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# Enduring Touch

MISCHA TWITCHIN

He chanted: ‘Just as it’s not impossible that the pent-up despair and the cries of a madman in an asylum be the cause of the plague, by a kind of reversibility of feelings and images, we can also see that exterior events, political conflicts and natural catastrophes, revolutionary order and the disorder of war, once released in theatre can contaminate the sensibility of the spectators with all the strength of an epidemic.’ Françoise Davoine (2014: 71)

These are the kinds of demands easily dismissed as unrealistic. But after the shock of 2020, how much more evidence do we need? What needs adjusting is our common understanding of the reality that we are actually in. Adam Tooze (2021: 292)

Running through the neo-liberal ‘performance economy’ is a compulsion to reduce (if not to eliminate) any active passivity from the dynamic of touch—as if the relation between active and passive, in enduring touch, could be made mutually exclusive. Simply abstracting a transactional or instrumental sense of the active in touch is, however, a form of psychic violence, for there is no sense of touch that is not simultaneously that of being touched. This chiasmus (in our relation to others as to ourselves) is experienced through affective registers of perception, which are culturally calibrated. ‘Having a body means learning to be *affected*’, as Bruno Latour observes (reflecting on the undoing of dualisms in ‘the great alternative philosophical tradition of the last century, the tradition of William James and Whitehead’ (2021: 97)). One example of this embodied learning is through developing a sense of ‘tact’, as a sensitivity to both the withholding of touch and the suspension of being touched in the dynamics of social interaction.

Where the precision of mechanical touch (an ‘unfeeling’ touch) in the future of robotics may be greater than the finesse of human touch (as, for example, in surgery), the sense of tact may yet prove to be another exploitable resource for the emerging ‘untact’ economy (accelerated

during the Covid pandemic):

Introduced in 2020, ‘Untact’ is a South Korean government policy that aims to spur economic growth by removing layers of human interaction from society. It gathered pace during the pandemic and is expanding rapidly across sectors from healthcare, to business and entertainment. (Rashid 2021)

Leaving aside the cultural politics of another recent Korean export, *Squid Game*, it is notable that out of fifteen Korean ‘unicorns’ (start-ups valued at more than a billion dollars) twelve ‘use non face-to-face methods in their primary business’ (Rashid 2021), devolving the emotional labour of their interactions entirely onto the user, thereby stripping out the costs of even this affective form of ‘service’ exploitation.

The feeling of being touched without oneself physically touching someone or something else remains, nonetheless, culturally vital, especially in modes of ‘causality’ that modernity refers to as magic. Indeed, the following reflections address this telematic possibility of touch—not least, in the power of reading—with what one might call the spell cast by the writings of Antonin Artaud. Of course, reading may be experienced literally by means of touch through braille, but it is also metaphorically touching by means of the eye. We are ‘struck’ by ideas, ‘impressed’ by concepts, ‘moved’ by figures of speech—all modes of being virtually affected, where the relation between the tangible and the intangible is, indeed, being constantly re-learned.<sup>1</sup>

For Artaud, this learning—not least, as an experience of thinking—manifests a question of ‘cruelty’, the theatre of which is its endurance. In his last major work—*To Have Done with the Judgement of God*—Artaud inscribes his resistance to the forces that he felt were trying to bewitch him, declaring that his ‘body is never to be touched’ (1995: 303). Artaud’s attempt

<sup>1</sup> This relation between action and suffering, as the endurance of touch, is commonly contrasted with the sense of vision, where phantasy is so often bound up with precisely the wish to see without being seen—for which modern theatre (in the electrical age) is commonly taken as a paradigm (in a fiction eclipsed by cinema and now inverted by the culture of ‘selfies’).

to reverse the judgment of madness made by society—into a judgment of society in terms of that madness—concerns what it might mean to be ‘authentically’ alive (1995: 167). During the lockdown that was imposed in response to the Covid pandemic, this ‘learning’ directly touched the lives of millions—not least, as a relation to death. It is in this context that questions of reading (with) Artaud are taken up here concerning the sense(s) of touch.

