

LEGACIES OF PLAGUE  
IN LITERATURE,  
THEORY AND FILM

Jennifer Cooke



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## Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film

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Jennifer Cooke

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*For Tony and Dwee Cooke*

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# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction 'But I ain't dead'	1
1 Writing Plague: Defoe and Camus	16
2 The Politics of Plague Theatre: Artaud, Čapek and Camus	44
3 Oedipus the <i>Pharmakos</i> and the Psychoanalytic Plague	73
4 Dreaming Plague and Plaguing Dreams: The Teachings of Psychoanalysis	97
5 Plague, Jews and Fascist Anti-Semites: 'The Great Incurable Malady'	115
6 Screening Plague Images/Plaguing Screen Images: von Trier's <i>Epidemic</i> and Hypnosis	141
7 Plague, Zombies and the Hypnotic Relation: Romero and After	163
<i>Notes</i>	185
<i>Bibliography</i>	211
<i>Index</i>	221



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# Figures

- 3.1 Benedetto Bonfigli (c. 1420–1496), *Madonna della Misericordia* (Madonna of Mercy). Perugia, San Francesco (Oddi Chapel) © 1990, Photo Scala, Florence. 76
- 7.1 Land of the Dead's principal zombie, the petrol pump attendant, at the start of the film. 172
- 7.2 Jason, from *Diary of the Dead*, filming the zombie who will bite him, filmed by Deborah, who will shoot him. 176

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# Introduction

## 'But I ain't dead'

Plague is still with us. This is a medical fact: the disease which results from infection by the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria continues to sicken and to kill, especially in poor countries where medical supplies are sparse and antibiotics are unavailable or arrive too late.<sup>1</sup> Plague is endemic in the rat and rodent populations of certain regions; humans who come into contact with these animals remain at risk. *Legacies of Plague*, however, is not concerned with the medical reality of the disease but with its conceptual and symbolic continuation from the time of the final Western European outbreak in 1720 to the present day. The Marseilles outbreak of 1720 was widely feared and prompted Daniel Defoe to write *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722, even though it did not spread and, when it exhausted itself, plague epidemics disappeared for good. Although various medical and epidemiological theories have been advanced, there is still no conclusive explanation as to why plague never returned to Europe upon an epidemic scale after the French outbreak. This mysterious disappearance, plague's huge numbers of victims, coupled with the vivid imagery of buboes, burial-pits, death carts and houses shut up or marked with the cross of infection, have been held responsible for the grim grip plague has had upon our cultural imagination and for its continual linguistic deployment to name new 'scourges', from AIDS to smoking and, more recently, 'Islamofascism'.<sup>2</sup>

Disease is never merely medical and, as Susan Sontag has pointed out, contagion is not only literal.<sup>3</sup> Writing of plague and other epidemic diseases, she remarks how 'feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched by meanings) is projected onto the world' (63). Plague infects its victim with more than just a bacillus and, as a disease which has outlived its epidemic threat, has since become a textual and metaphoric construction. Sontag's dual focus in

her study *Illness as Metaphor* is upon tuberculosis and cancer, diseases which she argues are perceived, however many victims they claim, to be visited upon the individual, in contrast to the way in which epidemics were experienced as community afflictions. The distinction is crucial and signals plague's social and therefore political dimension: as a disease besetting a whole town, province or area, it threatened the cohesion of the social bond and called for action and containment upon a mass scale, involving socio-medico-political, and therefore also ethical, decisions.

