

LACANIAN REVIEW ONLINE

COVID-19 2020

#37 to #42

Corona and then Time / Jouissance / Desire

By *Natalie Wülfing* (Germany)

Corona

For a few weeks now the world as we know it has changed – ever since an epidemic has breached the borders, from something far away, to something right here in front of our doorstep. A virus has become a global pandemic.

In common parlance the virus is a foreign body, a body in the sense of an element, that invades the human body from the outside and causes this body to become sick.

What is clear, is that a foreign body is no body, certainly does not have a body, it is rather foreign to the body. However, the term lends itself to the analogical effect of posing all ills as coming from elsewhere, from the outside, as foreign. Such is the banality of xenophobia.

Nevertheless, there is a low level of anxiety palpable in the atmosphere, an anxiety that came along with the first headlines in the news, on the one hand abstractions – the numbers, the statistics, the predictions, the logic of epidemics – on the other hand events – the amount of infections and eventually deaths, even images of the horror, from Italy in particular. Then also the words that carried a high level of meaning, like Unprepared, Overwhelming, Tsunami, 70 %, and Millions.

And the subjective response:

First, the moment of denial – can it really be so bad? Is it not just a flu?



Then the moment of seeing – this is really happening, it is really upon us. Inference, that governments do not choose to implement measures that harm “the economy” without very, very good reason, ever. The uncanny, a piece of real intrudes into the inertia. It becomes an event, when the instruments that punctuate our working life, seminars and congresses, start to be cancelled, along with travel.

Then the moment of understanding – one is living through a moment that is completely unprecedented in recent history, since the second world war. One is witness to this moment that will in time mark a before and after. BC, before Corona we might then say....

Separated by travel restrictions, the desire to be with those one loves, who one can't be with, is strong.

Then comes a first moment of concluding – the anxiety is now manageable, after a week of hobby virology, one can pass to other things, to read, to think, to work.

Time, Jouissance, Desire

We are in a time, we live in a time, this is what one says when one wants to say ‘times’, ‘a particular time’ marked by a difference to another time.

Re-reading J.A. Miller's Introduction to the Erotics of Time^[1], serves to find a way to situate what the erotics of time, namely libidinal time, means for the speaking being who has a body, and who is, in this particular time of the corona-virus not only confined to a space, but experiencing time differently.

In my particular case, I have more time, or so it feels. This is not the case for many others, quite the opposite. This terrible pandemic and the sudden stop of all life in the outside world, has effected a break, subjectively experienced. The pace, the race, the haste, the rush, the frenetic speed with which our working community puts desire to work, has paused. Haste has a certain value in psychoanalysis, as a way to treat desire.

But at this precise moment, there is the present now. If before, one could see all around the dependence, if not addiction, to the screens, to all the flow of information, and for me this was associated with the cause of suffering, including a nostalgia for times before this monster of the worldwideweb was invented, and before it became “smart” – now there is a new time, and it has a space for desire. This is the side of inquietude, and not that of nostalgia – the two versions of time, Miller mentions, if the present is defined as impossible. But libidinal time means that the present is subject to an experience, and this experience relates to the function of object *a*. “Petit *a* as such renders time unhomogenous. It controls the narrowing and the dilation of the present” concludes Miller.^[2]

If the world of busy movement, events where one gathers, places one travels to, local or international, are all cancelled, and work excludes the meeting of bodies, then time is all of a sudden, and surprisingly, changed. It is a change that is felt in the body, has a relationship with object *a*, with desire, jouissance and anxiety, as routines, automatons, recurring events, the fantasy of a known future, has temporarily disappeared.

What replaces the absence of the rush outside?

When one can momentarily resist the communal experience of this One Signifier, Corona, one can find that which animates desire, singularly, which manifests in the experience of time.

TP or not TP: That's my question

By Renata Teixeira (USA)

One day I couldn't leave my home, the city, the country, the planet was infested by virus causing respiratory problems and obligated the governments to take measures. The citizens stayed home. Everybody had to follow strict rules to contain the pandemic... and toilet papers were gone."

The statement above sounds like a persecutory nightmare. The world experiencing a confinement due to an alien object that causes a disease and eventually death. Strangely, it appears a connection between this persecutory other, the virus, and an anal object, toilet paper.