#### ENDURING NORMALITY

An all too prevalent symptom of COVID-19 has been the widespread call for a ‘return to normality’, with its implicit demand that post-pandemic politics be essentially continuous with the pre-pandemic ones.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the desire to be done with restrictions on touch—with such linguistic variants as ‘self-isolating’ and ‘social distancing’ themselves becoming viral—is wholly understandable. Here touch—which simultaneously evokes the sense of both contagion and care—becomes an index for all kinds of affective loss experienced during the pandemic. The profound, and often tragic, deprivation of touch that these restrictions entailed—curtailing empathic gesture through state-sanctioned mandate—will no doubt continue to work its way through forms of long-COVID ignored by the rush to affirm ‘business as usual’. Indeed, it sometimes seems now as if the only ‘recovery’ that matters politically is that of the economy.<sup>3</sup>

Questions of touch are not only symptomatic of the virus, then, but also of the political-economic conditions that have allowed it to thrive both globally and locally. In advance of the ‘metaverse’ perfecting the monetized distribution of affect, for instance, another register of not being physically in touch has been the appearance of digital platforms such as Zoom cloning themselves in language, insinuating these isolating conditions of experience into proprietary verbs (following the well-established lead of Google). The enduring sense of isolation demonstrates that the old verbs of touch—to hold, to caress—are not simply substituted by their new, social media variants—to swipe, to tap. Here the ambiguities

of touch (distinct from data) are palpable even if contact remains virtual, for touch may be painful as much in its absence as its presence, for example, in the want of an embrace. That touch unsettles the dualism of mental and physical can be seen when pressure overtakes a caress, or a grip overtakes simple holding—not least, as the one becomes a metaphor for the other.

Meanwhile, in the age of digital contagion, regulation of contact by ‘password’ (as Gilles Deleuze had already noted in the last century (1992: 5)) is now such a pervasive condition of ‘social’ media that it is barely noticed. In the metastasizing of the metaphor, infection passes from bodies to computers, requiring the isolation, or quarantining, of connections: ‘The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “*dividuals*”, and masses, samples, data’ (ibid.).<sup>4</sup>

#### ENDURING PARANOIA

In her acute analysis of paranoia in (and, indeed, as) the practice of critical theory, Eve Sedgwick asks: ‘How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?’ (2003: 124). Sedgwick’s discussion—which aims ‘to hypothetically disentangle a question of truth value from that of performative effect’ (2003: 129)—invokes Melanie Klein to explore relations between paranoid and reparative readings of *touching feeling* (as the very title of Sedgwick’s book suggests). Such critical ‘positions’ offer ‘changing and heterogenous relational stances’ (128) that are not reducible to either term being simply opposed to the other. Indeed, Sedgwick is concerned to maintain their difference rather than collapse them into versions of the same—as, precisely, in the case of paranoia (125–6). With the proliferation of conspiracy theories today, this critical interest in resisting the ‘contagious’ quality (126) of paranoia offers an important register for thinking touch—whether in theory or (as we see magnified by the business models of social media companies) in the virtual (not to say viral) transmission of affective motive. Indeed, galvanizing hatred seems to be a

<sup>2</sup> In the UK, this is exemplified by the removal of a £20 uplift in the Universal Credit benefit that was part of the government’s response to the pandemic with its shutdown of much of the economy. Paid to those whose income—even when in work—does not meet a basic minimum, this benefit is itself a register of the obscene inequality that is presented as if it were a ‘fact of life’, rather than a political choice.

<sup>3</sup> While it is already being overtaken by the so-called ‘smart supermarket’ (with no material transaction interface at all), it is still symptomatic that during the lockdown the promotion of consumer debt through ‘contactless’ transactions was extended substantially (more than doubling, from £45 to £100, in the UK on 15 October 2021), as if this might displace being touched by Covid in the social imaginary.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, being ‘password protected’ is no barrier to the backdoor access to ‘personal data’ in surveillance capitalism, which operates by the same ethical principles of ‘gain of function’ used in military research into the genetic sequencing of viruses.

