

Languages of COVID's Cultural Imaginary

Pramod K. Nayar

Paintings depicting the great plagues in Europe have remained cultural texts for centuries, documenting not just people's suffering but also social attitudes, official responses and theological-eschatological debates, constituting the cultural imaginary of the great plagues. Is a similar imaginary already emerging around COVID?

When Banksy gave us two paintings capturing, first, the heroism of the medical community fighting COVID and second, the stresses and strains of being housebound, he was seeking to express in artistic terms what a large number of people around the world were perhaps thinking and experiencing. Banksy, as artists generally do, provides a language in which to speak of and think through the pandemic.

Paintings depicting the great plagues in Early Modern England and Europe have remained cultural texts for centuries, documenting not just individual and mass suffering but also social attitudes, official responses and theological-eschatological debates. These constitute the cultural imaginary of the great plagues. Do we have a similar imaginary around COVID? What is the cultural imaginary that arises from and informs the experience of the pandemic, or any extreme situation? Perhaps it is too early to ask this question, although as we shall see, the beginnings of the imaginary are in the making.

The cultural imaginary of COVID throws up and is determined by at least three modes of discourse, or even three languages in which to talk about the current age.

Meme-ory Cultures

The internet and social media have produced literally thousands of COVID-memes.

Memes, we know, serve ideological functions. They are oppositional: mocking and satirizing, often impolitely, those in power. It is an extraordinarily malleable genre of communication as well. On the internet, memes are "at once universal and particular; they allow creative play based on established phrasal, image, video, and performative tropes", as Ryan Milner puts it. They are embodiments of participatory culture and what has been termed "spreadable media". It is kitschy, provocative: memes "spin around themes that are part of the public agenda of national politics" (Chagas et al). Plangent, plaintive or satirically powerful the range in meme culture is astonishing. (<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7264>).

Pramod K. Nayar teaches at the Department of English, The University of Hyderabad.

Work-from-home memes abound. Also common are memes about teachers and academics trying to teach online, theorize the new normal or offer critiques. Then there are the memes on spatial distancing, the inaction of people in power, the crippling effects of enforced domesticity, among others, documented by [databases](#) across social media. (<https://www.synthesio.com/blog/coronavirus-memes-twitter-tiktoks-instagram-challenges/>)

Memes are nodes serving memory cultures, or meme-ory cultures as several websites from Digg to Pinterest call it. They are, as originally theorized by Richard Dawkins, units of cultural transmission:

memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

For some commentators like Gregory Schrempf, memes also offer a *moral* discourse. In the COVID age, the meme-ory cultures have committed themselves to such a discourse: on the evils of hoarding, the selfishness that marks politicians hiding themselves while their nations suffer, the attempts to generate blame – racially determined – around specific peoples, the unabated commercial pursuits by the pharma and biomedical industries, to list a few. In this way, memes constitute meme-ory cultures around specific actions of people (like the US President, the subject of countless memes) or events, as a ‘public conversation’ (Milner’s term).

But why would this form of public conversation be important? To begin with, there is the logic of collectivism. Memes are a form of ‘connective action’, argue Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. They resonate, simultaneously, with individual and collective participants. They can be reappropriated endlessly – although there arrives a point where a meme is ‘tired’ or evacuated of its topical semantic and referential scope – by any number of people. ‘Memetic participation’, as Milner proposes, is a key constituent of today’s social interaction.

While it is a truism to state that in the age of COVID and the age of the internet, there is no strict isolation possible, memetic participation over the internet and social media is undeniably an important mode of *talking about* COVID.

Art, Parody and COVID-Kitsch

Commentators have noted that in order to reflect on the current contexts, one often turns to iconic art works. For instance, Andy Warhol’s *Death and Disaster* series from 1963 portraying disturbing, and explicit, images of dying (including the famous electric chair photographs), accidents and trauma, has become a touchstone for many, writes [Yuna Shin](#) (<https://medium.com/art-direct/warnings-from-andy-warhol-on-resuming-life-during-a-pandemic-and-time-of-civil-unrest-cab885929de8>). Katrina Karkazis imitated Vermeer’s ‘Girl with a Pearl Earring’ and Holly Bess Kincaid rejigged Andrew Wyeth ‘Christina’s World’. Chiara

Grilli invoked Edward Hopper's 'Morning Sun'. *Time* magazine reporting on the trend put it this way:

The human drive to engage with culture hasn't diminished, but with cultural institutions closed globally, that desire is manifesting in an alternative way (<https://time.com/5817117/coronavirus-art-history/>).

Art history, at a time when the museums and collections are closed, comes in handy for today's artists, teachers and commentators. Now, parodying and re-enacting (the term used in the *Time* commentary) well-known works of art from the past proves, yet again, that great, controversial or provocative art continues to fuel our discourses, shapes our way of thinking and enables frames of speaking of the present.