In his *Three Essays on Sexuality* Freud alludes to the anal phase and the libido attached to feces associated with the discovery of the sphincter organ. The child holds or expels the object, causing anxiety or joy to the family. Freud compares the anal object to a gift that the child can give or keep from his caregivers, later associated with money and financial possession^[1].

In the first week of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global stock market crashed, many investors sold their positions in stocks, investing in gold, another signifier associated with the anal object. The global economy collapsed. Along with this financial panic, many companies didn't know which procedure to take and had to follow governmental restrictive rules by closing industries, offices, commerce and employees were working from home. On the other hand, scientists didn't know how to face the invisible enemy. Subjects experienced a lack of control, once that in normal conditions scientific community possess knowledge and plays by giving or withholding it.

My question: what toilet paper, one of the most searched products in the shops during the pandemic, had to do with the lack of control to deal with the Corona virus?

Lacan mentions that the proximity of an object without the disguise of the symbolic causes anguish^[2]. In his Seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan states "The anal level is the locus of the metaphor – one object for another, give the feces in place of the phallus. This shows you why the anal drive is the domain of oblativity, of the gift. Where one is caught short, where one cannot, as a result of the lack, give what is to be given, one can always give something else. That is why, in his morality, man is inscribed at the anal level. And this is especially true of the materialist."^[3]

Amazon is charging \$60 to deliver toilet paper. In supermarkets around the world, consumers are fighting to acquire toilet rolls. Take-away restaurants are giving them as a marketing strategy. Even if the scientific community informed that the corona virus doesn't cause any major symptoms related to subjects' bowel movement, there was a collective fantasy regarding the urge to consume toilet paper, showing that the proximity of this real object needed to be 'partially' replaced with an anal one.

We can see the contradiction of neo-liberalism. Globalized societies can provide the fastest speed internet systems, all kinds of products from cars to vacuums acquired with a click or two, online services including virtual medical appointments and online academic classes, but struggled to provide one basic product, toilet paper, right where knowledge lacks.

[1] Strachey, J. (1953). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. VII (1901-1905): A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality *and* Other Works. The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London.

[2] Lacan J., Seminar X, Anxiety, Ed. J-A Miller, Transl. A. Price, Polity Press, 2016.

[3] Lacan J., Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, edited by J-A Miller. Transl. A. Sheridan. W. W. Norton & Company, N.Y., London.

The Little Bit of Freedom

By *Maurizio Mazzotti* (Italy)

With the virus, which infiltrates the pulmonary interstices, without any warning or presentiment, we find ourselves caught up in the impact of a real without presence, certainly a bodily one. We give that corporeal presence to it unknowingly and without wishing to, we ourselves become the corporal presence of this real which wraps up our days like a sort of shirt of Nessus. Each of us becomes Nessus's shirt for the other.



That is why there has been an outbreak of hyper-anxiety which traverses the social bond, preventing its functioning, at almost every level. And that raises in many ways the question of freedoms, those that are being denied us by the hygienic/sanitary/safety provisions imposed by the government of the State.

Psychoanalysis has had its say about civil liberties in various circumstances in the past, from taking positions with regard to actions against the individual in paradiatorial regimes, which strike at the freedom to work and/or study of colleagues, or in cases where the fulfillment of national political circumstances might have very negative repercussions at the level of the rule of law, the indispensable bastion for the exercise of our practice.

Even in this our time of great social anguish a debate has arisen about the freedoms that we have been denied, about the possibility that we could be transformed into an imprisoning society. Even Giorgio Agamben has intervened in this debate, at least twice, criticizing the restrictive provisions, which he thinks are incongruous, and yet put into the service of a segregative, disciplinary biopolitics, whose

degenerative consequences will soon be felt in human relations. So it's a question which is centred around what Heidegger called "negative liberty", saying that it is a fundamental experience of the human being, and on the other hand it is very clear what it is, it is a freedom which is independent from everything, from the bond, from "powers which surround us" etc. That's always there, ready to be felt in the most varied circumstances, in the past as well as in the present. And right now in fact it is being felt.