These threats, perceptions and necessities which plague created are still present in the disease's modern metaphorical usages: time and again, plague is wielded as a political or rhetorical weapon in the service of social discrimination or stigmatisation; it is mobilised to critique regimes, dictators or minority groups. Used in this way, plague is frequently accompanied by the powerful 'body metaphor', which renders a state, nation, or people the 'body' that can be labelled 'sick' or 'healthy', thus making it, with plague alongside, a convenient vector for political and social rhetoric. The body metaphor is so ubiquitous, so familiar, that its status as metaphor, and therefore as a linguistic construct, is often obscured and the lines between real sickness and metaphorical sickness blur. For example, appellations such as the 'gay plague' swiftly make the transition from being a euphemism for AIDS and the people it affects, to becoming a way of stigmatising the gay community. In fact, according to Michel Foucault, plague practices helped to form the way in which the medical profession constructs, distinguishes between and monitors health and illness. Foucault argues that the kind of containment practised during plague epidemics introduced a new drive towards the surveillance of people's health and sickness, a use of power with inclusive and epistemological, instead of exclusionary, aims.<sup>4</sup> Thus the fate of the leper, cast out of the community, was replaced by the containment of the plague victim, who was identified and duly quarantined, and whose sickness was measured according to rigorously organised systems of power and observation. These procedures, Foucault asserts, are the building blocks underlying our approach to health and illness today.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the practices which Foucault examines, the prehistory of plague and its later metaphorical deployment tend, as *Legacies of Plague* shows, to draw upon a different model, one closer to that brought to bear upon leprosy sufferers.<sup>6</sup> In times of plague, the ancient Greeks sacrificed a human *pharmakos*, who 'carried' the pollution of the disease outside the city boundaries and, through their death, was meant to secure the epidemic's cessation. The ritual and its impact upon later

plague uses are explored in detail in Chapter 3. This dramatic response survived to reappear in Hitler's accusations against and measures for dealing with the 'Jewish plague'. The structure of the ritual echoes in the way plague 'names' a group that is consequentially seen as a cause of pollution, the removal of which can be proposed as the desired end. Within these discourses, plague is used to identify, label and advocate the removal of a 'poisonous' or 'dangerous' outsider group, usually a minority believed to threaten (the 'health' of) society and whose extermination or containment is supposed to have a curative or restorative function. Although for some commentators plague is perceived as democratic insofar as it is capable of striking down the high or the low, rich or poor, sinner and saint, *Legacies of Plague* actually demonstrates that the disease is more often than not linked with practices that exclude certain groups from society and so is indicative of deliberately divisive forms of discourse, far from what we would consider the principles of democracy or egalitarianism.<sup>7</sup>

A 'normal' body implies a 'healthy' body; a plague-sickened body, society or text involves a thinking of the metaphorical attachments that are grafted within it or upon it. The embodiments of plague discussed in this study are varied; they include, for example, zombies, dictatorships and negative portrayals of the Jews. Plague is also a language effect and a structure of thinking; as such, it is deployed within and shapes discourses as diverse as political rhetoric and psychoanalytic theorising. The diffusion of plague metaphors is great indeed; even within the lexicon of disease, tuberculosis or syphilis – among others – are frequently labelled 'plagues'. Powerfully imbued with a linguistic infectiousness beyond its own set of associations, plague spreads to name a range of diseases and social ills, a practice beginning long ago when disease discrimination was more ambiguous, but which continues, ensuring that even today 'plague' remains a suitable designation for any threatening infectious epidemic.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, as Sontag's study and others have fruitfully explored, each disease has its own character, its own set of associative fears and figurations.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, therefore, *Legacies of Plague* confines itself to representations of infectious epidemics of bubonic plague, identifiable either through the symptoms described or the rituals, structures and history drawn upon in relation to the disease. This allows for the inclusion of fictional diseases which call themselves 'plagues', bear a resemblance in their effects and evoke the disease in deliberate ways, such as Karel Čapek's disease the White Plague, in the play of the same name. The notable exception to this limitation on discussing other disease 'scourges' is the case of AIDS, which is discussed

briefly in Chapter 2 as part of an exploration of plague's use in political theatre.

'Plague' is possibly the oldest name for epidemic disease on record. The Ancient Hebrew word for 'plague', noun and verb, is used repeatedly in the Old Testament and primarily means 'touch'.<sup>10</sup> Ancient Hebrew is pictographic; 'plague' is rendered with an eye (𐤀), a foot (𐤃) and a sprouting seed (𐤄), although since Hebrew is read right to left, this means the first letter is the seed, indicative of plague's disseminative properties. The detailed definition of the verb is 'to touch or strike; also, to bring a plague as a touch from God' and the noun, 'a plague or other sore or illness as a touch: plague, sore, stroke, stripe, stricken, wound' (374). The eye represents seeing, watching and knowledge; the foot stands for walking, carrying or gathering; and the sprouting seed signifies continuation, perpetuation, offspring or heir: the idea of passing on to a new generation.<sup>11</sup> Plague in Old Testament usage was a 'touch' from God, as is clear from the contexts of its appearances in Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus.<sup>12</sup> The English word 'plague' stems from the Latin, *plaga*, to strike or wound, while 'plague' in Latin is *pestis* and *pestilentia*, from where we get 'pestilence'.<sup>13</sup> Ancient Greek renders 'plague' as both *plege* and *loimos*, among others.<sup>14</sup> In all these antecedents, plague is an affliction; in the Bible it was frequently used to punish a people, as in the plagues of Egypt, and similarly, in Sophocles' plague tragedy *Oedipus the King*, it is plague which attacks the Thebans and results in the uncovering of Oedipus' true heritage and unwitting deeds. Even in 1722, Defoe is claiming that with plague '[God] had, as it were, his Sword drawn in his Hand, on purpose to take Vengeance, not on them only, but on the whole Nation' (69).

