

BOOK REVIEW

## Marsha Morton and Ann-Marie Akehurst (eds), *Visual Culture and Pandemic Disease since 1750: Capturing Contagion*

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The germ (pun intended) of this edited volume was a panel titled ‘Epidemics of Fear and the History of Medicine’ at the College Art Association conference in February 2021. I was an audience member for this online panel, and it is satisfying to see the finished product of that meeting. As was said then, and as Marsha Morton states in her introduction, in which she frames this volume in light of COVID-19, these past few years have proven ‘an opportune moment to reconsider the historic role and function of imagery in constructing, responding to, and documenting epidemics’ (p. 1). I am glad that this book exists; it would have been a waste to leave the early years of COVID without an edited volume like this to situate our memes, viral illustrations and newspaper front pages within a broader historical context.

This book offers a diversity of perspectives on the topic of visual culture and pandemic disease – it does not focus only on anglophone spaces, and it examines diseases with varied means of transmission: air, water, animals and humans. Even with this breadth, there are several striking linkages made between chapters, both by the authors themselves and by Morton in the introduction. This connecting of diverse perspectives allows for a better comprehension of the value and ubiquity of art and visual culture in global understandings of pandemic disease.

Throughout the chapters there are many echoes of 2020, 2021, 2022 and onward. Some historical connections to COVID are explicit, but others (such as the poor being unfairly disadvantaged with respect to the disease, or the effects of globalization on disease spread) could have been written more plainly to further what I see as the primary contribution of this book. With this spectre of COVID throughout, this book would have benefited from one more chapter focused on COVID visual culture as a conclusion. Additionally, a clearer definition of what a pandemic is, how this differs from an ‘epidemic’ or a ‘contagion’ (words used often throughout this volume), and the relation of each of the diseases covered by the chapters to these definitions would have been helpful in the introduction. The connections to the COVID pandemic – both explicit and implicit – are, I believe, the best work within this book, and will allow educators to position the objects and artworks of focus in this volume to their students’ pandemic experiences of the twenty-first century.

Along these lines, it is Amanda Sciampacone’s chapter ‘“Invisible destroyers”: cholera and COVID in British visual culture’ that serves as the heart and the highlight

of this edited volume. The most salient points that this book is trying to make can, I feel, be found in Sciampacone's prescient work on cholera and COVID, xenophobia and British visual culture and media. Sciampacone makes perceptive connections, exploring 'how the representation of COVID-19 in the British press, particularly in the *Metro*, recalls a longer visual history of the iconography of epidemics from plague to cholera' (p. 137). An idea that is latent throughout many of the other chapters is made explicit in Sciampacone's: the visual 'othering' of the diseased body. In this sense, it is also the print *John Bull Catching the Cholera* (c.1832) that speaks most to this trope. This piece is analysed both by Ann-Marie Akehurst and Sciampacone, and its triangulation of racism, pandemic disease, visual culture, public-health communication, governmental (im)potence and easily spread artworks about health makes it a perfect encapsulation of almost all of the purported purposes of this edited volume.

The final chapter, by Alev Berberoğlu and Cansu Değirmencioğlu, also deserves particular praise. Using two seemingly disparate case studies, these authors examine the role of visual culture in public-health communication around tuberculosis during the transitory moment between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Their source material – illustrations from 1926 delineating how a careless father could bring tuberculosis to his home, and faceless life-sized cut-outs at the Hygiene Exhibition of 1937 – is fascinating in itself, but the authors do a wonderful job showing how the same pedagogical goal can be visualized in multiple ways.

Unfortunately, there are several outliers in this book that throw off its central, strong themes. The first chapter by Andrew Hopkins, while it sets up some of the plague-focused precedents that are helpful in later chapters, falls far outside of the book's 'core' time period, stated in the introduction as being between the late 1700s and the 1920s (the long nineteenth century). Instead, this chapter focuses on outbreaks of plague and related paintings, processions and architecture in Venice from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, with some small references to cultural products of the twentieth century. This places this chapter not only outside what the editors state to be their primary temporal limit, but also outside the parameters of the wider Routledge series in which this book sits: *Science and the Arts since 1750*. This first chapter is framed as a 'preliminary' one, 'Because the past history of social and medical responses to epidemics has informed subsequent experiences' (p. 5). Although I agree with this statement, perhaps this early modern plague stage setting should have been done in the book's introduction, with a broader remit than just Venice. Much more could have been said about modernity, modern methods of visual culture, modern understandings of contagion and so on if this date period had been adhered to more strictly. Additionally, Edna Bonhomme's chapter on 'Plague, trade, and governance in eighteenth-century Tunisia' is only tangentially related to visual culture. Her focus is the Tunisian port of La Goulette, and while there is discussion of this space and how it was affected and constructed by plague, and the arguments made and sources used are sound, there is only brief engagement with visual culture or visual analysis. Although this volume will be helpful for students and educators to frame pandemic disease within historical visual contexts, perhaps this book would have been better served with a narrower focus, with chapters that did not align with the core intersection of modern pandemic disease and visual culture jettisoned.

Overall, *Visual Culture and Pandemic Disease since 1750* is an important read for art historians interested in medical history and medical historians interested in visual culture. The particular value of this volume lies in its diversity of perspectives, its ruminations on gender and race, and the visual connections made between pandemic disease of the past and COVID-19. This book shows, with a myriad of fascinating examples, that, when under the invisible threat of contagion, humans make sense of illness,

death and uncertainty through visualization: through prints, paintings, photographs and film. Sara K. Berkowitz states in her chapter that ‘images not only document but also deeply shape our reaction to and experience with disease’ (p. 74). This was true in early modern Venice, where this book begins, and it has continued to be true in our post-COVID world.