

The Disease Becomes the Host: Cattle Decapitation's Pandemic Discourse from Song to Music Video

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ABSTRACT

On April 2, 2020, extreme metal band Cattle Decapitation released a video for their song “Bring Back the Plague” (2019), whose lyrics invoke a pandemic that wipes out humanity as a means to counter the anthropogenic devastation of Earth. This article explores these lyrics vis-à-vis the music video, which tackles the spatiotemporal disruption caused by stay-at-home orders at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, condemning anomic behavior and appealing to solidarity and social responsibility.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemics, metal music, music video, Anthropocene

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La enfermedad se convierte en el anfitrión: el discurso pandémico de la decapitación del ganado de la canción al video musical

RESUMEN

El 2 de abril de 2020, la banda de metal extremo Cattle Decapitation lanzó un video de su canción “Bring Back the Plague” (2019), cuya letra invoca una pandemia que acaba con la humanidad como un medio para contrarrestar la devastación antropogénica de la Tierra. Este artículo explora

estas letras frente al video musical, que aborda la disrupción espaciotemporal provocada por las órdenes de quedarse en casa al inicio de la pandemia de COVID-19, condenando comportamientos anómicos y apelando a la solidaridad y la responsabilidad social.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemias, Música metal, video musical, antropoceno

疾病成为宿主：Cattle Decapitation乐队从歌曲到音乐视频中的大流行话语

2020年4月2日，极端金属乐队Cattle Decapitation为他们的歌曲“Bring Back the Plague”

（2019）发布了音乐视频，其歌词提到了一场消灭人类的大流行，以作为人为破坏地球的对抗手段。本文探究了这些歌词与音乐视频，该视频应对了2019冠状病毒病（COVID-19）大流行开始时居家令造成的时空中断，谴责了无规范的行为并呼吁团结和社会责任。

关键词：2019冠状病毒病，冠状病毒，大流行，金属音乐，音乐视频，人类世

In 2015, extracts from email exchanges between environmental philosopher Timothy Morton and singer/songwriter Björk were included in *Björk: Archives*, the catalog that accompanied a Björk retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In one email, Morton explains that the song “Virus,” included in Björk’s album *Biophilia* (2011), is, in fact, a love song: “Being alive means being susceptible

to viruses,” Morton mused (Guðmundsdóttir and Morton),¹ embracing the “dark-sweet” character of human-virus entanglements (*Dark Ecology* 5). Two years later, Morton reflected on viral politics and stressed, “Claiming that the AIDS virus has as much right to exist as an AIDS patient is a conclusion you can draw within the logic of deep ecology, but it has nothing to do with actual ecological politics” (“Subscendence” para 4). Less than a month after President Trump had declared COVID-19 a national emergency, Morton continued reflecting on viruses and explained, “The Latin word *hospitis* means host, guest, friend, enemy. Hospitality means you might open your door to a killer.” They concluded that “[I]f life is a loose collective of uneasy alliances. Life is ambiguous. . . . We just found out the hard way how humankind means solidarity with nonhuman people” (“Thank Virus” paras 4-7). But solidarity with viruses is fraught with incongruities. After all, viruses are “strange strangers” because they occupy the liminal space between life and death and they are simply so different from humans that they remain unfathomable entities (Morton, “Queer Ecology” 277). Nevertheless, Morton is strangely attracted to them: “I hate [the virus]. And I love it” (“Thank Virus” para 7). This expressly ambiguous attitude toward the coronavirus builds upon the difference between actual ecological politics and the logic of deep ecology Morton struggled with when discussing HIV, as humans are unable to imagine a world “so egalitarian that important human needs, such as health or survival, would not take priority” (Bennett 104).

1 Scott Snibbe, an interactive artist who designed the “app album” that accompanied the release of *Biophilia* noted in a 2011 interview with *The Guardian* that “Virus” is “a kind of love story between a virus and a cell. And of course the virus loves the cell so much that it destroys it” (Cragg para 4). Morton thus merely repeated discourse surrounding the album.

A similar discord defines the misanthropic, arguably deep-ecological lyrics performed by American extreme metal band Cattle Decapitation and the much less aggressive position taken in the music video for “Bring Back the Plague,” in which they ultimately believe and foster confidence in human solidarity. Cattle Decapitation’s oeuvre addresses environmental issues, in particular the negative consequences of human extractive and exploitative practices on the natural world. The environmental awareness performed in the songs was originally backed by a decidedly vegan lifestyle, but only two of the five current band members are vegetarian, in part due to the realities of touring on miniscule budgets. As frontman Travis Ryan has repeatedly stressed in interviews, there are definitive disagreements between their environmental agenda and routinely “burning fossil fuels” while touring the world.