<sup>5</sup> And the question we must now ask is whether, in this slippery world which is committing suicide without noticing it, there can be found a nucleus of men capable of imposing this superior notion of the theatre, men who will restore to all of us the natural and magic equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe' (Artaud 1958: 32).

sure means of infecting users of such media with the enduring emptiness of experience that is usually called addiction.

Besides this current means of contagion (automated by algorithm in social media), what might be the 'performative' dynamic of touch that acts at a distance—as the seeming opposite of contact and intimacy—where contiguity (infection, for instance) is imaginary or phantasmagorical, even as its effects (or symptoms) appear physical? Distinct from the medicalized violence of 'cure' through the convulsive touch of electroshock, for instance, what are we to make of Artaud's 'delusions' of the telematic touch of spells and bewitchment in his writings from the late 1930s on? How might the reparative relate tactfully to the paranoid readings proposed by Artaud's writing? How might the contact between pencil and paper in Artaud's manuscripts figure that of addressee and addressor (as, variously, paranoid or reparative forms of contact between hand and mind)?

Indeed, how might readers of Artaud be still, as it were, under the spell of his writing? How are we virtually in contact with Artaud's thought, as if we were ourselves its addressees, beyond any explicit instance of apostrophe (whether paranoid or reparative)? How might we still be touched by Artaud's writings (even in translation)—as a matter, perhaps, of what Sylvère Lotringer calls being 'Artaud crazy' (*Fous d'Artaud* (2003), translated as *Mad Like Artaud* (2015))? How might this epistemological question of enduring touch (and the potential of bewitchment) be refracted through a reading of Artaud's famous essay on contagion, or virulence, as offering an idea of theatre?

To be under Artaud's spell, to be bewitched by his writings and drawings, to be affected still by his testimony to existence—all this subsists in the manifold senses of 'enduring touch', in an interplay between paranoid and reparative reading(s). In contrast then to the appeal simply of a post-pandemic 'return to normality', what to make of Artaud's appeal in his essay on theatre and plague, with its resonant ambiguities concerning the modes of exclusion by which 'modernity' has sought to define itself, not least by isolating itself from the contagion of magic

and from contact with—from being touched by—madness?<sup>5</sup>

#### ENDURING PLAGUE

In the extraordinary first chapter of *The Theatre and its Double*, Artaud offers a bewildering narrative of the plague that interweaves 'historical fact', 'archives', 'dreams', 'social disintegration' and bodies whose organs 'gradually turn to carbon' (1958: 15). Exploring the relation between theatre and plague, Artaud presents the body as a site of and for a visionary analysis of contagion as the enduring of borders (including their ostensible transgression) between individual and society. Thinking of and with the endurance of touch here (distinct, traditionally, from vision) admits of the dynamic of both active and passive in relation to each other. In contrast to the isolation of pathogens by means of the microscope, for instance, in Artaud's analysis of contagion (plague) and mimetic affect (theatre) the implications of touch are not reducible to their ostensibly visible symptoms. Just as dreams are composed of images but are not themselves visible, so the plague-theatre for Artaud is (in Monique Borie's phrase) an 'epiphany of the invisible' (1989: 119): 'The plague, in its epidemiological aspect, becomes the metaphor of the circulation, from one organism to another, of invisible forces, in the gesture of theatre' (121).

For Artaud, the plague affects two organs specifically—the brain and the lungs—which he associates with the mutual interaction of voluntary and involuntary functions of consciousness or life: '[T]he plague seems to manifest its presence in and have a preference for the very organs of the body, the particular physical sites, where human will, consciousness, and thought are imminent and apt to occur' (1958: 21). For Artaud, it is precisely the potential of and for the non-synchronicity of voluntary and involuntary life that the plague exposes, including in conceiving of theatre—through enduring touch—as resisting (a return to) 'normality' and the ('tactless') demand to isolate passion from action.

In Artaud's vision, society can be no more immunized against plague than against

theatre—or rather the desire to be so immunized (that is, to remain untouched by either) is a wish to exorcize the passion of life, as if to anaesthetize the sense of being touched in favour of a merely instrumental sense of touch as action. Paradoxically, then, this action without passion, action that is not enduring, becomes itself effectively passive—where any sense of resistance *in* being touched is registered only externally rather than immanently, as if it were a resistance *to* being touched. Indeed, in a curious reversal, the pursuit of frictionless contact in surveillance capitalism (of a sovereignty without resistance) aims—through the optimization of performance—at what Artaud evoked, in *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, as a ‘body without organs’.

