

Power-games Behind the Conceptualization of Contagion

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This contribution is based on the talk I gave for the 2021 PARL Performance Art Research Ljubljana in September this year on the topic of contagion. I am trying to draw parallels between contagion in the medical-epidemiological realm and its metaphorical usage, while emphasizing the hazards of such sociability on the one hand, and opportunities on the other.

The fear of microbial disaster became a framework for questions about the nature and location of sovereignty, the hazards of sociability and an opportunity for a range of surveillance mechanisms throughout history. In addition, the concept of contagion has been impregnated with a number of imperialistic views and is in most cases presented as an external threat that is disseminated by foreigners.¹ Such a notion has been widely and uncritically reproduced not only in political discourse but also in literature and pop-culture.² These tendencies, which can be easily traced in the political language where almost all forms of political enemies, racial and other unwanted others have been identified as the threat of infection, reimagine the world “as a geography of bounded zones of containment, protection, and vulnerability”.³ During the Cold War, for example, such a label was among others given to the Communists portrayed “as bearers of ideological bacteria, infecting the minds of American civilians”,⁴ and replaced later by some other unwanted and threatening groups. A number of examples that emerged from political discourse show how political opponents and microbes have become indistinguishable. It cannot come as a surprise that artists and

¹ See: Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2008.

² For example, emerging infections of HIV in the 1980s put the vocabulary of disease outbreaks in the context of globalisation into circulation and led to a spate of mid 1990s films and popular novels that featured such storylines. A rich year for outbreak narratives was 1995 with the release of Wolfgang Petersen’s *Outbreak* and Terry Gilliam’s *12 Monkeys*, along with the publication of Robin Cook’s *Contagion* and Patrick Lynch’s *Carriers*. What these narratives share is a traditional way of responding through dramatization of a culture’s political unconscious. See: Priscilla Wald, *Contagious*.

³ *Contagion: Health, Fear, Sovereignty*, Bruce Magnusson and Zahi Zalloua (eds.), Washington, University of Washington Press, 2012, p. 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

representatives of civil society, as guards of critical discourse and fighters for social change, in many countries including in Slovenia, have been portrayed in similar ways.

Such narratives pinpoint the *power of technology*, to rely on foucauldian terminology, that circulates and functions on various levels. Various spatial strategies that are implemented by governments on various levels to ward off “the threat” have found a significantly pregnant fellow passenger in the ideologically embedded discourse that is placed in *constructed knowledge* and so visibly functional in every-day life. This is also a reason why the body was recognized by Foucault as the field of the greatest investment of governmental operations and how it was “moulded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws [...]”.⁵ However, the body is not simply docile and passive but is rather “a stake in the struggle for power’s control over a materiality that is dangerous to it, precisely because it is unpredictable and able to be used in potentially infinite ways [...]”.⁶ Especially since the body can be and acts as a resistant force, the regimes of power are continuously trying to prevail in that potentially infectious power and suppress it at the root.

FOUCAULT’S THREE MODELS OF POWER

For the conceptual background of infectious disease I will lean on those aspects of Michel Foucault’s critical theory of power, where he employs in the discussion the theme of infection and its metaphors in relation to changeable regimes of power. Foucault does not cope only with the mere relations between contagious diseases (leprosy, plague and smallpox) and models of governing, but goes further in his thinking unearthing those technologies that enable continuous fragmentation and divisions within society.⁷ I found these sources explanatory enough for enabling a better understanding of the overrepresented cultural and political subconsciousness.

⁵ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought*, London, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 87.

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 146.

⁷ It is worth adding that the epidemic problems that seemed to disappear from the first world, in many cases remain highly risky and dangerous in the Third world (including the three infectious diseases Foucault focused on in his studies).

Foucault claimed that during the time of leprosy, most of the technologies were implemented unsuccessfully. This was also the reason for the mainly chaotic situation of the time, full of suspended laws and lifted prohibitions. However, the mechanisms of exclusion of the sick from the cities work hand in hand with maintaining the exclusion of the unwanted population even after the removal of the set regulation. “Poor vagabonds, criminals, and ‘deranged minds’ would take the part played by the leper and we shall see what salvation was expected from this exclusion, for them and for those who excluded them as well.”⁸ Hence, leprosaria became houses for the poor and mental asylums in early modernity.