“Bring Back the Plague” is part of the band’s seventh studio album *Death Atlas*, which was released in fall 2019. The song draws on the idea of the “next pandemic,” a cyclical space-time occurrence that humanity is destined to experience repeatedly until a final pandemic will wipe out humanity, whose existence on Earth “is simply not sustainable” (“Be Still Our Bleeding Hearts”). Upon the implementation of stay-at-home orders in the United States in spring 2020, an official music video was published on April 2, 2020, shot using amateur technology while the band was self-isolating. Since the lyrics of “Bring Back the Plague” could well have been interpreted as a possible call to ignore measures meant to contain the viral spread, the band evidently felt the need to comment on the pandemic unfolding in the real world. The music video accordingly critiques different responses to the pandemic through parody, while at the same time expressing the disorientation provoked by self-isolation and the influx

of distressing news about the situation outside. In addition, it showcases the consequences of lockdown measures on professional musicians, resulting in an exemplary reflection on how the COVID-19 pandemic (in particular its early phase in spring 2020) altered people's perception of spatiotemporal and social existence.

The yearning for the extinction of *Homo sapiens* expressed in the lyrics thus clashed with the band's real-life political stance, enacted in a music video that engages with the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. To be sure, in extreme metal, the transgression of norms is little more than a gesture (to riff on Foucault) and accordingly does not have any real-life consequences other than inducing a sense of shock and disgust (see Kahn-Harris 48–49). In other words, “thematic imagery is presented precisely as *theme*, that is, as meaning” rather than a call to action (van Ooijen 86). Nevertheless, the music video reflects the gap between the band's radically environmentalist rhetoric and their reaction to a concrete pandemic event. While their song “Vulturous” suggests a “need to see our species burning” to end human exploitation of the planet, the music video seems to embrace solidarity with other humans instead of “ditch[ing] the ignorant philanthropy” (“Be Still Our Bleeding Hearts”).

DEATH ATLAS AND THE CHRONOTOPE OF RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALIST DISCOURSE

The Anthropocene conjuncture, its causes and effects, creates a multiplicity of new chronotopes and multipolar configurations that invite “Western-identified subjects to resituate themselves in the space-time-matter of the planet” (Pratt, “Coda” G170–G171). The Anthropocene discourse—and its multidimensional chronotopic unfoldings—is marked by

a sense of irreversible threat that conveys a spatial and temporal absolute (Rothe 147–148), whose narratives tend to engage with apocalyptic scenarios of environmental destruction. The relevance of tracing space-time ecological patterns lies in the fact that human existence has been structured in ways that inevitably lead to the consumption, exploitation and destruction of the natural environment which, at the same time, endangers the survival of humankind (Müller 600).² As Madeleine Fagan indicates, climate change has been pervasively framed in terms of pressing disaster in both media commentary and popular culture (228–230); its urgency has both spatial and temporal implications that contribute to a sense of doom. Apocalyptic environmental discourse structures chronotopes that depend on temporal urgency, a near-future temporality that is palpable and “visible” (Bakhtin 84), but simultaneously connected to deep time through humanity’s exploitation of fossil fuels and its indelible inscription into geological layers. Likewise, the space defined by this kind of narrative is marked by a global scope, and yet the imminence of environmental disaster situates it in a space of perceived vicinity. Such chronotopic interpretation is thus shaped by the telic perception of time and space connected to notions of irreversible temporal ending and the existential dread intrinsic to finitude.

2 Here, “human(kind)” refers to a “genre of the human” (Weheliye 2) that conforms to the “fundamental tenets of industrialism, including a ravenous appetite for consumption, the expectation of an ever-growing material standard of living, and a belief that all other forms of life exist to serve us” (Kidner 472). While various scholars have critiqued the human universalism inscribed into the very term “Anthropocene” (e.g. Yusoff, *Billion Black Anthropocenes*), we will replicate this problematic use because Cattle Decapitation’s lyrics do not distinguish between different groups of humans—humanity is an “ecological tumor” and only the “[e]xtinction of man” can bring “peace on Earth,” as they put it in their song “Everyone Deserves to Die” (2002).

Conceiving of the Anthropocene as a chronotope intersects with the proleptic characteristics of the chronotopes of memory, in which future experiences are anticipated based on past and present events, both temporally and spatially. Such structure permeates the proleptic patterns repeated throughout *Death Atlas*, revolving around the constant anticipation of human extinction. However, unlike the Anthropocene chronotope suggested by Mary Louise Pratt, which is characterized by humans “reimagining and remaking themselves in the space-time-matter of the planet and its beings” (*Planetary Longings* 121), the album seems to be trapped in a future imaginary that can barely see beyond the end of humankind.³ After all, the lyrics employ an apocalyptic rhetoric that acknowledges the global, planetary scale of the environmental crisis underpinned by the relentless forward motion of time, irrevocably resulting in the annihilation of any space-time-matter configuration.