Something different is the freedom at play in the analytic experience, in so far as it is ethical, in so far as it is oriented by the Freudian principle: *wo es war soll ich werden*, an experience in which precisely a "*soll ich*" is at play, something stringently ethical, in which the margin of freedom of the subject appears, 'the little bit of freedom' as Lacan already defines it in "Function and Field..." An essential margin, but of a 'little bit of' freedom. A margin of discontinuity in which the cause is decided. Because in the analytic experience the ethical "*soll ich*" is the one which makes the subject confront that which causes him, dragging him away from thinking he is *his own cause*. Jacques-Alain Miller had said that faced with our cause, our margin is in our *consenting*, our following it or not, in saying yes or no to be caused, which is not a huge freedom to do this or that. It's the result of a long traversal of a series of *semblants* which became laws, but whose real cause was not there.

Now, wanting to interest ourselves in the debate about the present limits of our freedoms, each of us might remember, based on the experience of psychoanalysis, just what that has taught us about individual liberty, after the "demystification of subjective camouflages" as Lacan defined it in 1953.

Undoubtedly we are now experiencing a restriction of our social and individual liberties, always bearing in mind that some people have even fewer of them than we do, doctors and nurses who are working 24 hour shifts to rescue as many as possible from dying. By remembering the little bit of freedom with respect to our real cause which psychoanalysis has made us realize, will we will be able to tolerate the limits of social liberties as an exceptional measure in order to face up to the new real which, at the moment, escapes scientific knowledge?

Jean Luc Nancy, a French philosopher friend of Agamben, well-known to us also for having intervened a few years ago at a conference organized by the ECF, replied to this question in his own way, when he took up a position in the present debate about freedom and the constrictions imposed by the virus. He did so while remembering that a few years ago he was faced with a decision about a very invasive surgical intervention, a transplant, which his doctors were pressing him to have. Many of his friends on the other hand were suggesting to him not to listen to them. He said that if he had followed then his friends' advice he wouldn't be here now to intervene in this interesting debate. And he concluded by referring to those suggestions: *It is possible to make a mistake*. Especially when the real is confused with the *semblant*.

SLP/WAP – Bologna – 18/03/2020
Translated by Pauline O'Callaghan

Are the Old worth more per Artist than per Person?

By *José R. Ubieta* (Spain)

A society that does not accept death can hardly enjoy life. The Portuguese Nobel Prize Laureate Jose Saramago, author of *The Intermittencies of Death*, wondered what would happen if death failed to kill. His response was blunt: “It would be a real disaster.” Years before, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan affirmed: “You are quite right to believe that you are going to die, of course; that sustains you. If you did not believe that, could you bear all this?” “And Borges ironically alluded to statistics to remind us that although we do not know who is going to die today, we do know how many.



Covid-19 has forced us to look at ourselves, as a society, in the mirror and the image that returns to us contains its chiaroscuro. We welcome, in addition to initiatives of solidarity, the sublimatory beauty of the works created by older artists: Scorsese’s cinema, Núria Espert’s theatre, the characters of José Sacristán, Antonio López’s paintings, Omara Portuondo’s songs or the literature of the recently deceased Isabel-Clara Simó. And at the same time we have decided, in the name of variables as relative as quality of life or social value, that we can “invest” less in protecting their vulnerability.

The reason surely is none other than the stain that we see on their faces when we look at them, the same stain that in Holbein’s painting “The Ambassadors” hides by means of anamorphosis (reversible deformation of an image produced by an optical procedure) the skull as incarnation of death. An illustrative painting, where the gaze is focused on the symbols of power of values and on the insignia of the world, including artistic signs, while death is only seen when leaving the room, from an oblique angle, and only if one pays attention.

Will culture, in the times to come, redouble the segregation of the most vulnerable or will it make creation and invention the best antidote to the real that confines us?

Translated by Roger Litten

Coronavirus as Metaphor

By *Gözde Kılıç* (Turkey)

In 1978, Susan Sontag published *Illness as Metaphor*, a book composed of three long essays which were originally delivered in the distinguished James Lecture Series at the New York Institute for the Humanities, and then published in *New York Review of Books* before making it to the bookstores as paperback.^[1] The book invites the reader, as stated in the title, to view illness as metaphor—that is, as capable of generating social and cultural meanings. It illustrates two particular illnesses, tuberculosis and cancer, by a number of imageries and fantasies attached to them. Tuberculosis, for example, was considered to be “an insidious, implacable theft of a life” in the nineteenth century before an effective medical treatment was developed.^[2] After it was conquered, though, cancer quickly replaced it in the twentieth century and filled the role of a mysterious illness waiting to strike its victims. Today one can see that attitudes towards the new coronavirus continue the same tradition, the same line of metaphoric thinking, as evident in various meanings loaded onto the virus such as “public enemy,” “foreign invader,” and “natural evil.” Without a doubt, coronavirus has already become a myth!