In his further investigation of infectious diseases in relation with surveillance rituals, he focused on the plague, when the surveillance mechanisms (controlling the borders of the city to prevent foreigners entering as well as citizens leaving the city, and harshly guarding all the movements within the city itself) were much more successful in disciplining their citizens in comparison to the previous epidemic. Thereby cities became

*a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion, or punishment. Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere. ‘A considerable body of militia, commanded by good officers and men of substance’, guards at the gates, at the town hall and in every quarter to ensure the prompt obedience of the people and the most absolute authority of the magistrates, ‘as also to observe all disorder, theft and extortion’.*⁹

In that way, he poses a causally-consequently resolution:

*if the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects. Rather than the massive, binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and ramification of power.*¹⁰

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Vintage Books, 1988, p. 7.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 195–196.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

However, such an ideal modern disciplinary state could not last forever, as it is in people's nature to disguise mere obedience. Still, protocols of division continued to play an important role for further separation and fragmentation, guarded by and through medical-epidemic (or/and military) notions of protection. To repeat Foucault: "Poor vagabonds [or racial others], criminals, and 'deranged minds' would [continuously] take the part played by the leper."¹¹

While the sovereigns had to invent a different technology to enable a smooth and beneficiary model to govern, which Foucault named *inoculation practices* and extracted it from the emergence and spread of smallpox.¹²

In opposition to the mechanisms implemented in the 14th century, in the 18th century the authorities approached smallpox with a very different type of prevention. Instead of passing the power to the hands of the police and military, smallpox infection was pushed into the hands of the medical professions. Instead of locking people in, the doctors and scientists tried to understand its incidence, measured the factual occurrence of cases in the population, the risk of inoculation and followed other statistical indexes/data, while at the same time promoting vaccination as a successful formula to halt endemic phenomena. The characteristic mechanisms of liberal society were placed in a wide scope of risk management and so, maintaining the people's belief of having freedom on the one hand, while practicing procedures of normalization as a new ground for further exclusion of the unwanted Others, on the other.

The three governmental models proposed by Foucault, have to a certain degree been already developed further. From the Western perspective a useful reference remains Gilles Deleuze with his short essay *Society of Control* in which the philosopher pinpointed new mechanisms that were set in neoliberal societies. However, even more relevant for today's perspective are observations of a new emerging and spreading model that combines and mixes capitalistic notions with feudalism, as tackled for example by a former politician and economist Yanis Varoufakis.¹³ As shown through older models, this relatively new model of governing is also a further development of previous models and could be recognized in the sudden

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, p. 7.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, Michel Senellart et al. (eds.), trans. Graham Burchell, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 10.

¹³ Yanis Varoufakis in conversation with Slavoj Žižek, *Indigo festival*, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIgFnfHhcRc&t=1453s> (last accessed on 10 Nov 2021).

empowerment of right-wing governments around the Globe and an escalation of authoritarian forms of governing.¹⁴

POSITIVE NOTIONS OF THE CONTAGION METAPHOR

What does such an observation tell us? In order to provide a clearer position, the contagion metaphor would be useful to observe and couple with concepts of protected and unprotected bodies, immunity, community and even autoimmunity. Instead of emphasising further a long list of dangerous consequences of linking contagion in a medical-epidemiological and metaphorical (political) conceptualization to its blueprints on our daily perception, I will rather focus on a resistant conceptualization that moves our perception in opposite directions – struggling to emphasize an urge for communal, unprotected and affectious human relations. While (potential) infections circulate as a threat that produces social anxieties and fragments a social body, creating a handy and powerful weapon for the elites, its flip-side conceptualizations unearth sovereignty mechanisms, empower the population and enable a strong resistant front.

The word contagion derives from the Latin term *contāgiōn* (as a stem of *contāgiō* or in English contact, infection) is an equivalent to a combined phrases of *con-* + *tāg-* (as a variant stem of *tangere* or in English “to touch”) + *-iōn*— or “in contact through touch”. The term found its place in the French and English languages in the middle or late 13th century. Regardless of the fact that the word itself is neutral, due to its usage and connotation the prevailing understandings discard medical-epidemic transmission of infectious disease and pin its frightening connotation to the metaphoric usage in a form of spreading mostly harmful ideas or practice.¹⁵

Overviewing the wide range of literature that replicates the term contagion, it becomes clear that as a metaphor it has found a pregnant space in a wide range of social studies throughout the 20th and especially in the 21st century, when it crystallized around the growth of social

¹⁴ For further analyses of government in the last few decades it is worth reading contemporary Italian Political Philosophy (especially Roberto Esposito) and Isabell Lorey *State of Insecurity. Government of the Precarious*, London, Verso, 2015.