Opening with an instrumental track titled “Anthropogenic: End Transmission,” *Death Atlas* is organized in four blocks, each of them introduced by an instrumental track. While “Anthropogenic: End Transmission” collects, as the title suggests, transmissions in different languages that point at the

3 Notably, the album’s final song, “Death Atlas,” oscillates between a timespace in which humankind “deserve[s] everything that’s coming” and a timespace in which “[m]ankind [is] ... dead and gone” and in which “Earth [is] reset to day one.” This is the only song that expressly mentions a “post-Anthropocene,” which is, however, not a timespace thousands, if not millions of years, in the future, when human impact is no longer felt, but rather a timespace closely tied to the vanishing of humankind, demonstrating that the album is caught in anthropocentric and humanist discourses. To add a more positive spin to these textual inconsistencies, one might say that they are testament to the “bad environmentalism” defined by “contradiction, imperfection, and ambiguity” that Nicole Seymour has observed in popular environmental discourses (232).

end of the world, “The Great Dying,” “The Great Dying II,” and “The Unerasable Past” reference different environmental discourses. These three tracks stand out for the register employed, as they mention a few concrete issues related to the environmental crisis: the importance of bio-diverse regions, the sixth mass extinction, rising sea levels, and the “abnormal rises in upper-atmosphere methane levels” (“The Great Dying”; “The Unerasable Past”). Significantly, these three tracks are not songs but rather short intermezzos in which the entirety or at least parts of the text are delivered by distorted speaking voices. “The Great Dying” part one is spoken by a female-sounding voice (and lasts 1:12), while the second part (1:05) is delivered by a male-sounding voice whose aural qualities and content uncannily recall the Reapers, biotechnological creatures from deep space and deep time that embody mass extinction in the *Mass Effect* videogame trilogy (BioWare, 2007–2012). “The Unerasable Past” (2:50) features a less distorted voice delivering data about environmental destruction, accompanied by a melodic composition and a clean-vocals verse at the end: “And I count the days / ’Til we expire our ways. / And I count the days / ’Til we expire for always.”

The remaining tracks are characterized by the apocalyptic imagery that defines the album. Thus, the lyrics exploit a variety of terms related to apocalyptic discourse and finitude (purge, extermination, extinction, euthanasia, demise, destruction, extinguished, poisoning, cremation, self-destructing power, sterilizing), negatively connotated verbs (infuriate, berate, subjugate, enrage, scavenge) and collocations (beyond compare, beyond repair, the scale has tipped, out of time, out of mind), and emphatic modifiers (inappropriate, hapless, ghastly, deep aggression, taunting). The album’s pivotal argument is the protracted neglect that humanity has

shown for the consequences of the exploitation, disregard, and pollution of the planet it has caused (“We know that we’re wrong. / We know what we’ve done, / Yet we still carry on” [“Time’s Cruel Curtain”]), for which “[w]e deserve everything that’s coming” (“Death Atlas”). *Death Atlas* exposes the fact that environmental destruction and climate change affect the livelihoods of humans as well, but that does not seem to be a sufficient reason to mitigate any further damage because “profits dominate what’s right” (“Vulturous”). The verses include constructions typical of radicalized misanthropic discourse, invoking the extinction of the human species (“Annihilation is necessary” [“The Great Dying II”]) while mourning the lives and species that anthropogenic activities have been exterminating.

The radically sounding lyrics suffer from their disconnect from the architectonics of environmental discourses and realpolitik. Radical environmentalism often brings forth conflicting notions and abstract solutions, failing to address underlying questions related to existing hegemonies. Furthermore, the dilemmas intrinsic to the construction of hierarchies in dealing with extinction and ecologies that are other situate such discourse “in pertinent existential questions that are culture-specific and need addressing as a prerequisite of working towards future global action in line with intercultural environmentalism” (Molek-Kozakowska 719). *Death Atlas* fails to propose any suggestions for solutions to the environmental crisis (other than ridding the planet of humankind) and remains trapped in a Western epistemology of extinction and climate change, overlooking the ecological crises that diverse populations on Earth have been facing. Indeed, this disregard for non-Western lifeworlds is a serious oversight because “the Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are

now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us” (Ghosh 62–63).

The arguments underpinning the lyrics do not advocate any kind of activism and do not speak up for mobilization. According to vocalist Travis Ryan, calling on people to blow up a pipeline (to draw on the title of Andreas Malm’s recent book) is not the point, though: “We only produce questions, complaints, criticisms and problems” (quoted in Masters and Currin para 20). However, the lyrics arguably even fail to raise ecological awareness, as the references to environmental destruction become engulfed by the apocalyptic narrative that drives the album. As a result, the band’s treatment of Anthropocene-related issues is a performance of a radical environmentalism that is mostly structured through discursive constructions and semantic choices, as well as perfunctory references to teleological, biblical, and mythical tropes (e.g., “We’re flying too close to the sun” in “Absolute Destitute”).

