

BOOK REVIEW

Visual Culture and Pandemic Disease since 1750: Capturing Contagion *Edited by Marsha Morton and Ann-Marie Akehurst*

Hardback, 254 pages
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Images offer more than simple illustration. This wide-ranging analysis explores how images during times of pandemic can afford deep insights into the meaning and understanding of disease and its social and political context. Images are powerful tools which can render disease comprehensible and controllable, stoke or allay public fears, criticise or satirise authority, enable population control, depict the experience of voiceless patients and carers, and represent the invisible.

These ideas are explored through 11 chapters, each individually authored as part of an edited volume. Church architecture, sculpture and painting interrogate the tension between 'science' and religion in plague-hit early modern Venice. A 19th century Japanese woodcut depicts cholera as a mythical animal with an enormous lethal scrotum, being fought by western-style soldiers, fusing Western and traditional Japanese imagery. Nineteenth-century British satirical prints, Nordic symbolist paintings depicting the sickroom and French paintings of children, working-class mothers and religious figures offer resistance and criticism to the state during times of pandemic. British media representations of 19th century cholera and the 21st century COVID-19 pandemic reveal striking similarities (however convincing the comparison of Boris Johnson to John Bull might appear to the reader). The late 19th and early 20th centuries allowed a photographic record of pandemics for the first time, explored through cholera in India and the 1918 flu pandemic in the USA. TV series from 2018 and 2021 reveal changing attitudes to HIV/AIDS in the 21st century. A chapter on plague in 19th century Tunisia arguably misses the brief, as it relies on texts rather than images to interrogate the actions of merchants and a ruling elite who imposed social control of a population in response to plague. A similar theme of government control is explored in an examination of graphic devices employed to inform and instruct the public about tuberculosis in early 20th century Turkey. This is no coffee-table picture book but a dense academic work. Some 64 illustrations are included, mostly black-and-white; this is inevitable when source material is black-and-white but many paintings printed in monochrome would benefit from colour, not only for aesthetic reasons but to appreciate detail and nuance. Several chapters refer, some in detail, to images which are not reproduced at all; colour printing, and its relevant permissions, can be expensive but given the theme of this book, and its cost, it would be good to see more pictures, particularly in colour. Despite the disparate nature of the studies, some themes emerge; the association of disease and its causation with minority or stigmatised groups such as foreigners, the poor and homosexuals, the use of militaristic visual metaphors, utilising folk or religious traditions besides science to render disease comprehensible, disease as a metaphor to satirise authority, and the employment of imagery to inform a population or control its behaviour. A thoughtful work, valuable to scholars of visual culture; more casual readers might more selectively find a number of chapters of interest.

Martin Edwards,
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