¹⁵ See: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/contagion> (last accessed on 10 Nov 2021).

networking.¹⁶ With frequent and continuous usage of this metaphor, researchers transmitted the metaphor in unconventional, self-sown domains; *social contagion* found its potent place in psychology, *cultural contagion* in anthropology, *financial contagion* in economics, *viral marketing* in the analyses of business and *meme theory (memetics)* in the studies of social media. It could even be claimed that in the last two centuries contagion has become a byword for creativity and a fundamental process by which knowledge and ideas are communicated and taken up, which resonates also with the influential book by André Siegfried, *Routes of Contagion*. The book became canonic true to its statement that “there is a striking parallel between the spreading of germs and the spreading of ideas or propaganda,” and which greatly triggered an interest in employing the statement in a wide area of social studies.¹⁷

Interestingly enough the concept of contagion has not been used much in theatre and dance studies. However, there are rare cases in which the metaphor is used but even more often replaced by some other concepts to describe intriguing aspects of relations and responses that are triggered by performance between the performer and its spectators. One of the most persistent concept in the last decade is “affect”. It has found a fruitful ground in Baruch Spinoza’s *Ethics* and especially in the implementation of his theory by Henri Bergson and later its development by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that lead to a wide range of affect theories and studies that proliferated in the last three decades.

Theorists and practitioners in the broad field of performance studies were for decades trying to answer: How do people respond to the moving body on stage and why do they respond as they respond? What do people sense? What resonates in them? What practices and for what reason are (more) infectious and why are others not?

In order to answer these questions, the implementation of the contagion metaphor seemed to be a promise. One of such early examples was the work of Antonin Artaud. With applying a figurative term Artaud tried to explain the energetic transmission between bodies on the stage, referencing St. Augustine, who “complain[ed] of this similarity between the action of the plague that kills without destroying the organs and the theatre which, without killing,

¹⁶ It is necessary to stress that a non-figural meaning of contagion was a fundamental concept in the study of religion but also other social theories analysing beliefs and their circulation in social interactions.

¹⁷ André Siegfried, «Germs and Ideas: Routes of Epidemics and Ideologies», in *Routes of Contagion* (translation of *Itinéraires de Contagions: Épidémies et idéologies*, 1960), Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1965, p. 85.

provokes the most mysterious alterations in the mind of not only an individual but an entire populace.”¹⁸

From a more accurate position, the concept of contagion could be found in John Martin’s writings on dance for the New York Times in the 1930s that were rewritten and compiled in the book *Introduction to the Dance*.¹⁹ With more universal assumptions, Martin focuses on new notions in contemporary forms of dance and choreography, on its modernisation, while providing an alternative paradigm of responses to help and encourage readers and spectators to make sense of this new dance form. “Dance, he explained, conveys meaning because viewers, even though sitting in their seats, feel the movements and consequently the emotions of the dancer.”²⁰ While referencing the studies of *kinesthesia*,²¹ the notion of (emotional) contagion helped him to explain “bodily movement, which makes the onlooker feel sympathetically in his own musculature from the exertion he sees in someone else’s musculature”.²²

Such awareness of body positions and movements by means of sensory organs can be considered as integral to perception, which is not only visual but multisensory. Martin argued that both, emotional and unconscious realms of the psyche are used spontaneously by modern dancers to cut through processes of socialisation and representations, accessing the genuine character of tacit emotional states, “awaken and enliven the feelings of the viewers or to assert the vitality of physicality as separate from the emotion”.²³ He encouraged spectators to actively participate in the dance performances through *inner mimicry* and experience *muscular sympathy* or *metakinesis*.²⁴

¹⁸ Antonin Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958, p. 26.

¹⁹ John Martin, *Introduction to the Dance*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1965.

²⁰ Susan L. Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 26.