More recently, controversy has been provoked by new historical and epidemiological work which posits that the Black Death was not, as has commonly been believed, purely or mainly bubonic but was instead a manifestation of other forms of plague bacilli or entirely different infectious 'plagues'.<sup>15</sup> While interesting and sometimes enriching, these debates do not alter the approach taken by *Legacies of Plague*. What remains important is plague's position within cultural memory and its popular, artistic and theoretical representations, not the specificity of past misdiagnoses. *Legacies of Plague* is particularly attentive to how new associations with plague have been forged within twentieth-century and twenty-first-century texts and discourses, while acknowledging and exploring how they often draw upon the existent associations which have historically been attributed to and carried by the disease, such as the perception that its presence is a form of divine judgement. More often

than not, new deployments of plague rely upon the heritage of past plague associations: for example, the condemnation of fascism as plague discussed in Chapters 2 and 5 revives the older belief in the disease as punitive, while Hitler's use of plague to name and blame the Jews clearly has echoes of the way in which the Greeks made use of the *pharmakos*.

Structurally, metaphor is a figure of speech that implies contagion: the two concepts metaphor brings together are no longer discrete but mutually infect one another. As summarised by Paul de Man, from Aristotle to the present, metaphor has entailed a conceptualisation 'conceived as an exchange or substitution of properties on the basis of resemblance'.<sup>16</sup> In texts which use plague as a metaphor, the point of resemblance which de Man refers to is usually concentrated upon issues of infection, contamination, dissemination and containment, as well as more anarchic reactions to plague, which include bacchanalia, the breakdown of law and order, and the lurking presence of the irrational. The move from the literal into the figurative that metaphor constitutes is an action of carrying over, passing on: for example, the social disorder that results from plague can become a plague itself. In his book *Dissemination*, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida has highlighted this carrying over which occurs in metaphorisation. He identifies its presence in Plato's use of the word *pharmakon* (drug or poison) to name and relegate writing in comparison to living speech. In exploring Plato's metaphor, Derrida concludes that '[m]etaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic'.<sup>17</sup> Metaphor plagues logic with its mixing, its disordering; metaphor's own logic is one of dissemination, which infects and disorders the specificity of definition. If many deployments of metaphor veil the structurally inherent contamination upon which they rest, plague quite obviously cannot. Discussing Derrida's argument in the context of AIDS rhetoric, Lee Edelman develops the 'germ' of a thought that 'Disease = Discourse':

Bearing in mind that Derrida's reading of the *pharmakon* explicitly invokes the critical conjunction of discourse and biology informing the platonic opposition between writing as supplement and speech as living word, his gloss suggests that defensive strategies deployed – in the realm of discourse or disease – to combat agencies of virulence may themselves be informed by the virulence they are seeking to efface, informed by it in ways that do not produce the immunizing effect of a vaccine, but that serve, instead, to reinforce and even multiply the dangerous sites of infection.<sup>18</sup>

The name given to this reciprocal infection of not just discourses but also states, politics and institutions in later Derridean writings is



'autoimmunity' and *Legacies of Plague* discusses this in particular in Chapter 5, with reference to plague's deployment in political discourse. Edelman's article seeks to examine and challenge some of the slogans that had become attached to the AIDS awareness and gay rights campaigns, yet in a more generalised context his argument highlights how within disease discourses the assumed distinctions between pure/impure, healthy/diseased, uninfected/infectious, poison/cure are often unstable, mutually infecting terms which bleed into one another and defy simple dichotomisation.

