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Black Death, Plagues, and the Danse Macabre. Depictions of Epidemics in Art

*Luisa Rittershaus & Kathrin Eschenberg**

Abstract: *»Der Schwarze Tod, Epidemien und der Danse Macabre. Seuchendarstellungen in der Kunst«*. What does a plague look like? What images correspond to it? Just as visual synonyms for the pandemic are formed in the media, the depiction of epidemics in the visual arts is a recurring topos, as art has always been a seismograph for social occurrences, moods, or political developments. This article shows how epidemics have been reflected in art history and illustrates three different representations using graphics from the graphic collection *Mensch und Tod* (Human and Death) at the Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf as examples.

Keywords: Art, Rethel, Weiss, Ensor, epidemics, dance of death.

1. Introduction

Empty streets, social distancing – these are the pandemic-related images of a social withdrawal. These images are further coupled with the media treatment of death in the form of numerical representation of infection figures and deceased people as well as frightening images from intensive care units. In spring 2020, COVID-19 brought death back into our midst. Even if dying still took place behind closed doors – and still does – its aura had settled over society. This crisis-like mood of disorientation, isolation, and fear finds direct expression in the visual arts. Works are created that visualise loneliness and introspection, problematise political and social attitudes, and take up the eternal topos of death personified as a skeleton.[1] Social media channels are once again gaining in importance, as some series of works are being created explicitly for presentation there; after all, art institutions have been closed or the transport routes to them have been interrupted.

Visual art has always been a seismograph of society, and so the great epidemics have also been reflected here over the centuries. One of the oldest

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[1] In the summer of 2020, the Kunsthaus Bregenz reacted directly to these developments in contemporary art by bringing together seven artists in the exhibition *Unforgettable Time*, who deal with the changing moods in a pandemic-ridden society. See KUB 2020.

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allegories of epidemics is the depiction of the four biblical apocalyptic horsemen of St. John's Revelation, whereby the determination of the individual horsemen was always interpreted in the context of current events. The fourth "pale" horse and its rider were considered to bring sickness and ultimately death: "And I looked, and behold, a pale horse. And he that sat on him, whose name was Death, and hell followed with him" (Rev. 6:8 King James Version). Thus, the early depictions of epidemics, in which the plague in particular found its image, are embedded in such religious contexts. In this way, the indiscriminately spreading disease received divine legitimation and the pictorial representation took on the character of a *memento mori* (remember death). The dances of the dead, which were painted as monumental frescoes on cemetery and church walls in the Middle Ages, are also part of this tradition of reminding us of transience. In the form of a round dance, people of different classes (from bishops and queens to beggars and children) stand hand in hand with a depiction of death, referring to equality in the face of death and the unpredictability of the last hour. The emergence of the death dances has repeatedly been associated with the great plague waves of the Middle Ages, although neither a causal nor a local connection can be established here.[2] The personification of death in its dual role as plague and death is not widespread in these early death dances; they rather serve as moral instruction and as an opportunity for reflection. On the other hand, it is the figurative image of the rampant plague as a death dancing across the land – in addition to a few pieces of writing – that led to a solidification of this link between the dance of death and the plague. With the advent of cholera, which swept across Europe from the east from 1830 onwards, and which in its vehemence and mercilessness evoked associations with the medieval plague, interest in the medieval dance of death depictions was on the rise again. So, it is not surprising that, on the one hand, there was a resurgence of plague depictions and, on the other, that the subject of the plague death found its way into the still traditional death dance motif. The confrontation with the suffering caused by the Black Death, as well as the social effects of an epidemic that were spreading throughout Europe, offered possibilities for orientation.

2. Depictions of Epidemics in Art

The graphic collection *Mensch und Tod* (Man and Death) at the Institute for History, Theory and Ethics of Medicine at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf is the ideal starting point for a comparative look at different representations of epidemics in art. The collection is one of the most comprehensive and of the highest quality on the themes of dying, death, and the dance of

[2] For more on the development of this thesis and its consequences, see Knöll 2016.

death. With its approximately 6,000 originals from the 15th century to the present, it provides a broad overview of the development of depictions of death in European art (Vögele and Rittershaus 2016). In the following, three prints will be presented as examples.

An example of the depiction of plague death in the context of a dance of death cycle is the etching *Cholera* from 1895 by Tobias Weiss. The print is part of the *Dance of Death* consisting of 20 etchings, in which Tobias Weiss has the personification of death appear in many different contemporary situations. Each sheet is complemented by texts by the Jesuit priest W. Kreiten.