BRING BACK THE PLAGUE: ABSTRACT VS. CONCRETE PANDEMIC DISCOURSES

“Bring Back the Plague” is the seventh track of *Death Atlas*, following “One Day Closer to the End of the World,” in which the lyrics express a “desire for the end times,” decry human activities, and proclaim a “Lust for dying / Lust for extinction / Lusting for euthanasia.” “Bring Back the Plague” continues along these lines by introducing the idea of a pandemic as a possible “solution” to humankind’s cancerous existence on Earth (to draw on Cattle Decapitation’s earlier song “Everyone Deserves to Die” [2002]). The lyrics of “Bring Back the Plague” exploit tropes typical of the “outbreak narrative” (Wald) and open with a direct reference to the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium. The use of the term “Black Death” not only

generically refers to popular imaginations of outbreaks but also evokes the devastating scale of the bubonic plague wave in the fourteenth century, which wiped out about half the European population (Aberth 3). Aligned with their overall approach to extinction-related topics, *Cattle Decapitation's* treatment of the plague is driven more by a fascination with the decimation of humans and possible disruptions in the capitalist machinery than insight into plausible epidemiological developments.

By mentioning “[t]he recurring pandemic,” the first verse evokes the “next pandemic” discourse. This discourse arose “in the early 1990s out of a shift in epidemiological reasoning, which ushered in the now prevalent notion of emerging infectious diseases” and refers to the notion of an upcoming pandemic event that will threaten the existence of humanity (Lynteris 6). Such discourse feeds the cyclical quality of what could be called the next-pandemic chronotope: human existence is bound to the expectation and unfolding of the next pandemic, in particular the spreading of zoonotic diseases, on a global, seemingly uncontainable scale. Despite the temporally linear irreversibility of the apocalyptic rhetoric, the chronotope relies on the idea of cyclically waiting for the eventual outbreak that will result in the end of the human species. As Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro underline, the next pandemic scenario is typically imagined as leading to a “world without us” rather than to “us without the world” (21). However, in *Death Atlas*, eschaton (or end of time, specifically for the human species) and katechon (time of the end, perceived as impending and caused by humanity itself) generally overlap.

Despite the exploitation of other common pandemic-related tropes and discursive constructions, the lyrics do not

figure the “plague” as a malicious agent. When referring to pandemic events, such as COVID-19, the most common discursive construction of relatively new pathogens imagines them as somehow mysterious, elusive, and treacherous, characterized by an anthropomorphized sense of agency and prone to go undetected until their existence is revealed in fast-spreading outbreaks. For example, the bacterium of *Yersinia pestis* was long “believed to be able to escape detection and eradication by means of an array of strategies” (Lynteris 34). However, in “Bring Back the Plague,” the virus assumes the role of an agent of justice, as the plague is personified as a mythical entity identified as “Black Death,” who comes to “find us” and whose “cloak” is bound to “surround us” and actively exterminate humanity by “drown[ing] us / In bacillus countless.” Despite this mythical, super-human dimension and its human-killing characteristics, the virus’s anthropomorphism suggests that humankind is both the disease and its solution.

In terms of cultural history, the connection between the experience and knowledge of epidemiological events and the notion of human extinction is a relatively recent phenomenon. As Christos Lynteris observes, scientific literature only started exploring this concept in the 1990s, leading to the notion of humanity as faced “with a formidable microbiological agency that is asymmetrically more pervasive, elusive, virulent, or ‘viral’ (in terms of the communicative doxa of late capitalism) than humans” (36). The guiding metaphor of *Death Atlas* is that humanity is itself a virus that feeds not only on Earth’s resources but also on its own livelihood, making the recurring and expected pandemic events the material consequence of such metaphorical infection and “diseased existence.” Among the few references to epidemiological tropes, the lyrics use the image of “scattering rats” metaphor-

ically to identify the human population prone to being infected and, at the same time, spreading the infection.

Rather than addressing questions such as taking preventive measures and/or preparing for the next pandemic, the lyrics of “Bring Back the Plague” identify the stark reduction of the number of humans inhabiting the planet as a desirable outcome; so much so that pandemics do not happen “often enough it seems.” The vocals emphasize the importance of “find[ing] a way to rid the world of everyone tomorrow” and stress the purportedly democratic nature of infectious diseases, as “Every body [is] a host / Every body [can be] infected.” However, the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that a virus is not “the great equalizer,” but rather exacerbates existing social inequalities (see, for example, Galasso; Mein).

In addition, the potentially equalizing human universalism imagined in the lyrics is riddled with inconsistencies. At the beginning of the song, the lyrics articulate a point of view that is external to the imagined pandemic event. The verses refer to a “populace” that is destined to become “a plague focus,” delivering a generically misanthropic discourse. Further on, though, the lyrics refer to “us” as the target of the plague and invoke the extermination of “those that threaten a new world.” This construction draws on the American apocalyptic tradition, which differentiates between sinners, who will be extinguished, and believers, who will populate the new world (see, for example, Zamora). In “Bring Back the Plague,” this generic setup implies a hierarchy based on which some humans deserve infection and consequent annihilation more than others. That the lyrics do not specify who “those” who “threaten a new world” are results from the abstract quality of Cattle Decapitation’s radical environmentalist discourse.