Rather than an anatomy of liberation (as if bypassing the hierarchically ordered dualisms of ‘a model of the body that is gendered and codified’ (Manning 2007: xii)), this new body (‘without organs’) would offer circuits of automated desire consistent with a ‘normality’ theorized by Deleuze (after Foucault) as characterizing ‘societies of control’ (1992). Even in the displacement by the virtual and algorithmic of the ‘automatisms’ of organism and psyche (which the body without organs would, for Artaud, have ‘done with’ (1995: 307)) there still remain forms of life experienced through addiction.<sup>6</sup> As already discussed, one need hardly be paranoid to see Deleuze’s ‘corporation’ projecting itself in Facebook’s ambition to expand its social media empire into a so-called ‘metaverse’ (Bryant 2021), in which the alchemy of touch would be engineered to conform to an ‘untact’ imaginary.

#### ENDURING POTENTIAL

Whatever might be the material and epidemiological basis of the plague’s transmission and its consequences, Artaud posits (in the early 1930s) ‘the idea of a malady that would be a kind of psychic entity and would not be carried by a virus’ (1958: 18), one that would not be restricted by or to the normal operation of the lungs and brain (and, thus, to their medicalized disease and treatment). This relation between the material and the mental

might seem strange in our habitual occlusion of the sense of touch through a focus simply on the things touched. Ordinarily we imagine that we touch others and objects, rather than experiencing touch itself as the subject of this experience. As Erin Manning observes: ‘Touch is an event ... [w]hat I touch is not the object itself, but the potential of the object to be touched’ (2007: 141–2). This offers ambiguities between pleasure and pain (complicating feelings of happiness and suffering) that become codified by what is deemed ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’—or, at least, socially ‘acceptable’ or not. Even the extension of touch through an instrument, such as a brush putting paint on a canvas or a pencil touching paper with graphite, may be overtaken by feelings of joy (with a ‘lightness of touch’) or of frustration (‘heavy handed’ or ‘forced’, perhaps)—as with the laceration of paper by the pencil in some of Artaud’s notebooks. In the case of Artaud’s own spells, charred holes in the paper ‘written’ with cigarettes also offer a thought-image of touch as literally burning.

Here the question of enduring touch concerns an active passivity, as suffering (or ‘living with’) touch, which could also be identified in Artaud’s experience of his own mental theatre through resistance to the effects of electroshock. What for Artaud was felt to be a matter of life and death—not least, in the ‘therapeutic’ contact of electricity with his brain, as another kind of demand for a ‘return to normality’—was presented by many as a question, rather, of his ‘madness’. Offering a profound undoing of the separation of active and passive in the sense of being ‘authentically’ alive, Artaud writes (echoing his own experience) about the sense of suicide in his great essay on Van Gogh, with its concern for how change—as ‘cure’—is conceived in terms of individual symptoms rather than social causes:

Van Gogh did not die of a state of delirium properly speaking, but of having been bodily the battlefield of a problem around which the evil spirit of humanity has been struggling from the beginning. The problem of the predominance of flesh over spirit, or of body over flesh, or of spirit over both. And where in this delirium is the place of the human self? Van Gogh searched for his throughout his life, with a strange energy and determination, and he did not commit suicide in a fit of madness, in dread of not

<sup>6</sup> This is, indeed, the caution offered by Deleuze and Guattari in their reading of and with Artaud’s idea of a new anatomy (1988: 149–66).

succeeding, on the contrary, he had just succeeded, and discovered what he was and who he was, when the collective consciousness of society, to punish him for escaping from its clutches, suicided him. (Artaud 1988: 487)

#### ENDURING THEATRE

Just as in the plague years of past centuries, another symptom of COVID has been the closure—and then the re-opening—of theatres (and other ‘venues’), as a model of and for the impact of contagion on the social imaginary. While there is no vaccine against (let alone a cure for) the death of metaphor through the malignancy of political cliché, appeal to the past as a ‘return to normality’, rather than its transformation in and for the future, is entirely predictable. Indeed, the sense of what *touch* communicates has a long history in the figure of plague within cultural politics, not least in the metaphors of ‘theatre’—‘always dying to be reborn’, as Caridad Svich marvellously suggests in the introduction to her collection of ‘conversations during a pandemic’ (2022: 4).