²¹ Broadly speaking *kinesthesia* refers to sensation of movement, being derived from the Greek *kinein* (movement) and *aisthesis* (sensation) that was “first implemented in physiological studies of the late nineteenth century to refer exactly to the sense of the body’s movement, yet the notion of internal bodily sensation was widely discussed in the eighteen-century philosophy and aesthetics”. Susan L. Foster, “Movement’s Contagion: The Kinesthetic Impact of Performance”, in Tracy C. Davis (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 49.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²³ Susan L. Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 309.

²⁴ John Martin, *The Modern Dance*, New York, A.S. Barnes, 1933, p. 11–13.

Close proximity between the spread of gems and the spread of affections in the theatre remain a potent ground for exploration of close proximities in theatre settings together with various innovations in the domain of performance art. While Artaud's writings had a huge impact on ritual theatre and performance, Martin's on new dance notions, Susan Sontag's essays gathered in *Against Interpretations: And Other Essays* (1966) were the most infectious for artists working toward reconceptualization of their performative strategies as well as (young) intellectuals striking for the social revolution. Although Sontag did not deal with the same terminology, she used similar stances to describe the sublime power of art, entitling it with the term *new sensibility*.²⁵ According to Sontag *new sensibility* could be achieved through "revolutionizing from the inside", "in nature itself", which was possible through and by, as artists and intellectuals believed at that time, a "kind of shock therapy for both confounding and unclosing our senses".²⁶

Hence, Sontag's observations were made just a bit before the intriguing study *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*²⁷ (1966) by american psychologist James J. Gibson in which the author made an important step forward in analysing the complex relations between the moving subject and its viewer, arguing that multisensory perception is the act of extracting information from the environment.²⁸ According to Gibson, "any given act of perceiving depends on a complex sorting through of that, which is invariant and that, which is in flux"²⁹ and "any act of perception depends on the detection of the just-noticeable difference between sensory input and bodily disposition".³⁰ However, he still acknowledged *kinesthesia* as playing a central role in integrating all the senses, perceiving for him is more extensive and wide. In contrast to Martin's belief in movement offering access to primal or repressed experiences and feelings, with Gibson the potentiality of movement became seen as a possibility to provide insight into new dimensions of reality, which is similar to Sontag's position.

Such observation could be further linked to the great shift in dance expressions and in relation to them. In contrast to Martin's analysis of various expressionistic dance forms

²⁵ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, London and New York, Vintage, 1994.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

²⁷ James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1966.

²⁸ Susan L. Foster, "Movement's Contagion", p. 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

(concert forms of dance full of emotions), the Gibson theory correlates already with new notions of conceptual dance and dance improvisation. If the significance of dance performances in the era of Martin's writing was providing an apparatus to encourage his readers, and so the audience, toward active observation and experience, in the 1960s dance and wider performance art wasn't any longer about admiration of the virtuosity of the performers, but transformed into a ground that tried to confound the senses of their observers and challenge their interpretation. While many dance performances lost their infectious side, new performance protocols found a new ally in the student revolution.

This relation seems to be fruitful for further acknowledging the potency of revolt through bodies' desensitisation and more spontaneous collective organizations that captured 1968 and made it an infectious revolutionary side that wasn't long lasting. In addition, governments tried to prevent its groundbreaking potency of social transformation by managing the student uprising's "afterlife" as suppression and trivialization. The former Yugoslavia for example, from the early 1970s until the early 1980s, prosecuted protagonists of 1968, censored a number of journals, books, and films, and incriminated prominent intellectuals.³¹ At that time, the memory of the student revolt of 1968 was successfully diminished or was (mis)perceived as a failure, a different social contagion spread in Slovenia through the metamorphism of punk, licensing a voice to rage against taboos and "pointing out the critique of the socialist world and its attitude against everything and everyone who was a possible threat to it".³² As with many other infectious social and artistic practices and movements, punk slowly lost its power of contagion.

FROM A SOCIAL ASPECT

In the relatively calm period of the 1990s that followed, findings about a new class of brain cells called *mirror neurons* located in several areas of the cortex were important for a once again growing interest in *kinesthesia* and a new ground to implement the metaphor of contagion in art. The author of *mirror neuron* theory, Alain Berthoz, built his findings on Gibson's theory of perception but managed to depart from him in two crucial ways: firstly, with his argument "that perception is a simulation of action; and secondly, [that] he does not

³¹ See: Branislav Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects, Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2016, p. 193.