At the same time, the song exploits the dichotomic opposition between “us” and “them” typically employed in populist discourse. This construct seeks to create distance between the speaker and an antagonistic other that is entirely responsible for the negative acts at hand (van Dijk), which clashes with the album’s underlying argument that humanity as a whole has contributed to the environmental disaster. Whereas most songs on the album employ the first-person plural to evoke species-thinking, “Bring Back the Plague” and “With All Disrespect” repeatedly use the second person. While the latter song deploys the pronoun to accuse an environmentally culpable yet nondescript “you,” the former’s use of the pronoun is key to the lyrics’ ambiguousness. On the one hand, “you” refers directly to the virus and the pandemic: “Black Death, you’ve found us / Your cloak surrounds us.” On the other hand, it refers to an interlocutor who “bring[s] back the plague” and who slowly becomes included in the mass of people deserving of extinction due to having ravaged the planet:

Delete *those that threaten* a new world ...

Dig *their* graves ...

Bring back the plague

Even if it means your own survival is at
stake

Dig *your* grave.

We’ll find a way to *rid the world of everyone*
tomorrow ...

Dig *our* grave. (our emphases)

The song thus suggests a responsibility for the environmental crisis shared among all of humankind and the inevitable out-

come of anthropogenic activities that is extinction. Crucially, the lyrics do not indicate any type of solidarity among humans nor do they appeal to social responsibility. The music video, however, alters the perception of the lyrics.

REAL-LIFE PANDEMICS: THE MUSIC VIDEO

The “Bring Back the Plague” official music video opens with a distorted fragment of an official speech that Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau delivered on March 23, 2020: “We’ve all seen the pictures online of people who seem to think they’re invincible. Well, you’re not. Enough is enough. Go home and stay home.” The passage formed part of the opening of the speech, in which Trudeau condemned negationist attitudes and called upon Canadians to respect social distancing measures. The liberal prime minister punctuated his speech with harsh remarks to insist on the necessity for everyone to “do their part,” while reassuring the population by pointing out the government’s plans to cope with the virus and thanking essential workers (Trudeau). At that time, U.S. President Donald J. Trump repeatedly stressed the foreign (and specifically Chinese) origin of the virus, stated that his nondescript coronavirus team was “the best anywhere in the world” and claimed that the health risk for the majority of Americans was “very, very low” (Trump). The combination of downplaying the threat and glorifying the United States’ opposition to the foreign otherness of the virus marked Trump’s discursive approach to the pandemic and contributed to polarizing the electorate’s positions. By integrating a meaningful fragment of Trudeau’s speech into the music video, *Cattle Decapitation* signals a political position, distancing themselves from the U.S. presidential attitude.

After this introduction, the video shows different lockdown

practices and contexts that were experienced by subjects both situated inside their houses and venturing outside to provide for their livelihoods. The only epidemiological and plague-related trope used is a short clip showing a dead rat lying on a roadway, but the video avoids any further reference to zoonotic spread. Likewise, the foreign origin of the virus is only briefly hinted at when a cursor moves from China to the United States on a world map. Overall, the music video is deeply embedded in the coronavirus context to the point that for anyone unaware of what happened during the first few weeks of the coronavirus pandemic, the assembled clips would arguably be devoid of meaning.

Directly connected to real-life political discourse and concrete space-time, a new chronotopic dialogism of the (ongoing) pandemic emerges. The “inside” lockdown chronotope is marked by a familiar, circumscribed, and seemingly inescapable space, whereas time becomes an undefined parameter depending on the subject’s perception influenced by the constant influx of news on pandemic developments. The impossibility to go outside and perform habitual tasks deconstructs time and binds it to the virtual, mediated connection with the outer world. The “outside” lockdown reality is equally marked by concrete locations that become the theater of narratives of quasi-ordeal, as people leave the “inside” chronotope to face a space and time that used to be familiar but has turned into an inhospitable and surreal version of reality.

This surreality is connected to how the pandemic—and in particular the first, unexpected lockdown—“distorts ordinary understandings of time by closing the geographical perimeters of public space” (Kattaga 1402). Chronological time, or *kronos*, was disrupted while the duration of mundane, everyday life, *kairos*, which is related to the unexpected

but also to seizing moments, expanded (Hartog). Similar to how the Anthropocene suggests finitude with respect to life, the pandemic entails the idea of an ending—of “normalcy” but also possibly of humanity. It represents a temporal caesura and suggests a temporal order that transcends human existence by evoking a kind of posthuman time defined by “living with the virus.”