Figure 1 Tobias Weiss, *Cholera* (1895)

Source: EIN MODERNER / TODTENTANZ. / ZWANZIG BLÄTTER / AUS DEM BILDERBUCHE / DES TODES, Radierung (Etching), 23.3 x 17.7 cm. (c) Graphic Collection *Mensch und Tod*, Düsseldorf.

The first depiction in the series shows Death receiving God's instructions through an angel. The following etchings consequently depict the bone man in his actions on God's behalf; moreover, the four-line rhymes at the foot of the illustrations repeatedly emphasize the sacred context. With this divine legitimation for the actions of death, Tobias Weiss's dance of death ties in with the medieval tradition of the *memento mori* character of this medium (Knöll

2009a). The present sheet, No. VII, shows a wooden cart drawn by two horses, heavily laden with coffins and dead bodies wrapped in shrouds. On the back of one of the two horses sits casually the skeleton of death, dressed in a loincloth, smoking a pipe, and wearing a top hat on his head. This bears the inscription "cholera," as does the raised sign at the front of the cart referring to the deadly epidemic. The coffins and body bags pile up, one coffin has already fallen to the ground due to the overload of the cart, but Death rides on, indifferent and unperturbed. He pulls on his pipe, a classic vanitas motif as a symbol of transience. In the background lies the alignment of the narrow streets of the city, deserted and lonely. It is already dark; the light of the streetlamp is burning as the journey continues out of town. A description of the cholera outbreak in Hamburg in 1892 formulates how the frightening number of corpses were transported away and buried around the clock:

> The burials of the dead [...] take place not only during the day, but also during the night. The four-horse wagons with 50 corpses also bring their gruesome load there during the day, usually 5 times in 24 hours, and drive directly into the churchyard, right up to the graves, where at night, under petroleum lighting, the dead are buried without interruption. (Hamburger Generalanzeiger 1892, as cited in Schmolinske 2017)[3]

The rhyme below the image once again identifies the dead as authorised by God and focuses attention on a God-fearing life in which death appears under the Christian aspect of repentance: "This is death's rich mowing / Of corpses rigid way and path - / And yet of all none fell, / To whom the Lord did not set the goal."[4]

An earlier example was created by Alfred Rethel with his woodcut *Der Tod als Erwürger. Auftritt der Cholera auf einem Maskenball in Paris* (Death as a Strangler. Appearance of Cholera at a Masked Ball in Paris). The work was created 20 years after the devastating outbreak of cholera during the carnival celebrations in Paris in 1831 and presumably goes back to Heinrich Heine's descriptions of the outbreak in the French capital, which he wrote for the *Allgemeine Zeitung* and later included as Article VI in his collection of *French Conditions* (Französischer Zustände):

> Its [the cholera's] arrival had been officially announced on 29 March. As this was the day of the Demicarême and the weather was sunny and lovely, the Parisians were all the merrier in the boulevards, where masks were even seen, mocking the fear of cholera and the disease itself, in caricatured discolouration and deformity. That same evening, the redoubts were more

[3] "Die Beerdigungen der Todten [...] erfolgen nicht nur am Tage, sondern auch während der Nacht. Die vierspännigen Wagen mit 50 Leichen bringen ihre schauerliche Ladung auch am Tage, gewöhnlich in 24 Stunden 5 Mal nach dort, fahren direkt in den Kirchhof hinein und zwar bis zu den Gräbern, wo des Nachts bei Petroleumbeleuchtung ununterbrochen die Todten beigesetzt warden."

[4] "Das ist des Todes reiche Mahd / Von Leichen starren Weg und Pfad – / Und doch von Allen keiner fiel, / Dem nicht der Herr gesetzt das Ziel."

frequented than ever; high-spirited laughter almost overjubilated the loudest music, people heated up at the chahut, a not very ambiguous dance, swallowing all kinds of ice and other cold drinks: when suddenly the funniest of the arlequins felt an all too great chill in his legs and took off his mask, revealing, to everyone's amazement, a violet-blue face. It was soon realised that this was no joke, and the laughter died away, and several carts full of people were driven from the Redoubt straight to the Hôtel-Dieu, the central hospital, where, arriving in their adventurous masquerade clothes, they were immediately different. Since in the first consternation people believed they were contagious and the older guests of the Hôtel-Dieu raised a terrible cry of fear, those dead, as they say, were buried so quickly that they were not even stripped of their colourful jester's clothes, and merrily, as they had lived, they also lie merrily in their graves. (Heine 1832)[5]

