

ART AND PANDEMIC: LIMINAL EXPERIENCES?

And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence
in heaven about the space of half an hour.

Revelation, 8:1

Art has always been a reflection of society. In this sense, art and the pandemic have shared the same scenario and have interacted to leave us a testimony. Covid-19 has made us rethink our relationship with life and with things, with ourselves and with others. Culture and art have changed not only the way we approach the world, but also the way we understand it and stop projecting ourselves into the future, as we have always done. This interruption of «vital normality» led to a proliferation of catastrophic, apocalyptic, and even «virtual» thoughts, out of any real dimension. It is not surprising, then, that in relation to this last term, the new technologies and the Internet have acquired an exceptional importance, and that we have been presented with the use of resources that are closely linked and that bring us closer to the «others» without the possibility of contagion. The presentness to which we were accustomed was replaced by the virtuality of screens, remote controls and simulacra, and conditioned by an unquestionable imposition, such as that of biosecurity.

In addition, and in retrospect, the pandemic also brought us closer to an urgent vision of death, to revisiting it. Death was not something that came «when it was time», as if it were the fulfillment of a natural law, nor did it follow what the *vanitas*' still lifes of the Baroque period made clear: that death burst into every home and environment to take over every person, regardless of age or social class, in a fleeting and cruel way. At the risk of sounding macabre, pandemics do not equalize society. Although no one escapes it, neither the poor nor the rich, death may seem inclusive—so ironic!—, but it is at least traversed by class bias.

Unesco has made it clear that the pandemic we have experienced has been such a devastating crisis that it has had an unimaginable impact on all areas of our lives, including, of course, culture and the arts. It had im-

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pacted in such an unexpected way that the creative and heritage industries had been exposed to a high degree of vulnerability. On the other hand, and because it was an unexpected situation, it put governments and cultural managers on the spot when it came to reacting and creating alternatives so that culture and art would not diminish their presence, while at the same time they had to think of aids and incentives that would not slow them down. And so one of the most recurrent slogans in the history of mankind was followed: «imagination to power».

In times when the rational logic of what is part of everyday life is altered, we find an opportunity to reflect and think about things in a different way: art was one of the fields that most rethought how to create new scenarios conditioned by the pandemic, proposing new ways of conceiving the relationship between artistic practice, its audience and the spaces where it is exhibited. The binomial art-pandemic has served as an indisputable example for understanding the spread of diseases and the changes they have provoked in society. Although in many cases, and in periods such as the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Baroque, we did not have the data to know exactly the number of deaths, the types of infections, the characteristics of the symptoms or their effects, art has always shown us some aspect, a look shocking enough to give us an idea. Art has always left a record for future generations of these convulsive moments that we have suffered and continue to suffer because of epidemics; the contributions collected in this volume will leave us a record of this. In 2020, art was one of the fields most affected by the pandemic. Institutions and artists sought all kinds of resources to maintain the relationship with society, from the creation of a series of experiences that gave way to new paradigms that have come to stay. And this has manifested itself in everything from museum programming to new music production and broadcasting, as well as television series, and so on. All of this has fostered the rethinking of new policies, new pedagogies, new economies, both locally and globally.

Throughout the history of art, we find many works on canvas, photographic paper, marble, scores, and stages that show the devastating effects of diseases such as smallpox, plague, or influenza, not only on society in general, but also on the skin of the artists themselves. These diseases have changed every aspect of our lives, then and now. We could undoubtedly comment on many works of art that have shown us this, but we would always fall short, we would leave out relevant data, incomparable paintings, extremely heartbreaking photographs, shocking sculptures, macabre melodies and terrifying performances, for sure! But we cannot deny that there has always been a need to explain stories, experiences and devastating realities of a present, a past and even, in a fictional way, a future. And when

the pandemic has visited us, there have been words that have echoed in the walls of our brains and have been printed in many works of art, such as: apocalypse, death, disease, contagion, devastation, terror, and so on. And in this sense, and immersed in the pandemic, we are convinced that there are many images, scenes and poems that have come to mind, such as the beginning of the *Decameron* by Boccaccio:

Let me say, then, that one thousand, three hundred, and forty-eight years had passed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God when the deadly plague arrived in the noble city of Florence, the most beautiful of any in Italy. Whether it descended on us mortals through the influence of the heavenly bodies or was sent down by God in His righteous anger to chastise us because of our wickedness, it had begun some years before in the East, where it deprived countless beings of their lives before it headed to the West, spreading ever-greater misery as it moved relentlessly from place to place. *Against it all human wisdom and foresight were useless.* Vast quantities of refuse were removed from the city by officials charged with this function, the sick were not allowed inside the walls, and numerous instructions were disseminated for the preservation of health—but all to no avail. *Nor were the humble supplications made to God by the pious,* not just once but many times, whether in organized processions or in other ways, and more effective. For practically from the start of spring in the year we mentioned above, the plague began producing its sad effects in a terrifying and extraordinary manner. (Giovanni BOCCACCIO, *The Decameron*, translated and edited by Wayne A. Rebhorn, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2016, pp. 5-6).

In the face of the pandemic, there is no knowledge to prevent it from advancing by leaps and bounds, there is no past experience that is of any use, and viruses mutate and transform themselves to fully attack humanity.

When we speak of pandemics, we cannot help thinking of situations such as the apocalypse - understood as a catastrophe of colossal proportions - in which another reality is really «revealed» to us, one that was not expected, a reality that will change the course of everything that existed and was foreseen. One of the phrases most proclaimed by the politicians and journalists in the media that hammered our heads was the phrase: «return to a new normal». This phrase led us to create an infinity of proposals that could replace our life, but what we were living was a kind of «doomsday». *Apocalypse*, etymologically, means «revelation», and this is what was constantly presented to us: to remove the veil of something we did not know, as if we were going to discover a new truth, totally alien and strange, devastating and annihilating. Faced with this situation, we had two options:

To be frightened, or to adopt a stoic attitude, like that of some characters in Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting *The Triumph of Death*, which captivates us when it becomes clear that Death wins the battle against all worldly things, where chaos and destruction take over the landscape and where salvation is diminished and totally annihilated. But in a hidden place, in the lower right corner, a couple of lovers live their love as if nothing was happening outside, although there is a clear moralistic view in the painting that permeates everything. In this painting, a very common theme of the time appears in a subdued way: the dance of death, a dance derived from the medieval *danse macabre*. Certainly, during the 2020 pandemic, one of the things that was repeated was: «that's all we needed! On top of the climate crisis, on top of the crisis of neo-liberalism and on top of the crisis of ethical values now comes this!». And the last thing was dance. In the *danses macabres* there is the exciting idea that death has some allies, the skeletons, who dance all night until the cock crows at dawn. The melody of a macabre dance could have been another of the melodies that visited our minds during the imprisonment, when music was played in every house, and that prepared us for the twelve notes of the harp and the sound of the violin of Saint Saëns in his famous *Danse macabre*, where this instrument initiates a solo with the famous triton or *diabolus in musica* of an A and an E-flat, and where a xylophone also seems to imitate the movement of the bones of the skeletons that move to an impressive rhythm.

Another image that describes very well, from a psychological point of view, the situation experienced during a pandemic, is that of the atmosphere created throughout *The Seventh Seal*, a film by Ingmar Bergman set during the Black Death, in which a knight and Death play a game of chess, while Death wants to take the knight's soul, making us aware that chance guides our lives—and that Death is very capricious—since we are predestined by decisions that we cannot control and that have already been made. Images and stories help us to elaborate traumatic events and teach us ways to reintegrate them into the symbolic realm, also opening us to new solutions based on the imaginary created. And we cannot fail to allude to two texts that have also come to mind when we have tried to explain the pandemic and make it conscious in a rational way: *Illness as Metaphor*, by Susan Sontag, and *Pandemic! Covid-19 shakes the World*, by Slavoj Žižek. The first book is an essay Susan Sontag wrote in 1978 and expanded ten years later with another essay called *AIDS and its Metaphors*. When she wrote the first book, Sontag focused on tuberculosis and cancer, on how society treated these diseases; while tuberculosis was seen as a glamorous disease, cancer was experienced as a tragedy, and this was confirmed by the inhumane way most societies dealt with AIDS in the 1980s. The warlike

treatment of the coronavirus makes it essential to re-read Sontag's masterful work, which focuses on the very different ways in which these great epidemics have been treated at the social level. The American author reflects on how different societies or historical moments generate completely different discourses when it comes to explaining diseases. The metaphors with which we refer to them—because they are always traumatic for people's lives, and even more so when they are fatal—are linguistic constructions that are often just a pretext to avoid facing our fears head on.