As the coronavirus spread across the globe, in a very short period of time people were exposed to three new temporalities: the virus’s own unknown temporal existence, the time imposed by the reaction to the spread through research and measures, and the time of the lockdown that coincided with a suspension of *chronos*. Avishek Parui and Merin Simi Raj have noted that a COVID-19-related crisis chronotope emerged from the uncertainty and defamiliarization of space-time intrinsic to the pandemic, leading to “a remapped engagement with materiality” (1434). In the configuration of a chronotope, space “becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history,” as time “thickens” (Bakhtin 84), becoming palpable and connected to a specific space. In the case of the consequences derived from the abrupt lockdown measures taken at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a chronotopic ambivalence emerged from the clash between “compressed spatiotemporal connectedness and existential disconnect, whereby subjects share an infected time and space which also necessitates a distance which is defined as a social norm, avoidance of touch and only partially visible self” (Parui and Simi Raj 1435).

In an attempt to evidence the character of the pandemic as a social event and the uselessness of xenophobic “ground zero claiming,” medical anthropologist A. David Napier has stressed that viruses are “just information waiting for a

host.” Such simplification resonates with the lyrics of “Bring Back the Plague,” in which the concept of “host” is a focal point. However, the music video almost exclusively tackles the chronotopicity of early pandemic measures, focusing on the social consequences rather than the viral outbreak, condemning specific reactions and highlighting the pervasive disorientation generated by the sudden lockdowns. The music video’s montage exposes how pandemic outbreaks are, in fact, “as much socially as biologically driven, being moments when information—for whatever reason—is socially shared, amplified, consumed, distorted, recycled and so on” (Napier). The awareness of the concreteness of disease and proximity of death is very likely to induce a “social meltdown” and “widespread disregard for law and custom . . . , and the public display of indulgence” (Lynteris 28).

The music video alternates between short fragments that are structured around two chronotopic dimensions. The “outside” pandemic experience is conveyed through clips showing people’s aggressive reactions to imposed measures (Illustration 1), as well as people not following any guidance and instead traveling to Florida for spring break. Conversely, the “inside” space-time is connected to both a pandemic reinterpretation of images typical of music videos (showing the band members playing the song in their homes) and the visual commentary provided by the vocalist, Travis Ryan. Scenes in which Ryan appears tie the rather loosely assembled clips together, as his body language satirically comments on the imposed lockdown and on the absurdity of both the violence and the obliviousness displayed by people outside. The transition to “inside” clips is repeatedly characterized by a visual effect of static distortion, suggesting the presence of security cameras filming Ryan and the other band members, which touches upon the theme of surveillance evoked by lockdown

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measures. Besides generic stock footage of handwashing, wearing masks, blowing one's nose, and animations used to visualize the SARS-CoV-2 virus, a purposely placed clip shows a toilet paper roll descending a staircase, from the inside to the outside and from up down, thereby bridging the two chronotopic realities. The “outside” chronotope is characterized by signs of a possible social meltdown, revealed via social media clip: people panic-buy toilet paper and fight over goods and groceries, coping with the shortage that hit stores in the early stages of the pandemic.

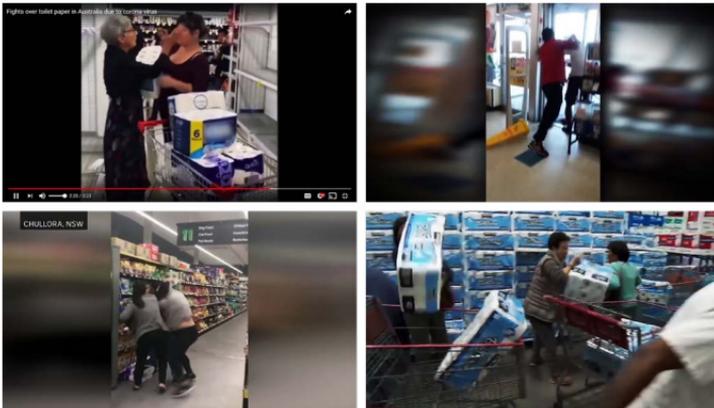


Illustration 1: The hunt for toilet paper leads to altercations.

With just a few clips sampled from video platforms, the images document the onset of anomic behaviors in the context of a pandemic event. The selection of clips supports the concept at the heart of the song: humans are the “virus”—in two senses: metaphorically by facilitating their own extinction with their (anti)social and individualistic behaviors and literally by thus spreading the virus. In a way, reality validated the notion underlying *Death Atlas* that humans often react in antisocial ways that amplify the damage already caused. A few clips showing people praying superposed with images of toilet pa-

per rolls establish a link between the absurdity of herd behavior and (unmasked) mass prayers as a solution to a pandemic (Illustration 2). In other words, the music video satirizes how quickly people in the Global North idolized toilet paper and effectively turned it into the most prized commodity in the first few weeks of the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, the images of worship critique people's misbegotten belief in religious practices as a "solution" to the viral spread instead of adhering to the guidelines published by the authorities.



Illustration 2: Toilet paper assumes a divine quality.