Plague thinking and plague writing therefore entail an examination and, quite often, a crossing or blurring of boundaries. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Derrida's contemporary Maurice Blanchot notes how cancer inherits and continues the plague legacy: '[cancer/plague] 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>19</sup> While it is true that plague is a disruptive force, the response to plague is usually to try to re-establish order by segregating, by issuing edicts which curtail the ordinary rights of the individual and by producing discourses which attempt to explain the disease and account for its affliction. A proliferation of diseased disorder and social chaos breeds a proliferation of tyrannical measures of control and totalising discourses of disease cause or cure. This is what Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus portray; it is also an aspect of Karel Čapek's *The White Plague* (1937) and Camus's play *State of Siege* (1948). Both Čapek and Camus use plague and the measures it produces as an analogy for the effects of fascism and military dictatorship. Not all plague writers stress this aspect of the disease, however; Antonin Artaud, in his 1933 essay upon theatre and plague, in *Theatre and Its Double* celebrates the liberating disorder and the anarchic, subconscious release the disease facilitates. These two responses, the military and the anarchic, draw upon the spectacle inherent in plague which is discussed in Chapter 2.

Academic work on plague consists in the main of historical accounts of specific plague outbreaks or scientific and social science orientated examinations of plague and other epidemic diseases. Many of these contain essential factual and medical information but they are not particularly concerned with plague's symbolic role. Margaret Healy's excellent study, *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues and Politics* (2001), addresses this lacuna for the early modern period and works as a useful historical preface to *Legacies of Plague*. Healy considers the effects of plague upon its victims but crucially 'foregrounds

the socio-culturally constructed nature of explanations of disease, and literature's important participation in that process' (2). She contextualises and investigates plague accounts of the period, drawing upon pamphlets, historical and medical documents, sermons and poems to provide a rich examination of how plague functioned and what it represented across a range of disparate discourses. Healy's close reading of plague tracts reveals that the disease was enmeshed in a complex array of metaphorical associations, many of which are resurrected in the much later plague representations I examine. In a period when religious convictions carried political implications, *Fictions of Disease* outlines the way in which plague circulated as a trope among pro- and anti-Reformists, both claiming God to be upon their side. Plague was routinely depicted as God's punishment but this could be for multiple reasons which tended to shift with the economic, political and religious preoccupations of the time and the author. As 'warnings to be ware', plague tracts linked pestilence to war and famine; to the greed of the rich and their exclusionary measures which disproportionately disadvantaged the poor; to sinfulness; to religious factions; to civil unrest; and to the filth of London's liberties.<sup>20</sup> Even such a summary list gives an indication of the potential contradictions in plague rhetoric: in some manifestations, the rich are responsible for plague or its spread, due to their greed and lack of charity; in others, the poor, for their dirtiness and sinful behaviour.

What emerges is a picture of plague as a rhetorical tool with which to criticise enemies, antagonists and minorities, and to apportion blame. Healy notes too that this can result in the scapegoating of particular groups, as happened to the Jews. These are aspects of plague which have survived and continued into the twentieth-century and beyond: while political and religious positions have altered, the need to find a portion of society to blame for socio-economic and political problems has remained the same and the metaphor of plague has often been reached for at such points. Thus, as Healy observes, 'plague writings inscribe social tensions' (63), and:

[p]lague thus comes to represent the ultimate horror, that of both individual and social disintegration: only those two competing scourges, famine and war, match its effects. Ideas about social decay, disorder and instability are thus encoded in the word 'plague'.

(62)

At the same time as encoding social disintegration, plague was often personified as a 'militaristic tyrant' (62), a representation that is revived by Čapek and Camus in their plague plays against fascism. Healy's

sensitivity to the constructed nature of plague, even at a time when it was a palpable threat, has informed my own approach, and her detailed attention to its powerful metaphoric role in early modern discourse provides an essential genealogy for the disease.