Drawing on her own experiences as a cancer patient, Sontag sets herself the task of de-mythologizing disease, stating explicitly on the opening page of her book: “My point is that illness is not a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking.”^[3] However, one wonders if there is a discernible difference between illness as metaphor and illness as an objective process. Is there a way of separating, so to say, authentic illness from spurious meanings attached to it? Kojin Karatani answers this question by suggesting that we instead question modern medicine’s approach to illness which is itself mythological: “The problem is not the use of illness as metaphor, as Sontag would have it, but, on the contrary, the epistemological institution of modern medicine which objectifies illness as pure illness.”^[4] For Karatani, the idea that illness exists independently of an individual’s awareness, that it can hurt or harm bodies without realization, is a construction of modern medical power/knowledge. Inasmuch as it perceives illness as an external agent, not in cooperation with but pitted against the self, Western medicine has always been symbolic—as a semiological system (in the appearance of factual truth). If we see coronavirus as our common enemy today, then, it is because “we have become thoroughly acclimatized” to this form of thinking.^[5]

Jumping back to the nineteenth century, on 24 March 1882, German bacteriologist Robert Koch announced his discovery of the tubercle bacillus as the cause of tuberculosis. It might sound like common knowledge to us now, but this discovery was considered to be epoch-making in its time. Until the identification of the tubercle bacillus, tuberculosis was associated with certain personality types (sensitive, delicate, prone to excitement) and family clusters. Koch showed that it originates from a single microbial agent. This biomedical model, referred to by Rene Dubos as “the doctrine of specific etiology,” is still the most accepted scientific explanation for diseases. Yet, as Dubos argues, although “the doctrine of specific etiology has been the most constructive force in medical research for almost a century and the theoretical and practical achievements to which it has led constitute the bulk of

modern medicine ... few are the cases in which it has provided a complete account of the causation of disease.”^[6] Using Koch’s discovery as an example, he asks why, if the cause of the disease was a specific bacillus, people who had already been infected with it (at that time practically all city dwellers in Europe were infected) and probably still carried it in their bodies did not develop the same symptoms as clinical patients? Decades later, the question is still valid in relation to the new coronavirus. We have its microscopic image etched into our minds and know its “personality” traits by heart (likes plastic and metal surfaces, likes cool weather, dislikes sun, light, and humidity etc.), yet we cannot explain why some infected people show no symptoms while others get very ill. Still we insist on clinging to the same old germ theory—but why?

Karatani would say, and Foucault would probably agree, that the modern etiological construction of disease is only one way of understanding disease, and that there are other ways—surely—but they are ruled out, limited, and suppressed by positive science. Take Hippocrates, for example. According to his view of medicine, Karatani summarizes, “illness is not traced back to either a specific or local cause, but is regarded as disturbance in the state of equilibrium among various internal factors which regulates the working of the body and mind. Furthermore, what heals the disease is not the doctor but the natural healing powers of the patient. This is, in one sense, a principle of Eastern medicine.”^[7] But instead of following Hippocrates and other holistic approaches to health and body-mind equilibrium, we almost unconsciously objectify disease, viewing it as an injury from an external assault (in the same way we view UFOs, terrorists, and other “others”). What explains our predilection for mythologizing, so to speak? For Karatani, it lies in the “theological and metaphysical” value of Western medicine. As he writes, “The very thought of fixing a single, original cause is theological and metaphysical.”^[8] The notion of germ as the cause of illness draws on the repertoire of Christian symbology when it induces us to imagine germs as “a form of invisible, ubiquitous evil ... as a sort of original sin.”^[9] This explains why we use religious allusions when we are talking about illness. We “struggle” with depression. We “fight” against cancer as a cancer “victim.” We “wage war” on the coronavirus. All these metaphors bring to mind humanity’s ancient war with Satan. Therefore, if we speak of illness as metaphor, as Sontag believes we do, it is not merely out of personal choice, but because of the epistemological dominance of the Western medical discourse that we are (a little too comfortably) embedded in. And as long as we do not historicize its scientific objectivism, we will not be freed from our habituated compulsion to circumscribe illness with satanic metaphors.