The possibility that plague might imply a transformation of ‘normality’ appears, for instance, in Edward Gordon Craig’s appeal for theatrical reform at the start of the twentieth century (citing Eleonora Duse): ‘To save the Theatre, the Theatre must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague. They poison the air, they make art impossible’ (2009: 38). Plague as a purification associated with the corruption of society—mirrored in the very practice of theatre—is seen as a metaphor for divine punishment in St Augustine’s denunciations of paganism made in the *City of God* (especially Book 2 (2003 [1476])). It provides, further, a thought-figure of and for the mimetic contagion whereby the body politic is touched by the proximity of death in arguments for (and against) claims of sovereignty, whether of the individual or the state.

Addressing ‘the modern state as a plague state’, Alberto Toscano, for example, brings a critical magnifying glass to bear on the famous frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*—seeing in this image of a virtually deserted city, besides ‘some patrolling soldiers’, a ‘couple of

ominous figures donning birdlike masks’. These seventeenth-century ‘plague doctors’ are agents in the modern government of touch (through quarantine or social isolation) that provides the ‘context for the incorporation of now-powerless subjects into the sovereign [the figure that dominates the Hobbes frontispiece], as well as for their seclusion in their houses in times of strife and contagion’ (Toscano 2020: n.p.).

For Michel Foucault (also cited by Toscano), the management of plague provides a model of and for political control—a positive ‘technology of power’, as a new ‘art of governing’ (2003: 48–9)—that replaces a ‘pre-modern’ model of and for managing contact (as contagion) in the image of leprosy:

Broadly I would say that the replacement of the model of leprosy by the model of plague essentially corresponds to a very important historical process that I will call, in a word, the invention of positive technologies of power. The reaction to leprosy is a negative reaction; it is a reaction of rejection, exclusion, and so on. The reaction to plague is a positive reaction; it is a reaction of inclusion, observation, the formation of knowledge, the multiplication of effects of power on the basis of the accumulation of observations and knowledge. (Foucault 2003: 48)

The leprosy model (that of an incurable ‘curse’) makes the infected untouchable through their exclusion from society (removing them to a society of their own in leper colonies); while in the plague model a prohibition on touch provides for an isolating inclusion within society, whether in the home or in hospital, the contemporary paradigm of which is, perhaps, the laboratory.<sup>7</sup> In today’s biopolitical regulation, everyone is treated as potentially contagious in an experimental calculus of death measured between rates of infection and the monetization of existence—where the (literal) ‘cost of living’ translates into the ‘value of life’. This calculus is an index of the failure of politics in the neo-liberal world, where the administration of life is subject to the ‘rationality’ of a cost–benefit analysis that undermines long-term government planning through privatization and just-in-time logistics. The more brutal face of this calculus in the UK is a term that politicians now want to deny ever having used, ‘herd immunity’, which rationalizes a policy in which ‘the weakest in

<sup>7</sup> Of course, modern theatres are also seen as a means to shut oneself away from the society outside, to ‘escape’ it, even as one ‘goes out’ to visit them. This makes their re-opening paradoxical as a symptom of the ‘return to normality’ (despite the prevalent sense of the stage as a space where social problems are represented). With respect to clinical laboratories and ‘escape’, there remains, of course, the specific question concerning the ‘origin’ of the Covid virus in Wuhan.

society—the ill and the elderly—are left to perish’ (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021: 106). Here the politics of touch reaches its *terminus ad quem* in the statistics for excess deaths due to the government’s deliberate lack of preparedness—for the dead, unlike the grieving, no longer endure touch.<sup>8</sup>

