, distancing, there are any number of ways of working with what can be so distressing in an experience of the gaze.

It seems that in this time of the virus, beyond the microscopic droplets of infected airborne material which may or may not reach us, there is an atmosphere. A thickening of the air with what is not there, marked by a hole between cause and effect, a miasma, experienced as both foreign and intimate to the body, outside and



in. Aside from the practical measures we may take to care for ourselves and others against the material of the virus, and which is not the realm of psychoanalysis, we work with something which was not necessarily of so obvious before, which perhaps miasma names.

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[1] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Seminar XI*. Ed. J.-A. Miller, trans A. Sheridan, (Norton: New York/London, 1978), p. 22

[2] Jacques-Alain Miller, *Cause et consentement*, lesson of 3rd February 1988, delivered at the Department of Psychoanalysis, University of Paris VIII (unpublished).

[3] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Seminar XI*, op. cit., p. 22

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## A World in Quarantine?

By José R. Ubieta (Spain)

The COVID-19 is a new name of the real, that which from the start does not have a whole sense, since we do not know exactly what it is and, although we try to compare it with previous things (other coronaviruses), there is always an unknown remainder left. This is what anguishes us and the spring of collective panic. For the moment, it is a single signifier - COVID 19 or Coronavirus - that is missing the second part: the full story that would explain it, locate it and thus put it "under control". We are still constructing that story, not without difficulties, since in the midst of the crisis the narrative is full of fakes, partial data, sometimes accurate alerts, other times disproportionate ones. When the story progresses and we get to know who it really is, how it works and how we can prevent it, panic will fall... until the next unknown.

The consequences are, therefore, somewhat unpredictable, but some can be advanced: the world is increasingly quarantined; some are placed on it by medical prescription and others by prevention or panic, or even by *modus vivendi*. Some companies begin to notice it in the rise of their stocks: Zoom, Netflix, Facebook, Amazon or Slack. All of them allow teleworking or home entertainment. Those who depend on direct or on-site supplies or labor are falling. Capitalism, as always, finds a benefit out of any crisis.

For some time now we have all been a little quarantined, protected in the TV series and on social networks, removed from the contact with each other, the social phobia that Freud spoke of a century ago. Even a basic need such as eating does not require us to leave the home fort, for this we have the *deliveries* and their booming platforms.

A new digital gap seems to be drawn between those who can resist the virus, isolated in their homes, and those who have no choice but to face it hand-to-hand. The paradox is that many of those who can more easily protect themselves from the hostile enemy by subtracting the body, through their digital avatars, are those who later on (after the exception time) will be able to pay for face-to-face care (teachers who speak to them, doctors who explore them, people who take care of them). Others will be left only with virtual care (remote learning, telecare, digital diagnostics) which is cheaper and more universalizable.



Soon, body to body contact, face-to-face interaction in healthy conditions will be a luxury that many will not be able to access. COVID-19 (and as the viral joke says, number 20 and those that will come after it) has come to remind us of our fragility, now that we had begun to believe that we were absolute masters of our own destiny, believers in the limitless power of technology. The truth is that we still inhabit a body.

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## Side Effects

By *Marcelo Veras* (Brasil)

Walking through the streets and shops, across television channels, we conclude that civilization has finally produced its maximum measure of unity, the pandemic. It overcame right-wing and left-wing ideologies, dictators, media giants and religions. It silenced the streets around the world, in short, causing the semblants that covered the structural vacuum of the new millennium to vacillate. Impossible to see the situation only as a medical situation, it would be the same as thinking of September 11<sup>th</sup> only as a terrorist attack. The effects of the coronavirus, beyond the public health questions, will leave an irreversible impact on the culture. I have been reflecting on what I have heard in recent days from the Lacanian theory of what is real, symbolic and imaginary, and especially from the last phase of Lacan's teaching.

What is a virus? A being that is not alive. A virus affects the real of our body precisely like this "nothing of life" that is added to the living and threatens it. Lacan said that the hole in the real is life, and the virus is what realizes this hole, it is the vacuum around which life falls apart.

On the other hand, its invisibility makes a hole in the imaginary body, because it is not added to the body image. By itself, the virus does not amputate, or make scars, that is, it does not leave positive traces. "Being with a virus", what does that mean? When we look in the mirror we do not locate it, it is as if we have the worst in us, the most threatening otherness, without being able to extirpate it. I could say that it is the smallest scale of the Lacanian "a" object, a "minimal" rest of what, in us, we are not.