Rethel liked to refer to historical events in his work and here takes up the moment when the exuberant carnival celebration comes to an abrupt end. A brightly lit, draped banqueting hall can be seen, in the foreground of which the figure of personified death, dressed in a monk's habit, is playing on two bones – like a violin – for the last dance. He has already taken off his mask and now it is the moment of truth: three of the revellers are already lying at his feet and present a paradoxical picture, carried away in the middle of the dance in their foolish costumes – the neckline low, the mask still laughing ...

The (pictorial) space continues upwards towards the back; on the upper gallery, the musicians push to the right with sheer horror on their faces and other guests flee out of the picture to the left. But death does not appear alone here: Behind him, in the light of the octagonal chandelier, sits the personification of cholera wrapped in a wide cloth. She is the reason for the appearance of the fiddling death. Her body is emaciated, described as dehydrated (Schürmann 2009), her gaze blank: symptoms associated with cholera disease. In her hand she holds a three-tailed scourge, a Christian attribute from the Passion narrative, which identifies cholera as penance due to sins, vices, and debts. The image of the carnival as the epitome of the topsy-turvy world and the jester as a synonym of the godless culminate here with the pandemic,

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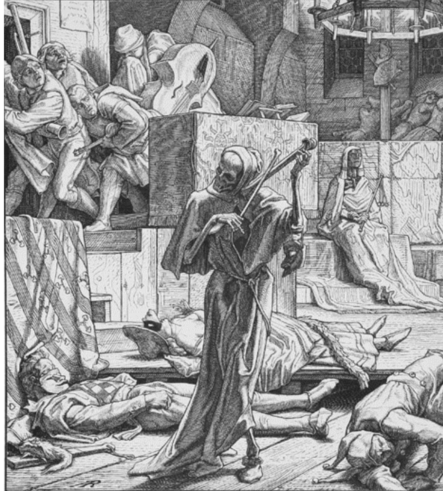
[5] "Ihre [die Cholera] Ankunft war den 29. März offiziell bekanntgemacht worden, und da dieses der Tag des Demicarême und das Wetter sonnig und lieblich war, so tummelten sich die Pariser um so lustiger auf den Boulevards, wo man sogar Masken erblickte, die, in karikierter Mißfarbigkeit und Ungestalt, die Furcht vor der Cholera und die Krankheit selbst verspotteten. Desselben Abends waren die Redouten besuchter als jemals; übermütiges Gelächter überjauchzte fast die lauteste Musik, man erhitzte sich beim Chahut, einem nicht sehr zweideutigen Tanze, man schluckte dabei allerlei Eis und sonstig kaltes Getrinke: als plötzlich der lustigste der Arlequine eine allzu große Kühle in den Beinen verspürte und die Maske abnahm und zu aller Welt Verwunderung ein veilchenblaues Gesicht zum Vorschein kam. Man merkte bald, daß solches kein Spaß sei, und das Gelächter verstummte, und mehrere Wagen voll Menschen fuhr man von der Redoute gleich nach dem Hôtel-Dieu, dem Zentralhospitale, wo sie, in ihren abenteuerlichen Maskenkleidern anlangend, gleich verschieden. Da man in der ersten Bestürzung an Ansteckung glaubte und die ältern Gäste des Hôtel-Dieu ein gräßliches Angstgeschrei erhoben, so sind jene Toten, wie man sagt, so schnell beerdigt worden, daß man ihnen nicht einmal die buntscheckigen Narrenkleider auszog, und lustig, wie sie gelebt haben, liegen sie auch lustig im Grabe."

which was deadly and underestimated by the population (Knöll 2009a). Dismissed as a disease of the poor, the Parisian bourgeoisie did not see itself affected by cholera (Spree 2016).

Figure 2 Alfred Rethel, *Der Tod als Erwürger. Auftritt der Cholera auf einem Maskenball in Paris 1831* (1851)



Source: Holzschnitt (Woodcut), 30.9 x 27.5 cm. (c) Graphic Collection *Mensch und Tod*, Düsseldorf.