#### ENDURING CONTAGION

A corollary of the exercise of state power in regulating social contact is (as Foucault notes) an anarchist dream—which appears in Artaud’s account of a relation between theatre and plague condensed into a sense of the ‘gratuitous’ (with its Surrealist echoes (1958: 24)). Foucault, indeed, cites Artaud in his reference to this anarchist alternative to canonical treatises on sovereignty (such as Hobbes’s *Leviathan*):

There is a literature of plague that is a literature of the decomposition of individuality; a kind of orgiastic dream in which plague is the moment when individuals come apart and when the law is forgotten. As soon as plague breaks out, the town’s forms of lawfulness disappear. Plague overcomes the law just as it overcomes the body. Such, at least, is the literary dream of the plague. But you can see that there was another dream of the plague: a political dream in which the plague is rather the marvellous moment when political power is exercised to the full. Plague is the moment when the spatial partitioning and subdivision (*quadrillage*) of a population is taken to its extreme point, where dangerous communications, disorderly communities, and forbidden contacts can no longer appear. (Foucault 2003: 47)

The recent COVID restrictions defining ‘dangerous communications’ and ‘forbidden contacts’ applied not only to familiar sites of marginalization—such as needle exchanges and sex clubs—but to care homes and cemeteries. They were enacted against the bereaved, not just the hedonistic (or the addicted), and yet they hardly seem to have provoked any real crisis of legitimacy for government.

This entanglement of the social imaginary pre- and post-pandemic with the cultural politics (or theatre) of touch—under the sign of contagion—can be explored, then, with both the rationalist historian of contemporary political economy, Adam Tooze, and the likely

anti-vaxxer and conspiracy theorist, Antonin Artaud. Tooze situates his analysis—‘writing to be overwritten’ (2021: 304)—in its own relations to power-knowledge, as offering a critical ‘grand narrative’ (ibid.) that can be counterpointed with Artaud’s visionary account. Although the former cites reports from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Chinese Communist Party, while the latter is engaged with alchemical understanding, for both writers (in Tooze’s words, echoing Horace), ‘*de te fabula narratur—the tale is told of you*’ (2021: 303).

#### ENDURING DEATH

In 1720 (in Artaud’s telling), the viceroy of Sardinia refused to let a ship, the *Grand Saint Antoine*, dock at the island—in an act of quarantining that saved the population, but that also manifests a regime ‘transgressing ... upon the rights of man’ (1958: 16).<sup>9</sup> As we have seen, Foucault too observed that while ‘plague brings with it the literary or theatrical dream of the great orgiastic moment’, it ‘also brings the political dream of an exhaustive unobstructed power that is completely transparent to its object and exercised to the full’ (2003: 47).<sup>10</sup> The ambivalent echo today—howsoever faint—of the ‘orgiastic’ in the re-opening of nightclubs and theatres (with or without Covid passports) evokes the wholly normalized embodiment of pleasure (and its imagined irresponsibility) that Artaud’s contagious but intangible theatre was conceived to resist.<sup>11</sup>

Artaud offers a compelling story of clairvoyance, of the intangible transmission of images through contagion (1958: 27–8), where the mind is touched by a premonitory hallucination of bodies ravaged by a contact that, indeed, twenty days after its passage through the Sardinian unconscious, took hold in Marseille.<sup>12</sup> This theatre of the virtual and the material, long before today’s rules on touch, shows how enduring the principle of ‘lockdown’ in fact is. By contrast to Artaud’s dream of the Viceroy, we can read Tooze’s recent account of the failure of governmental imagination in the West with respect to the appearance of Covid in China:

For a disastrous month, most of the rest of the world

<sup>8</sup> On excess deaths in the first year of the UK’s ‘failures of state’ with respect to COVID, see chapters 10 and 11 of Calvert and Arbuthnott (2021).

<sup>9</sup> This aspect of Artaud’s essay contrasts tragically with the image of the UK in 2020 under the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson as a ‘plague island’. This description from *The New York Times* is cited by Calvert and Arbuthnott in the title of their last chapter (2021: 383ff; for the reference to *The New York Times*, 397–8).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of this ‘political dream’ enacted by the Chinese Communist Party see, for example, both Tooze (2021, especially chapter 2) and Zhang (2021).