In conclusion, illness is always already a metaphor. This is what brings it into being as a discursive construct in the space of power/knowledge. Under the medical gaze, to use a Foucauldian phrase, we have become so familiar with objectifying, reifying, and externalizing illness that it is almost impossible to envisage it outside of semantics, that is outside the realm of our dreams, fantasies, and projections. In this light, I think the virus is itself a fantasy. It principally serves to quench the quest for perfect health. The belief that better days are coming once we get rid of this pandemic, that life will be wonderful when we get back to our healthy selves again, is the underlying hope that drives our “war” with the virus. Indeed, with every new virus, our desire for immortality is renewed and gains postponed satisfaction. However, as Dubos shows, this “mirage of health” is ill-fated as long as humans try to stay ahead of microbes. Just like our eternal fight with death—a fight that we cannot win—our struggle against illness is doomed to replay on a continuous loop with no real success, that is until one day we learn to come to terms with our mortality.

^[1] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

^[2] Sontag, *Illness*, 5.

^[3] Sontag, *Illness*, 3.

^[4] Karatani Kojin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993), 108.

[5] Kojin, *Origins*, 110.

[6] Rene Dubos, *Mirage of Health* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 91.

[7] Kojin, *Origins*, 109.

[8] Kojin, *Origins*, 106.

[9] Kojin, *Origins*, 106.

(*) Gözde Kılıç is a psychoanalytically-oriented scholar of cultural studies, holding a PhD from Trent University in the same field. She currently works at Başkent University in Ankara, Turkey.

Life

By *Markus Zöchmeister* (Austria)

The Austrian government took restrictive measures at a relatively early stage, limiting public life to a necessary minimum. In doing so, the Chancellor repeated again and again that “we have to get used to the fact that our lives will change permanently”. At the moment, living in Austria means a certain freedom, which is no small thing. The Austrian government forbids people to leave the house, but walks alone are allowed. This makes it possible to continue working with patients with the presence of the body.



One patient says that we are entering a new era of deceleration, which is coming over our lives with incredible speed. He calls futurologists who interpret “this message” of the virus in this way. But the virus does not speak. The message that some people might read from it is phantasmatic. And these phantasms circulate like the virus itself, from one cell to another. We know about the transmission and we can make projections like an election poll, we can make forecasts like a weather forecast, we can use all the instruments of the symbolic apparatus to generate data around this hole in knowledge. But the hole itself remains and it doesn’t speak. This hole is silent, as silent as the grotto in the grove of the Erinyes, where Oedipus on Colonos last seen only by Theseus, disappeared.

Our life has changed dramatically and radically in a very short time. Fundamental democratic rights have been suspended, political leaders are using the crisis to implement the instruments of tracking and surveillance. The virus as a global phenomenon, as a phenomenon of globalisation creates above all segregation – the healthy from the sick, the dead from the living, the vulnerable from the less vulnerable, old from young and the virus radicalises existing exclusion, such as the exclusion of refugees who, according to the last decree of the Austrian government, can no longer apply for asylum unless they have a health certificate with a negative corona test, which is practically impossible. The virus is like a microscope, it brings out the best and the worst of all of us. It affects all our lives and multiplies coextensively over our vitality.

The techniques of segregation are expanded and applied together with the many modes of techno-communication. Telecommunication is a tool that virtually removes segregation at home. We can all

make this leap into the virtual. That is where life is. In segregation and telecommunication, two modes of enjoyment as a-responses to the impact of the real on the gear of enjoyment. Universities, schools, even elementary schools work with these tools and make it possible to go on as if nothing had happened. Parents who now work from home can go to school with their children at the same time.

The virus, which is neither alive nor dead, but which seeks life in order to replicate itself^[1], hits us all, but everyone differently. What we need is time to live with our bodies.

^[1] Miquel Bassols, *The Law of Nature and the Real without Law*, The Lacanian Review Online, March 15th 2020.