Parodies of classic art approximate to kitsch in many cases – inverting a Caravaggio or Hopper into something else altogether. But, contrary to the dismissal of parody and kitsch as mere commodified sentiment, kitsch can be a powerful instrument of and space for reflection. First, kitsch, when you examine Grilli's or Kincaid's, opens up the world of high art to the popular. While many critics see kitsch as reductive, simplistic and excessive and hence depoliticising, surely, the transformation of a Vermeer or a Hopper into an invocation of the *present* is no less political? Using the theme of domesticity or gender relations from canonical art to draw attention to the iniquities and difficulties of the new incarceration is the language of political emotions even, or especially, in kitsch. Second, kitschy parody points to a pluralism in the language of art, so that the language of an older work of art can be *made* to speak to the present. Kitsch, like parody, is a cultural mechanism that turns often incomprehensible or partially comprehensible works of art into a more readily accessible object to which one responds more affectively. This is not a reductionism as much as a repurposing. Third, transforming a classic work into a comment on the present-day scenario of masks, isolation and frightening viral transmission is to work with a melodramatic mode. In Grilli's reworking of Hopper's 'Morning Sun' (in the series 'quarantinart') we see a woman catching the sun coming in through the open window. If Hopper painted this with an open vista partially visible through the window, Grilli's view is restricted spatially to another apartment block outside her window, narrowing considerably her range of vision. The heater in the room, the glass window panes, the angle of light which in Grilli is subdued unlike in Hopper, are dramatic, even melodramatic, because here sunlight does not appear rejuvenating or even cheery. It takes the effulgence of Hopper and turns it into an excess of brooding and even vaguely eerie lightscape. Here sunlight is the source of a melodramatic excess: that people inside houses today experience *even* sunshine as carceral light.

COVID-kitsch is this play with classical images, merging them into current stereotypes (such as the trope of the 'concrete jungle' of the city that Grilli is obviously referencing), and serving the present need.

COVID Street (Art)

A second mode of aesthetic response in the COVID imaginary is the production of vernacular, non-official art works that become a part of campaigns, advisories and general public culture. Street art, note commentators, has flourished in COVID times. These works of art are visions of the future as well, argue [Eugene McCann](https://theconversation.com/COVID-19-murals-express-hope-and-help-envision-urban-futures-138706) et al. (<https://theconversation.com/COVID-19-murals-express-hope-and-help-envision-urban-futures-138706>). Across India and its major cities, said one [report](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/coronavirus-pandemic-inspires-the-art-of-graffiti-in-india/saluting-the-corona-warriors/slideshow/76443288.cms), graffiti and street art has come out, literally, to honour the health care workers. (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/coronavirus-pandemic-inspires-the-art-of-graffiti-in-india/saluting-the-corona-warriors/slideshow/76443288.cms>)

In other parts of the world, artists invoked older themes – such as war – to speak of and represent the war on viral terror. [Vietnamese artists](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/09/in-a-war-we-draw-vietnams-artists-join-fight-against-COVID-19), for instance, yoked the nation’s history of war to the contemporary battle against COVID (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/09/in-a-war-we-draw-vietnams-artists-join-fight-against-COVID-19>). A fascinating collection of such street art has been [documented](#). This too, like the parodies we have already looked at, often mimes and mimics earlier art work: Eme Freethinker of Berlin shows Tolkien’s Gollum worshipping a toilet roll (whose scarcity and hoarding was headlines a few weeks into COVID). Others converted romance into a hygiene-discourse, depicting lovers kissing with masks on. In Chennai street art was used to demonstrate the need for spatial distancing. Sand sculpture in Gaza City asked people to stay home. The Virgin Mary and Mona Lisa were both depicted with face masks in a few cities.

Street art and graffiti constitute what used to be deemed subculture but now have been integrated into the cultural memory and cultural history of a place like New York or London. Cedar Lewisohn’s *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution* (2009) defines graffiti as “any form of unofficial, unsanctioned application of a medium onto a surface”, and “exist[s] in the mainstream of culture and at the same time on its periphery”. Often illicit, the art is a “mix of skill and risk”, writes Jeff Ferrell in his Foreword to the *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. *Defined contrastingly as art or defacement, expressive or destructive, street art is a powerful medium to carry political and social messages, especially those proscribed by the law, the state and sometimes even the community.* In line with this thinking, [Tyson Mitman](#) argues that street art is carnivalesque and helps “society identify where the collective boundaries of acceptable opinion are”. Street art is above all a history of the vanishing present (<https://thewire.in/culture/inside-the-world-of-coronavirus-inspired-street-art>) .

Street art is the ornament on the buildings and public spaces, argues Rafael Schacter. In the COVID age, devoid of mass and collective spectacles of entertainment such as sports, these ornaments are modes of bringing people to focus on the message in the text. But the point is also that these are not art works that stand alone: they are ‘adjunct’ and affixed to an existing structure. In Schacter’s words, we find their meaning when we see the “how of their having been scored,

eSS Sunday Edit, Prakash on school sports
August 2, 2020

stamped and situated onto the architectural body of the city”. Banksy, therefore, is redoing the architectural body of the city, its history, when he inscribes his art on the buildings. For Graeme Evans street art is a form of ‘place branding’ as well.

Vernacular public art in the age of COVID is *time* branding too: for it marks a time-stamp of the present. Whether capturing the saga of the health workers – Banksy’s ‘Game Changer’ showed a boy. Having dumped Superman and Batman, is holding up a caped nurse as the new superhero --- cautioning everyone to wear masks, or mocking the impotence of political leaders and statesmen to stem the rising cases of COVID deaths--- the vernacular public art maps a sliver in time. It is, one could argue, restitutive art. Vernacular public art is something a community in a particular place experiences collectively, a common language of their experience that restores to the members of their community who are now in isolation, a sense of place-belonging. That is, when *isolation* and *separation* are the watchwords of the current experiential moment, vernacular public art seen and experienced by the people in its vicinity delivers a sense of place as a restitution of the sense of community.

*

Much work needs to be done on the emerging COVID cultural imaginary in literature and culture. As battles over the ‘new normal’ continue – especially at the imposition of specific forms of governance under the guise of ‘normalization’ – the languages in which one can, and must, speak of the COVID Age are to be examined.

eSocial