<sup>11</sup> As Foucault notes (in reference to Georges Canguilhem): ‘[T]he norm is not at all defined as a natural law but rather by the exacting and coercive role it can perform in the domains in which it is applied. The norm consequently lays claim to power. The norm is not simply and not even a principle of intelligibility; it is an element on the basis of which a certain exercise of power is founded and legitimised’ (2003: 50).

<sup>12</sup> The historical example that Artaud’s account refers to is also recalled in the dialogue between Lawrence Wright and Gianna Pomata in Wright’s account of the ‘plague year’ in the United States (2021: chapters 10 and 16).

registered the events in China as something that had no immediate relevance to them. It reflected a deep underestimation of the virus, a complacency about the ability to cope, and an unspoken sense that for all the talk of globalisation, a Chinese problem was Chinese. Beijing may have had to adopt radical measures in response to the outbreak in Wuhan, a city 1,000 kilometres away. But the idea that containing a virus emanating from a city in central China might require immediate action in places as far away as London and New York seemed unimaginable. The year 2020 revealed that our ability to fly around the world vastly outpaced our understanding of what that interconnectedness entailed. (Tooze 2021: 65)

In the case of the UK, furthermore, there was no need for the kind of phantasmagorical premonition that Artaud evokes. The government had rehearsed its preparedness for a pandemic in October 2016 with a ‘three-day operation codenamed Cygnus’ (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021: 88)—but then totally failed to implement the subsequent report’s recommendations. Yet more tragically, the UK government seemed to learn nothing from the first wave of the virus and repeated its mistakes when failing to deal with the second wave. As Calvert and Arbuthnott write:

Word of the new virus strain led to swift action around the world as countries rushed to ban travel to and from Britain. The failure to get a grip on the pandemic had effectively turned the United Kingdom into the Wuhan of Christmas 2020. Except, while the Chinese city had managed to effectively eradicate the virus in nine weeks, Britain had failed to do so in nine months. (Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021: 390)

Although the ship in Artaud’s account (like aeroplanes today) brings the plague—as a return of its ‘original’ variant from the Orient—Artaud points out that the disease is already endemic in Marseille, albeit manifest only in localized outbreaks. (We might also remember that Artaud—a grand Antoine himself—was born in Marseille.) That the renewed virulence of plague in the city amplifies a disease that is already rife is the crucial point. As we see today with COVID, the newly manifest demographics of death make apparent the so-called ‘underlying health conditions’ or ‘co-morbidities’ that characterize society—that is, modes of the systemic exploitation of life (experienced

through poverty, racism, precarity and so on). These mark the limits of commodification as a destruction of existence, just as the proliferation of the virus depends, paradoxically, on a host whose life it may consume. (By June 2021, deaths ascribed to the virus had reached ‘about 3.8 million’ worldwide (Zhang 2021: 43).) The organic manifestations of disease in the body are symptoms of an entirely predictable (and, thereby, politically ‘manageable’) statistical prognosis—even when regarded in terms of what Tooze (citing Ulrich Beck) calls the ‘organised irresponsibility’ of contemporary politics (35).

#### ENDURING LIFE

In Artaud’s reading, the arrival of the ship leads to a magnified exposure of what is otherwise ‘normalized’, where (as we are encouraged to say for our own times) society has ‘learnt to live with’ the disease—except, of course, for those who have already died owing to a politics that practices human sacrifice on the altar of Mammon. This normative political horizon would have society anaesthetized to the implications of touch as *both* care and contagion, as if these could be rendered mutually exclusive when the one becomes excessive in relation to the other. Ostensibly a triumph of the medical over the magical, this indicates a politics that Artaud’s conception of the plague-theatre would subvert.<sup>13</sup>

