

**POST # 1**

**THE VORACIOUS DESIRE OF COVID-19**

Since the beginning of the epidemics—now global pandemics—of COVID-19 we have been barraged increasingly by a discourse ‘about’ death. The death toll of the virus, country by country and region by region, punctuates our everyday existence and makes it impossible to keep away from the news. Confronted with the concrete possibility of becoming infected, and thus transforming our bodies into objects of possible death or vehicle of death, we live in different degrees of isolation meant to restore, in the long run, an illusory return to ‘normal life.’ Whether we realize it or not, our cocoons also become the house of depression: they are our only way to retreat into ourselves and defend our psyches from the anxiety from without. The life principle has to be put on hold if we want to imagine that it will back again.

A few considerations emerge from the current moment:

- For some of us, this retreat into hiding (physical as well as psychological) becomes ‘a way of being,’ albeit a temporary one. Are we becoming used to such withdrawal? Are we starting to enjoy the enforced retreat into ourselves? Or, in Lacanian language, *are we eroticizing the loss*—loss of life, of consumerism, of physical interconnection and so on? What happens when the loss becomes the new mode of living the present, a present which might extend much longer than we can fathom? For some of us, this retreat may play into a tendency already structural in the subject of identifying with one’s lack. What are its consequences?
- We increasingly hear about the resurfacing of hidden dimensions of life because of the enforced isolation. In Italy, wildlife has reappeared after having been lost from sight since the second postwar period (it must have been there before the epidemics, at least in the wild, but nobody recalls seeing or hearing the long-lost creatures of the natural world now so close, again, to human dwellings). The pollution of skies and seas has suddenly decreased. The canals of Venice are transparent again. Humans cannot walk freely in the cities but can observe the silent spectacle of artistic beauty from their homes. Balconies are populated again—with musicians, spectators, or simply neighbors. Plenty of articles and posts on social media testify to the rediscovery of neighbors once barely tolerated (and neighbours lining up to take your previously detested dog out to have an excuse for an outing). And yet the anxiety of economic collapse—and possible social collapse—allows little space for such enjoyment. Our desire for the collapse of capitalism (a capitalism that is also responsible for the pandemics in the first place) is confronted with the ugly reality that such event could be more catastrophic than hopeful. The imaginary of the ‘new community’ and the renewed visibility of the natural world clashes with the fear of what will happen if the system does not hold: such unrecognizable event is also the desert of the Real.
- About what, then, are we anxious? The irremediable loss of our earlier life? The impossibility of plentiful future (which was not realistic even before but we have forgotten that part)? As Lacan reminds us, anxiety has an object but its object is not clearly definable. Such object is not the ‘object of desire’ but the *objet-a*, the ‘cause of desire.’
- How is COVID-19, then, implicated in our desire? COVID-19 is a signifier, which is meaningful only in a chain of signification. The ‘cut’ that the signifier operates also annihilates the flesh of biological existence for a signifier represents a subject for another signifier. The signifier does not

allow for expression of the biological existence of the individual but forces such existence into the strictures of language itself. Each individual's entry into language is marked by such annihilation (of the biological, the material, the psychic matter that cannot find a way into language, impossible desires, and traumas of all sorts). The lethality of the signifier makes possible the functioning of language and the birth of a subject of language but also limits tremendously the possibility of such subject. It is against the deadly signifier that Sophocles's Antigone, in Lacan's reading, acts: breaking the chain of signification that condemns her desire to death by choosing (biological) death. In Lacan's reading, Antigone is caught between two deaths and in choosing her own desire she consumes herself (Antigone as *jouissance*). But COVID-19 has now become a sign of death itself. Its murderous action is not concealed in the functioning of language. It has opened the door to the Real while not allowing for the capture of the Real by the symbolic. How does such operation act on individual and social desires? What room does it leave open for desire? Is this the reason that the imaginary of the new community has taken such a hold of us?

- COVID-19 has *opened a hole in the Real*. The virus is irreducible to the dialectic of recognition. The virus has become the voracious desire of Lacan's preying mantis.