And, without a doubt, there is the great baroque movement of the symbolic. It is when the anguish of the viral alterity meets the semblants, the novels, the fabulations, the memories and theories that try to give a symbolic treatment to this anguish, making it preferably a phobia. Our alcohol gel, our gloves and masks curiously create a surface that, by separating, confers an unprecedented mirage of visibility to the invisible real of the virus, we are almost able to see it going away when we rub the alcohol on our hands.



There is no shortage of projection screens. The current pandemic, a decade after SARS, has found an infinity of series about zombies and the living dead to remind us that hyperconnectivity hides a growing desert of really worthwhile experiences. Such is our immersion in the universe of consumption, excessive work, and the search for the perfect and healthy body.

And then we return home, a curious exile inside out, we are trapped in the place where we should be freer, among our own, with our books and music, with our memories and our caresses. My vote is for the pandemic not only to be a cult of the death drive, but mainly a lesson in life.

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## The Day the World Stood Still

By *Bogdan Wolf* (UK)

Virus is a pure force, the real without borders or limits. It must be taken at its most radical at the time of impact: terror without terrorist, identity or objective. The name Lacan gave to this nameless real had to therefore be in the negative: "it doesn't work". It doesn't work for it is situated as external to failure to enter any form of collaboration with the symbolic, to strike a deal, to be tamed, to submit to instructions and to

immunisation. Maurice Blanchot, who has written on psychoanalysis, described the “mythical cell” of cancer as “the refusal to respond” wherein analysts can find an indication of the location of the real. He continues: “here is a cell that doesn’t hear the command, that develops lawlessly, in a way that could be called anarchic. [...] it destroys the very idea of a program and wrecks the possibility of reducing everything to the equivalent of signs [...] and, from this perspective, is a political phenomenon, one of the rare ways to dislocate the system, to disarticulate, through proliferation and disorder, the universal programming and signifying power”.<sup>[1]</sup>

Let’s have no illusions about it. The force of the viral cell that has swept the world for over a month now, has no equivalent except for the primary signifier that leaves the mark of language on the body prior to any sense effect. Blanchot clearly places the cell outside the universal, paternal order. This has not stopped prevented us from acknowledging our powerlessness in continuing our attempt to humanise the viral cell by calculating the algorithm of mortality and the statistics of increase of deaths from country to country. In effect, scientists and politicians have made the lethal cell believable.

To approach the primary mark of language on the body, Lacan went beyond the literary and paternal solutions and pointed to the saint. Who is the saint? It is the one whose body remains external to seductions of meaning, and to authority built on it, and who renews his affliction with the real every time he encounters *corporeal* trauma. The saint embodies part of the waste attributed to him and embraces the real. He even, in some incomprehensible way, loves the real albeit we would have to distinguish love of the real from loving one’s delusion or one’s symptom such as the woman. Saints have always shown a bizarre love for a person that in Latin, *per-sonnare*, signifies a body present through sound, voice. Saints were never chumps of the powerful, religious or secular alike, or indeed of the capitalist bosses. Francis of Assisi was an anomaly and a deviation in Church ranks which only accentuates the singularity of “it doesn’t work” for a speaking being. In the eyes of Pope Innocent III, Francis brought the shameless, opulent Benedicts to their knees and, in effect, refreshed the relation to the *causa Dei*. The saint, as Lacan approached him, incarnates the *trashitas*, rather than *caritas*, which amounts to assuming a place on the map drawn up by the real that undermines political programs and displaces the capitalist interest in all pursuing wealth into anarchic variants of social concern.

It is interesting to learn that some scientists, like Dr John Ashton and Paul Hunter, support this orientation towards the social dimension. But there are also those whose interest oscillates between the genetic history of the SARS CoV19 and the possibility of calculating statistically the end of humanity. The history of the viral pathogen shows us it is an effect of 11,000 years of mutations that lead back to one, supposed origin. Geneticists concede that the viral spreads of past decades are mutative examples of genetic sequence variations, in this case RNA and not DNA, that recently (pig’s, bird’s, bovine flus), turned out to be less harmful to humans than the one we are currently dealing with. It goes all the way back nowhere else than to the animal kingdom where bats and pangolins are the main carriers and culprits.