The way in which plague has been written about in the twentieth century indicates the shifting parameters of how it has been interpreted and understood, providing a guide to its role within literature and the work of cultural and critical theorists. David Steel's 1981 essay, 'Plague Writing: From Boccaccio to Camus' establishes the existence of a literary plague canon by providing an invaluable overview of authors who have drawn upon plague, confirming that the disease had a significant impact upon writers who took up the pen well after the medical threat had receded. Steel notes that in the past 'the idea of plague seems to have been as powerful as the disease was virulent'; so much so in fact that 'despite the rarity of outbreaks today contemporary literature bears witness to the continuing vitality of its symbolic possibilities'.<sup>21</sup> Tracing the plague tradition as it develops in Western literature, Steel notes writers well known for their plague depictions – Boccaccio, Defoe, Edgar Allan Poe, Artaud and Camus – but he additionally pauses over those whose plague works have attracted less attention, such as Francesco Berni, John Wilson, Alessandro Manzoni, Harrison Ainsworth, Adalbert Stifter and Hermann Hesse. Steel is not attempting to theorise plague nor does he detail the individual resonance of these different depictions, but the essay importantly recognises that there is 'a curious parallel between the transmission of a virus by a carrying agent into a receptive area and the communication of an idea, orally or in writing, into a favourable cultural milieu' (106). Before Steel's article, Raymond Crawford's *Plague and Pestilence in Literature and Art* (1914) was the only twentieth-century study of the disease's cultural impact; its focus is the early Biblical, Greek and Roman accounts of pestilence, and the art inspired by these and the Black Death.

A very different approach and understanding of literary plague texts is presented by Barbara Fass Leavy's *To Blight With Plague: Studies in a Literary Theme* (1992). She reads familiar, canonical plague texts: Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's 'The Pardoner's Tale', Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' and Camus's *The Plague*, although she also includes chapters on texts which feature different diseases, stating that she has 'taken the authors at their own word when they use the word *plague*'.<sup>22</sup> Despite the varied diseases and the inevitably different contexts and mythologies they carry with them, Fass Leavy identifies the theme of the Edenic Fall as common

to most of the texts she reads; for her, plague literature 'is replete with bowers of bliss and false paradises' (17). She supports her argument with Boccaccio's Arcadian settings for the brigada's tale-telling and the supposedly impregnable fortress retreated to by Poe's Prospero in 'The Masque of the Red Death'. Yet, while these can be seen as temporary and illusionary paradises from plague, in most of the texts which *Legacies of Plague* examines the Edenic theme is by no means a prevalent one; if anything, the reverse is true and plague becomes associated with ugly and often militaristic dystopias. Fass Leavy's preoccupations are very different to those under consideration in *Legacies of Plague*, and her focus is primarily literary:

Ironically, both Boccaccio, who starts from the premise of the writer as moral instructor, and Poe, who denounces that premise, use the plague motif to call into question the significance of art in a mortal world. A reading of their works reveals something paradoxical, even self-cancelling, in the whole idea of plague literature, which strains to breaking point the tension between the instructive and the self-expressive in art. How can the subject of pestilence be consistent with the pleasure principle that separates literary art from rhetoric? Is plague itself – as subject – a bridge between the artist's moral and creative self?

(20)

These enquiries are concerned with literature's aesthetic dimensions, with the role of the artist and the function of their art. They fail to address the significance of the political paradigm. Many of the texts I discuss use plague rhetorically to make a political point, thereby inter-fusing the literary and the rhetorical. The question, then, is not one of the extent of separation or the consistency of aims which Fass Leavy pinpoints; it is instead a question of effect and impact within a specific historical and political circumstance. To align the pleasure principle with literary art, as Fass Leavy does, is to assume a simple relationship between literature and pleasure that does not take account of the fascination inherent in spectacle, disgust and horror, or the potential pleasures to be derived from rhetoric. The figure of the writer is not extraneous to examinations of plague, but the writing of plague is always inextricably linked to questions of language and the social and political domains in which that language operates.

For Elana Gomel, plague narratives have a very different set of characteristics to those sketched by Fass Leavy. In her essay 'The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body', Gomel posits that