A temporality is inscribed in the picture: The compositional diagonal extends from the front right corner with the fool already slumped to the ground, over the crossed leg of death upwards to the musicians still fleeing. Cholera sits in the glaring light of the candelabrum, the deadly disease radiates from it, who still manages to save himself in the shadows? The picture serves as a reminder to the viewers; another *memento mori* that once again makes clear: no one – regardless of age and class – is immune from death. Even though Death bows his head to the side, he is still facing us, even taking a step forward. The lower edge of the picture is open, the planks of the parquet run towards us, the right arm of the harlequin, who has slumped to the floor at the front right, is cut and figuratively reaches out of the picture: We are metaphorically standing with death on the parquet ... Only three years after the publication of this woodcut, cholera hit Munich hard.

With the Enlightenment beginning in the 18th century and the accompanying secularisation, depictions of epidemics also freed themselves from religious connotations (Boeckl 2000). The image of death as a so-called “uncanny guest” becomes increasingly popular. This guest enters – as already seen in Alfred Rethel’s work – in masquerade at an advanced hour and encounters a society that realises too late that behind the mysterious façade of the stranger

is the skeleton of death as an allegory of epidemic. A famous literary example to which these depictions can be traced, among others, is Edgar Allan Poe's story, *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842). Here, at the symbolic midnight, the masked Death enters a courtly masked ball whose festive party is lulling itself to safety within the magnificent castle walls from the cholera raging in the city. In this context, the mask is seen as an allegorical figuration of the epidemic and as a symbol of human ignorance in the face of the ever-triumphant death (Schonlau 2019; further on Höll 2021). The link between death and the mask results from a close cultural relationship between the two: starting with the ritualised removal of death masks from the deceased, to the decoration of death faces on the basis of ancestral skulls, to ritual mask traditions within which the mask functions as an interface between the living and the dead. Thus, the masks of the carnival represented the souls of the ancestors, while the traditional parades were regarded as so-called "atonement festivals" for the deceased. At this point, in addition to the link between masks and death, another one emerges: that of illness. For – so it was believed – an encounter with a soul of the dead could be the cause of a wide variety of ailments (Schonlau 2019). The fact that art-historical depictions show personified death in its role as a deadly plague wearing a mask becomes clearer at this point. Syphilis death also camouflaged itself in the figure of a coquettish lady clad in ball gowns behind a flawless mask.

After science decoupled plagues from a divine purpose in the 19th century, the countless deaths and immeasurable suffering seemed sheer senselessness. Inability to act in the face of disease was now defined as human defeat ... no more symbols, no more allegories (Davis 2020). But there was now room for satire on the superstitions surrounding the spread of the plagues, and so, in 1895, James Ensor's etching *Le Roi Peste* (King Pest) emerges as an almost pictorial equivalent of the narrative of – again – Edgar Allen Poe's *King Pest* of 1835.

The print shows a grotesque round of two drunken sailors fleeing after a bruised tipple in a segregated area of London due to the plague: King Pest the First, along with his consort Queen Pest and other family members Archduke Pest-Iferous, Duke Pes-Ilential, Duke TemPest, and Archduchess Ana-Pest are seated at a table around a punch pot (Poe 1835). The encounter comes to a tumultuous end, with the sailors piling headlong with the two ladies in their arms after the rest of the company has met its abrupt end.

Figure 3 James Ensor, *Le Roi Peste* (King Pest) (1895)

Source: Radierung (Etching), 10 x 11.7 cm. (c) Graphic Collection *Mensch und Tod*, Düsseldorf.

3. Conclusion

The art of the early 20th century, which also experienced a pandemic with the Spanish flu (1918–1920), no longer depicts the epidemic directly. Here, it is rather the chaotic and hopeless mood that is reflected in the works. The disease coupled with the horror of the First World War forms a disoriented society, disillusioned with the governing structures and the increased moral loss. The art movements that emerged during this period, such as Dadaism, reflect the brokenness of the time without having to depict it directly and show individual ways of dealing with the (personal) crisis. Thus, one no longer has to look for traces of the pandemic in specific representations, as is the case in the examples given above, but in the general tone of the art movements that emerged in its wake. When Marcel Breuer joined the Bauhaus in 1920, he designed the furniture that is still influential today, made of minimalist tubular steel and wood, as a hygienic contrast to heavy upholstery, inspired – so the

thesis goes – by easy-to-clean hospital furniture (Kambhampat 2020); a famous example of art as a sensor in pandemic times.

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