As Monique Borie writes: ‘By privileging metaphors of the plague ... Artaud remains at the very heart of the question of sources that, from the 1920s on, he never dissociated from magical thinking’ (1989: 119). For Artaud, enduring touch concerns equally the enduring magic of mimetic contagion—at the intangible limits (or the reversibility) of touch, which could (or should) transform the social imaginary. What might this mean today, when we are ‘preoccupied with the Anthropocene, a transformation driven by capitalist economic growth that puts in question the very separation between natural and human history’ (Tooze 2021: 22; also 291–2)—including the compression of contact between animal and human environments that makes trans-species viral mutation (or zoonosis) practically inevitable (Zhang 2021: 10–21)?<sup>14</sup> Much remains

<sup>13</sup> Rather than mindlessly repeating the mantra of ‘following the science’ it would be better if politicians showed some understanding of what reference to ‘science’ might actually mean.

<sup>14</sup> ‘The emerging infectious diseases paradigm, proposed by scientists from the early 1970s onward, was, like the models of climate change and earth systems ecology that emerged at the same moment, a profound critique of our modern way of life, our economy, and the social system built on it. Our use of land across the globe, relentless incursions into the remaining wilderness, the industrial farming of pigs and chickens, our giant conurbations, the extraordinary global mobility of the jet age, the profligate, commercially motivated use of antibiotics, the irresponsible circulation of fake news about vaccines—all these forces combined to create a disease environment that was not safer but increasingly dangerous’ (Tooze 2021: 31).

to be learned about—and from—the politics of ‘isolation’ (and ‘escape’) between bat caves in Yunnan, a mine in Tongguan and laboratories in Wuhan specifically. But more broadly, the exemplary contact offered between theatre and plague (reading between Artaud and Tooze) makes this politics apparent anywhere. Indeed, ‘If the experts tell us that our modern economic and social system is systematically generating disease risk, what do we do about it?’ (Tooze 2021: 31).

#### ENDURING MAGIC

In this wider context, how might the closure and re-opening of theatres figure a relation between a pre- and post-pandemic cultural politics of touch, not least through the manifold senses of the empathic? In Artaud’s vivid (or, with Lotringer, ‘crazy’) mental theatre of the body as the site of a mimetic imaginary (1958: 19–20), what kind of political contagion may—or may not—be brought to life by touch? The cruelty of the neoliberal trade-off between the health of the economy and the population is phantasmatically exposed by Artaud’s vision of a theatre of the body politic—in its madness and its magic—as a paranoid attempt at the reparative. Where Tooze focuses the question on ‘our ... capacities’ in terms of ‘given ... limitation[s]’, of ‘fixes’ and ‘resources’ that bypass questions of empathy, might we not also wonder about what Artaud evoked in the relations between theatre and plague, contagion and confinement, the tangible and the intangible?

Given the limitation of our social, cultural, and political coping capacities, we depend ultimately on techno-scientific fixes. Generating those depends on our willingness and ability actually to mobilise the scientific and technical resources at our disposal. What is striking about the experience of 2020 in this regard is not just the success in developing the vaccine, but the disproportion between the scale of the crisis and the scale of the means used to resolve it. Tens of trillions in damage. Tens of billions on the vaccines. Even less to ensure their efficient deployment and fair distribution. (Tooze 2021: 292)

In the theatre of cruelty that is British politics, the chiasmic register of touch, underlying the enduring sense of what is ‘fair’, is played out

through the restrictive question of taxation and the costs of care—without, seemingly, a sense of their ‘disproportion’ ever becoming a crisis of government legitimacy.

Artaud’s revelatory sense of the relation between theatre and plague provoked only jeers when originally performed, in a presentation on 6 April 1933 at the Sorbonne. As his friend Anais Nin records in her *Diary* (1994: 191–2), Artaud sought to enact rather than describe an idea of plague. This was a projection of ‘feelings and images’ (Davoine 2014: 71) to which the audience preferred to leave him, returning to their everyday reality (or normality) in the streets outside the lecture theatre. Artaud too, deciding that his performance was over, simply got up, walked over to Nin and, politely kissing her hand, invited her to join him at a café. In this case of ‘performance research’, folding a paranoid into a reparative reading, what might it still mean—with Artaud’s example—to be touched by the enduringly contagious?

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■ Antonin Artaud, 1947  
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