Furthermore, the music video repeatedly includes footage of people spending time on beaches during spring break,

especially young women dancing in swimsuits and entertained onlookers (Illustration 3). In the initial phase of the pandemic, the downplaying of viral spread within the United States led to the ban of foreign passengers from entering U.S. territory but did not regulate American citizens' travel. The lack of travel restrictions allowed students to spend their break on American and Mexican coasts; at the end of March, non-essential travel between the neighboring countries was only limited at land ports of entry (US CBP) and individuals assumed to be undocumented migrants (US CDC). Early college spring break (March 14–19, 2020) significantly increased viral spread in communities in which students had returned from popular destinations (e.g., Mandrum and Niekamp). The montage of Cattle Decapitation's video identifies spring breakers as a symbol of the super-spreader figure, as well as the embodiment of the lack of social responsibility and reckless attitudes that later were advocated by opponents of the pandemic measures imposed by the government. The reality of the pandemic depicted in the video confirms and expresses in a more concrete way Cattle Decapitation's consolidated criticism towards widespread individualism. The behaviors displayed in the clips expose a lack of social trust and the attendant inability to coordinate citizens' actions "in ways that are uncomfortable, inconvenient, and even painful to individuals, but crucial to collective well-being" (Napier and Fischer 275).

In the series of clips almost nobody is shown wearing masks except the band members, who are self-isolated in their homes: bassist Olivier Pinard and guitar players Josh Elmore and Belisario Dimuzio all wear different kinds of industrial safety masks and appear to be playing in their living rooms, while drummer Dave McGraw wears latex gloves, and vocalist Travis Ryan compulsively uses hand sanitizer (Illustration 4).



Illustration 3: Spring break helps spread the virus.

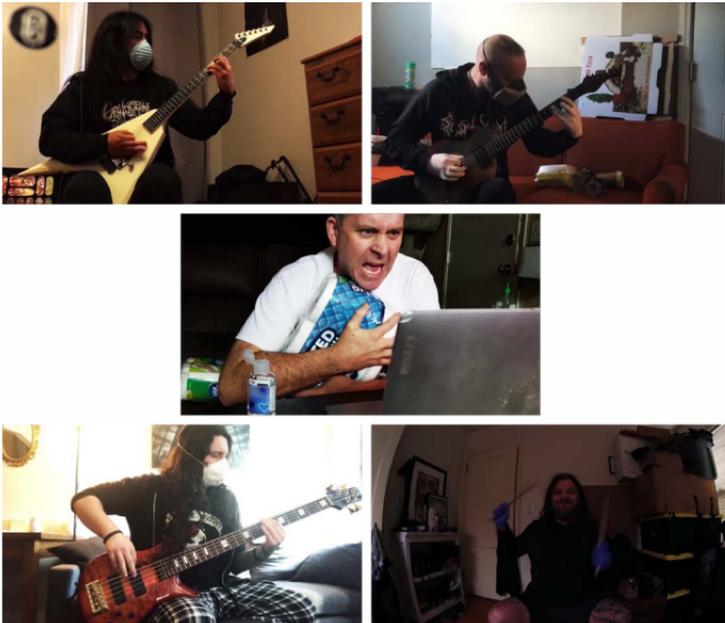


Illustration 4: The band members “play” their instruments physically distanced from each other.

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Illustration 5: Vocalist Travis Ryan plays videogames and gives in to the media flow.

The “inside” chronotope is mostly detailed by clips featuring the frontman, who expresses boredom, cynically observes the unfolding events, and becomes frustrated by the (mis-) information spread through the media. Partly owing to not being able to work—which was especially relevant for musicians during the early stages of the pandemic—and the limited array of activities available due to the sudden implementation of stay-at-home measures, Ryan seems to abandon himself to the passive exposure to all sorts of footage, news, and television programs (Illustration 5). Coupling a

reference to popular culture with criticism of the kinds of content that were trending at the time, the music video briefly features a parody of Netflix's reality television show *Tiger King* (released on March 20, 2020). The fragment amplifies the perceived overlap between reality television shows and the "outside" chronotope, blurring the divide between fiction and reality, between misinformation and factual data on the pandemic.

Watching the news, the vocalist obsessively sanitizes his hands and the objects around him, hugging a package of toilet paper rolls while rocking in his sofa, as if he were stimulating to cope with the coverage. His mood changes cyclically throughout the video, as he expresses disbelief, frustration, boredom, and apathy (Illustration 6). The lockdown activities he engages in manifest the domestic context, and yet they seem to get repetitive and eventually dull. Besides watching television and browsing the internet for information, Ryan plays video games and cuddles his pets in his living room, surrounded by personal belongings that represent his life, such as a bong, furry slippers, and a sitar. His condemnation of the irresponsible and anomic behaviors he witnesses and has access to from home is made clear through his reactions to the clips that viewers can see.