plague narratives fall into two types, apocalyptic and postapocalyptic. The former is notable for its millennial preoccupations and for the way in which plague becomes figured as a 'final solution' which facilitates a genocidal cleansing before utopia can be ushered in.<sup>23</sup> Gomel rightly locates the roots of this in the Nazi and eugenicist rhetoric prevailing in the first half of the twentieth century; its plague narratives tend to be within the science fiction genre, set in the future, and they draw upon developments in nano- or gene technology to create fictional uber-disease pandemics. Such texts express a chiliasm orientated towards the cleansing of society through disease in order to facilitate a 'glorious rebirth' (408). The texts examined in *Legacies of Plague* lack the eugenicist optimism inherent in such millennial visions because they are mostly the product of European writers in the mid to late 1920s, the 1930s and 1940s, a time period marked by the rise of National Socialism and other fascisms. Although some of the disease narratives drawn upon here imagine alternate realities and are set in fictional, nightmarish worlds, they are attempts to refute and depict the menace of the new political and social conditions prevalent at the time of writing. Hence, the majority of *Legacies of Plague's* texts fit into Gomel's postapocalyptic typology. These are said to feature 'protracted dying, narrative entropy, and interminable duration' characterised by what she terms, following James Berger's definition, 'aftermaths and remainders' (408). Examples would be Defoe's *Journal*, Camus's *The Plague*, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, the political theatre discussed in Chapter 2, and the zombie films of Chapter 7. Alongside Healy, Gomel affirms the importance of the 'contagious body' as 'a locus of political struggle' (409); her discussion of the voice of the plague witness is drawn upon in Chapter 1.

Like Gomel, who identifies the phenomenon in Hitler's anti-Semitic rhetoric, one of the earliest theorist of plague texts, René Girard, is keenly conscious of the way in which the cause of plague can also be figured as the cure, which he discusses in his early essay 'The Plague in Literature and Myth' (1973–4). Girard's focus is on violence. Attentive to what Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* can teach us, he argues that plague is always accompanied by a 'thematic cluster' comprised of 'epidemic contagion, the dissolving of differences' and 'mimetic doubles', as well as featuring a 'sacrificial element'.<sup>24</sup> All four elements are forms of crisis for the social bond, threatening the boundaries, hierarchies and differences that ensure stability within societies. While I would not go so far as Girard in stating that all plague texts exhibit this quartet of traits – a clearly identifiable scapegoat or a playing out of mimetic

doubles is absent, for example, from Defoe's *Journal* – they certainly feature, whether singly or in combination, in many representations of plague, as Girard amply demonstrates through reference to Shakespeare, Artaud, Dostoevsky and others. The reading Girard gives of plague and *Oedipus the King* is fleshed out in more depth in his book *The Scapegoat* and is, along with the article, discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of *Legacies of Plague*. The great value of Girard's work on plague lies in his recognition of its metaphorical import; his stress upon how plague texts revolve around or stage social tensions and crises; and his identification of the role of plague in ritual and myth. Even though plague eventually comes to be another feature of his larger thesis about the violence inherent in human societies, he was the first to bring a theoretical dimension to discussions of plague and demonstrates the 'incredible vitality' of plague's legacies and their contemporary relevance:

Earlier, I said that the plague, as a literary theme, is still alive today, in a world less and less threatened by real bacterial epidemics. This fact looks less surprising now, as we come to realise that the properly medical aspects of the disease never were essential; in themselves, they always played a minor role, serving mostly as a disguise for an even more terrible threat that no science has ever been able to conquer [the dissolution of the social bond]. The threat is still very much with us, and it would be a mistake to consider the presence of the plague in our literature as a matter of formal routine ... its relevance to our current psychosociological predicament becomes evident as soon as specific examples are produced.

(845)

Girard's perception of the contemporary relevance of plague is confirmed by what follows in *Legacies of Plague*. However, the medical aspects of the disease are not as minor as he represents: the symptoms of plague, its buboes and the imagery it carries with it, are an intrinsic part of the disease's specificity and horror. *Legacies of Plague* explores how the distinct medical, social and metaphoric roles that the disease fulfils have their roots, as Girard argues, in ancient rituals and practices. These survived to be remolded by medieval associations and early modern fears, and then to be reinvented within more recent embodiments and uses of plague.