³² Marina Gržinić, "Performans, feminizem in queer", in Marina Gržinić and Tanja Velagić (eds.), *Trenutki odločitve: Performativno, politično in tehnološko* [Moments of Decision: Performative, political and Technological], Ljubljana: Društvo ZAK, 2006, p. 91.

assume that observers share a common environment, instead holding that each individual may perceive the world quite differently, based on the kinds of cultural and gendered differences from which the *habitus* [term by Pierre Bourdieu] is formed”.³³

These findings were crucial for the further development of dance and theatre perception, making the critics, theorists and researchers understand that the spectators’ interests and engagement in various forms of dance practice are not only culturally specific but gradually dependent on their individual histories, their education and their experience. In that sense, neither dance nor other social practices are de facto contagious practices for everyone in the same way, but also a possible reason for dance and performance art to slowly turn toward participatory practices that nurture a social body instead of the individual one. However, all artistic, cultural and social practices could have a very different affectious spin if they would enjoy the support and recognition in a wider social system (especially in their value, extensive presences and visibilities and attendance that would be nurtured in processes of socialization, education, media, politics etc.). Furthermore, as the triumphed capitalism is driving a huge part of the population into unbearable living conditions, a number of infectious counter-movements and protests are forming around the globe.

Next to localised and socio-culturally specific movements, there are a number of cross-national networks emerging aiming for similar goals: to empower and to emancipate people to resist and propose different forms of life and living. No doubt, looking and thinking of the number and variety of social movements and collective actions anticipated by the global population can be perceived as contagion. In addition, we should agree that the calculation of their proposed actions, ways of being and doing in the world is impressive, as it presents a multiplicity of ways of possible coexistence in this world under much more endurable conditions than the socio-political order wants to impose on us. No matter that the political elites are working hard to invent a number of ways to suppress, drain or neutralize the beneficiary initiatives and to keep them low key. This only speaks in favour of such initiatives and their contagion potency as they are recognized as a threat. This is also a reason to recall counter-initiatives and use them as a toolbox that pushes our thoughts and moves us

³³ Susan L. Foster, “Movement’s Contagion”, p. 53.

into action. We should be reminded of Henri Lefebvre's statement "The crowd is a body, the body is a crowd (of cells, of liquids, of organs)."³⁴

In that regard, we should create a shift in our preoccupation and perception from the self toward the collective, instead of pricing the first we should shift to the other. Since we are interdependent creatures – for example, the baby would not be born without having another individuum and it would not survive without a care-giver –, we have to nurture, explore and expand our social bonds and relations. We sometimes forget that we learn through relations; a baby copies its care-takers, the peers learn in a dialogue in the frame of a wider social network and surrounding. Or with the worlds of Isabell Lorey, it is important to nurture various scopes of "social practices that are oriented not solely to the self and one's own milieu, but rather to living together and to common political action, recede ever more into the background and become ever less imaginable as a lived reality."³⁵

CONCLUSION

It may be naive but I believe that art can be one such form. As the political discourse shows, progressive art together with civil-social actions, is perceived as dangerous and risky for political hegemons, which is a reason for their continuous financial cuts and the ever greater condemnation of "dirtiness". Their potential contagious nature is a threat to the existing order and thereby gives us an even greater reason to operate with the concept of contagion as an ongoing struggle for a more inclusive world.

³⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, London and New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 42.

³⁵ Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, p. 90.

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Keywords: contagion, Michel Foucault, dance and performance, social movements, kinesthesia

Summary: In this contribution, I will draw parallels between the notion of contagion of diseases and the potential effect of movement as contagion, while juxtaposing some of the selected theoretical approaches that analyse the term contagion as a threat on the one hand and as a potential weapon in the processes of sensibilization of humanity, emphasizing empathy as a tool and medium for social politicisation on the other. I will try to answer to the following questions: What does it mean to see the contagioned body as infectious toward other bodies? What is the impact of the medical-epidemiological concept of infection on the wider political discourse? How have the metaphoric notions of contagion been used as its counter-side? How contagious are social and artistic practices and what are the reasons for their success or/and their downfall?