Žižek's book, in eleven chapters and an appendix, deals with the coronavirus pandemic, which has mainly affected Europe. The first metaphor is the biblical passage in which the resurrected Jesus commands the Magdalene not to touch him, and another in which he assures his disciples that they will recognize him wherever there is love among believers. Although during the pandemic we were forbidden to touch each other, the Slovenian thinker tells us that «no coronavirus can take this from us. So there is a hope that corporeal distancing will even strengthen the intensity of our link with others» (Slavoj ŽIŽEK, *Pandemic! Covid-19 shakes the World*, New York, OR Books, 2020, p. 3). Despite this positive tone, since the sensitive and sentimental bond of humanity will never be able to be cremated, there is something that has been broken and that Žižek emphasizes. It is the fact that we have to protect ourselves, to love each other, yes, but we cannot always trust people. And this reinforces one of the things that has proliferated the most in the networks and the media in recent years: fake news. This fake news is the pillar of conspiracy theories, the resurgence of racism, the accentuation of homophobia, and so on. The philosopher suggests that perhaps it is time to restore trust between the state and society, the only way to end this dark tunnel through which we are passing. The economic and psychological crises have added to the health crisis, but a communist society in which solidarity based on rational and selfish motives prevails, which is not an idealized or utopian solidarity, can be proposed. Not for nothing, it is an «event» as Žižek understood and defined it in an earlier book (*Event*, from 2014, which could well include *Pandemic!* as an additional chapter), that is: something «traumatic, disturbing», an anomaly that imposes itself on the established order of things, exposing its inconsistencies, making us rethink everything we understood as reality and forcing us to configure it. This, on the other hand, opens us to new possibilities. In this new way of living we have the obligation to take care of ourselves and to practice healing towards others.

This monograph, which we are coordinating, brings together a series of five articles that, from the late Middle Ages to the present day, and taking into account different artistic languages, highlight the aforementioned im-

portance of images and artistic practices in times of crisis. These not only bear witness to the vicissitudes, consequences and collective understanding of pandemics such as the plague, the so-called Spanish flu or the recent Covid-19, in which we are still immersed, but also fulfill an important function: protective, cathartic and even sociabilizing.

The monograph opens with a study by Rosa Alcoy entitled «El Triunfo de la Muerte y el Juicio divino. Reflexiones sobre causalidades epidémicas y lindes sensoriales del Gótico» («The Triumph of Death and Divine Judgment. Reflections on epidemic causalities and sensory boundaries of the Gothic»), which analyzes the complex relationships between the two elements that make up the first part of the title, in order to introduce and examine, from the perspective of this link, the impact of the plague on the art of the Italian Gothic.

Cristina Fontcuberta's article then deals with the artistic production of modern Barcelona around the plague and other epidemics, emphasizing the votive and protective character of the images, taking into account the social prestige that the inclusion of the portrait in some of them implied.

More recently, the influenza pandemic of 1918-1920 had devastating consequences worldwide. Its memory emerged with great force a century later, due to the similarities with the coronavirus. Araceli Moreno's text focuses on the comic and satirical representations that the press of the time offered of the «influenza» of 1918, plagued by stereotypes related to the alleged—and false—Spanish origin of the virus, which they dressed up in «sequins and frills», personifying it in the figures of flamenco and the flamenco dancer.

The following articles take us to the present day with creative projects that give a direct account of the changes in culture as a result of the pandemic mentioned at the beginning of this presentation. For example, Constanza Blanco observes how the virtuality imposed on the performing arts as an adaptation to health measures has allowed the development of strategies and methodologies whose potential and results could be transferred to the return of presentness. The works of the Chilean theater collectives *Artificial* (2021, Teatro del Terror) and *Flores a quien corresponda* (2021, La disvariada) constitute the case studies that allow her to analyze and evaluate this transition.

On the other hand, the collective work of Núria Garcia, Silvia Bernad, Giorgia Scavo and Citlali Hernández proposes a series of devices that have been specifically designed by a team of artists and designers in the so-called Laboratorio de Dispositivos Virales (Laboratory of Viral Devices). These devices make it possible to capture and record gestures, movements, actions and sounds around everyday gadgets that allow us to connect at a

distance, thus analyzing the relationships between bodies and spaces in the context of hyper-connectivity accentuated during the pandemic.

In short, these works, in their diversity, provide us with a set of elements to understand and reflect on the role of art and creativity in times of past and present global crises, to establish lines of relationship and, we hope, to stimulate new research.

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