*Legacies of Plague* specifically examines three areas: literature, theory and film. Its chapters are ordered to reflect this, although due to plague's infectiousness, names circulate repeatedly and themes recur in differing guises. Chapter 1 explores literary narratives and plague

through a discussion of the well known plague texts, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Albert Camus's *The Plague*. Just as plague inscribes itself upon the body of its victims, it produces textual, thematic and stylistic symptoms upon an author's corpus. Despite the deaths plague texts inevitably recount, there is a surprising creativity bequeathed by the disease to the writer. Plague's relationship with language and its creative possibilities is addressed; so too is the plague witness, the one who survives to tell the tale. Resultantly, Chapter 1 encompasses an examination of how Defoe and Camus both intervene in history through their fictions. Due to the nature of plague, its symptoms, victims, necessities and the exigencies it creates, there are shared affinities within plague narratives and shared challenges for the plague writer. This is also true for the playwrights discussed in Chapter 2, which explores the theatricality and spectacle of plague plays and Antonin Artaud's theatre theorisation of plague. Moving from the notable absence of plague on the Elizabethan stage, when the disease was prevalent, and finishing with the AIDS plays of the 1980s, the chapter is interested primarily in the way plague has been used by twentieth-century playwrights to effect political and social change. The anti-fascist plague plays of Albert Camus and Karel Čapek inform the central consideration of the chapter, as well as Artaud's conception of how plague can radically reinvigorate theatre. All three twentieth-century playwrights were living under the shadow of emergent fascism and their work has transparent political dimensions.

Chapters 3–5 address plague and theory, with psychoanalysis occupying a rather special position. Firstly, and as outlined in detail in Chapter 3, this is due to the importance Sigmund Freud accorded to Sophocles' plague tragedy, *Oedipus the King*. In the play, Oedipus fulfils the role of the ancient Greek plague victim, the *pharmakos*, which emerges as a significant and powerful legacy resonating throughout this and other chapters. As is well known, Oedipus lends his name to the central psychoanalytic theory, the Oedipus complex, which Freud initially identifies as structuring the interpersonal attachments of childhood and later widens to account for societal development. In the play, Oedipus is responsible for plague's presence in Thebes; his removal is supposed to ensure it ceases. Through an examination of its reception and the questions of later critics, Chapter 3 outlines how the same position can be attributed to the role of the Oedipus complex in the Freudian oeuvre: it at once describes the genesis of sickness and the pathways to its cure. Broached in Chapter 3, and developed more fully in Chapter 4, is an exploration of the 'infectious' spread of 'the psychoanalytic plague'

in its impact upon the world of psychology and science, and also in the development of its therapeutic practices and structures. Concepts like analysis and resistance and transference provide a totalising theory of the way in which a patient is unable to react to psychoanalysis without already conforming to its prescriptions, without already being contaminated by its logic. Furthermore, in its attention to the death drive, to the power of dreams (which Artaud links to plague infection) and in its later adoption by film theorists, psychoanalysis concerns itself with many of the issues raised by and within plague texts.<sup>25</sup> Chapter 4 stays with psychoanalysis to investigate a curious proposition of Artaud's in 'Theatre and the Plague' that the disease could be a psychic entity and capable of being psychically transmitted. Concentrating upon a key phenomenon, transference, I undertake a close reading of one of Freud's dreams, from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, named the Three Fates by editor James Strachey. The dream weaves a complex set of associations which circulate contagiously around fears about the future, plagiarism, scenes of knowledge acquisition and impartation, and an admission by Freud that he is plagued by desires. The chapter follows these rather elliptical symptoms to disclose a contiguity between the concerns raised by the dream's plaguing associations and the very practices of psychoanalysis and its teaching.

An echo of the *pharmakos* mechanism can be identified at work within Hitler's anti-Semitism: the Jews were depicted as the scourge of German Aryanism and their removal proposed as the cure. Chapter 5 examines the relationship between plague and anti-Semitism in fascist rhetoric, following closely the analogies of Hitler and examining the Nazi propaganda film *Der ewige Jude*. In opposition to this rhetoric is the anti-fascist critique of Wilhelm Reich, who labelled and theorised fascism as an 'emotional plague', but in whose later writings plague slowly widens to name the behaviour of Jewish psychoanalysts with whom Reich once worked. The way in which psychoanalysis dealt with its Jewish constitution in the face of increasing anti-Semitism is another redeployment of plague, demonstrating how it circulates between and within these discourses in curious ways which are not so simple as to be assimilated under the attack and counterattack formula of typical politicking. René Girard's work on the community in *Violence and the Sacred* is read alongside Jacques Derrida's conceptualisation of autoimmunity to provide a framework for understanding the motility of plague across discourses that are often directly working against each other. The result is still pertinent to political discourses and institutions today.



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