The lures of science have not stopped those who feel the impact of the epidemic from taking steps and compiling food supplies as well as bales of toilet paper to ensure their safety when panic reaches the stage of the somatic reactions requiring anal hygiene. Everyone is puzzled, yet everyone knows. With the World Health Organisation declaring CoV 19 a world pandemic, we have now entered the stage of political strategy. Donald Trump for one went on to cancelling all flights to the EU, which surprised many. The space for political phenomena of this kind is only emerging now, as Blanchot anticipated. After the initial impact, and a gradual reconciliation by the WHO in cooperation with various governments that deaths will spiral, we are on the road to write another chapter on the unconscious and its politics. It is in this sense that Freud, not knowing what he was doing, and Jung when he was still an analyst, approached American with a declaration they were bringing a plague. The virus of the unconscious, prior to any semantic mutation, is indefensible because we are all subject to ignorance in the face of *forza del destino* of the primary signifier. Which is why Lacan called it a “bearer of infinity” with a potential of inflicting anyone who comes into contact with it. Making the virus believable in this way puts it in the position of the not-all, -“x Φx. Every time someone comes to analysis, he brings a virus he does not want to hear or to know anything about it.

Political strategies vary at present. On the continent schools, universities, public gathering museums, restaurants, cinemas, theatres are gradually being shut. In the EU, there is a lockdown on flights *en masse*, and sport and seminar events are cancelled for at least a month. The level of isolation is growing which makes us all more connected. This resembles a state of war and goes well beyond the hysteric's demand being alternately refused and following the master command. Instead we are dealing with the socio-economic rupture of pandemonic and diachronic proportions. For many, British government acts too slow. Isolation means economic disruption which in the face of Brexit should be delayed as long as possible. But the delay also reveals the trait of a modern political leader who flees the scene of disaster to hide in the delusion of getting on with business as usual. What will awake those leaders? This does not look like an encounter with the real but a strategy to delay, hold back, and reason: prudence in the face of a hiccup. Is panic and turmoil (*émoi*), where Lacan situated the little real, *a*, that shakes the system, the only way to set things into motion? The virus virility is still not recognised as a political phenomenon.

Professor Dr John Ashton was very critical about the political strategy of Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer<sup>[2]</sup>. He has only been in the job since January this year and his career was in pharmaceuticals and biology. Dr Ashton called Boris Johnson's position on Coronavirus "a disgrace", and reproached people in charge for allowing biologists and pharmacists to dominate the whole issue. What it ignores is the social dimension and the lack of expertise how to organise social groups and communities in the event of pandemic. Dr Ashton was equally critical, which was supported by a more moderate academic Paul Hunter from the University of East Anglia, of the new proposal of "herd immunity" calling it a "fantasy narrative". As he plainly put it, herd immunity is not only unethical but allows the virus to run wild across society and communities until mortality rate goes above 60%. Only then would the virus be assimilated and turn into home flu, a domesticated Other. Apparently, this already happened in the past in Tahiti when its population was decimated after Captain Cook left them. From the Lacanian perspective this proposal amounts to forcing to create a community of saints through a trait of incorporation of the Other's *jouissance*. Needless to say, this approach would be a complete reversal of the immigration policy whereby a foreigner has for millennia been the carrier of diseases which led to border closures and internal isolation. To introduce isolation due to the viral threat, one must be in close proximity to suffering within social community. Otherwise it's a Stalinist tyranny, as Dr Ashton remarked.

A community of saints does not exist, let's add. The nearest to it, a community of analysts, does not believe in the common good but in the not-all the traumatic real, different for every member of the community. An attempt to tame and domesticate the real of the virus for all would serve as a demonstration of failure to symbolise it and to make it domicile. A prospective loss of millions of lives appears not to deter the British politicians to drop the idea at the very moment it emerged. If you can't defeat it, submit to it, even bring it on. A friend shared with me a memory of an interview in which Johnson envisaged building beaches where sharks keep watch. Nietzsche's motto "live dangerously and build your houses under Vesuvius" smacks of politics of masochism when espoused by a national government. The UK answer to the threat is politics of delay and avoidance. It reveals a trait of ignorance linked to letting the death drive run wild or to being already dead. It is no surprise that Lacan approached death as imaginary and put life on the side of the real that fails and thus pushes, urges us to seek new signifiers that apply to groups and communities. It could work, as Lacan showed in "British Psychiatry and the War".

On the day when the earth is slowing down and coming to a standstill, British politicians revert to the position of their colonial masters watching impassively the course of events and misleading population, so that there is no economic disruption. Hence the refusal to collaborate with colleagues from the continent to introduce measures to suspend for the time being institutions, organisations, including corporations. We are getting closer to the point of sacrifice to keep things in order in accordance with what people voted for.

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[1] M. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. A. Smock, University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 86-7.

[2] Professors J. Ashton and P. Hunter were interviewed by Matt Frei on LBC Radio on Saturday 14 March 2020.