The music video thus removes the lyrics from their uncannily anticipatory-yet-nondescript timespace and transports them to the early days of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, documenting this particular point in history as perceived and experienced by a large part of the general public. The video interweaves the experience of the inside chronotope, defined by increasing boredom, with an outside chronotope characterized by chaos. Uploaded in early April 2020, the music video originally conveyed a sense of liveness,

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as people across the Global North identified with the experiences represented, with YouTube user Evangelium, for example, remarking, “This is what we all needed during this time,” while, for example, Jeff Buskirk pointed out the “clips from the crazy people in our society, and the massive hoarding and insane actions they are taking.” Today, the music video still conveys this aura of past liveness, a memento of the onset of the pandemic.



Illustration 6: Vocalist Travis Ryan going through the motions.

LOCKDOWN AND THE ARTIST

An insert in the music video highlights that “Bring Back the Plague” was filmed “on cell phones in self-isolation during the Covid 19 pandemic of March 2020.” Resorting to a home-made mode of media production focusing on how they cope with the lockdown, Cattle Decapitation participated in the expression of agency that people with access to social media “had in shaping and sharing their experience of lonely isolation” (Redmond 186). The montage of low-tech clips and the appeal to a shared experience of the pandemic that revolves around the initial shock and difficulty to cope with stay-at-home measures is in line with a type of social media

content that plays with notions of authenticity and personal disclosure. The construction of “an authentic self-representation can be understood as a way of telling the truth—about themselves” (García Santamaría 30) and, in this case, of revealing both the reality behind the artistic personae and the band’s take on the social dimensions of the pandemic.

The depiction of the involuntary isolation that the band members were subjected to appeals to an idea of authenticity precisely because it is shared publicly on social media. This sharing of personal pandemic experiences through the music video resonates with how “ordinary people used the media to share their own stories of overcoming pandemic loneliness” (Redmond 185). The band’s lockdown looks like the confinement ordinary people experienced in that moment, characterized by confusion, fear, and concern about the pandemic, as well as the boredom of unexpected forced isolation.⁴ If, on the one hand, the start of the pandemic led to the abrupt cancellation of live concerts and tours, on the other hand, the availability of media and the production of content that tried to mediate the pandemic experience “has deepened the attachment to video and audio access to music at home. High-fidelity seems less important” (Botstein 353). Given the lack of live events and the concomitant necessity to move most daily activities online, “social media became filled with music videos and songs that related to the lockdown” (Alvarez-Cueva 6), eliciting a sense of solidarity and unity in view of the dramatic consequences of the viral spread.

In the “Bring Back the Plague” music video, such a function is

4 The band members’ abodes (which are barely seen) also resemble ordinary people’s homes, unlike, for example, Jimmy Fallon’s house in the Hamptons, where he recorded the “Home Editions” of his late-night show.

present, albeit only subtly: the band participated in the public social discourse on COVID-19 by both engaging with the unexpected boredom of isolation and exposing the inability to dedicate themselves to their work. Despite the frustration with the situation depicted, the condemnation of selfish diversion and neglect of basic civility is clear and identified as a deviation from the solidarity among the American population that the authorities hoped to leverage. Similarly, *Death Atlas* diagnoses the lack of human solidarity with the nonhuman world and excoriates rugged individualism.

Nevertheless, there is an underlying conflict between the radical discourse typical of Cattle Decapitation's lyrics and their applicability to real-life events. Despite their misanthropic message, the band clearly engaged in the social event that the pandemic was from the get-go. Indeed, uploaded to YouTube, the music video exploits the platform, which "enables communities of shared interest to interact through words and images" (Strangelove 116). By being made publicly available and shareable, the music video was integrated into the practice of virtual-yet-social gatherings that came *en vogue* across the globe in early 2020, as Zoom's revenues skyrocketed. The fact that the band couldn't play together is made especially evident by the fact that the drummer had to resort to air-playing for the music video and reveals a sense of nostalgia brought about by the pandemic. Such feeling is subtly present in Cattle Decapitation's depiction of their coping mechanisms: the nostalgia for the ease of practicing together, which they enjoyed before the lockdown, is conveyed by the claustrophobic framing that their cell phones allow for, as well as the domestic environments characterized by disarray.

The stark contrast between the way the band members present themselves onstage and the middle-class domesticity

that they represent in the video amplifies a sense of disruption and unreal disconnection from their pre-pandemic act. The abrupt change and the fear that nothing would “go back to normal” resulted in the creation and sharing of everyday pandemic experiences as a “[p]anic-stricken production of the real and of the referential” (Baudrillard 7). As Jean Baudrillard notes, when reality “is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (6). The social media exposure of ordinary coping with an extraordinary conjuncture thus becomes an “[e]scalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative” (Baudrillard 7), where real-life sociality was rendered impossible and “normal” activities disappeared. Such reaction and its depiction in the music video are limited to the lockdown experience lived by specific albeit ample strata of American society: essential workers did not enjoy the luxury of staying at home and kept on working throughout the pandemic, even in its early stages.

This neglect of the diversity of pandemic experiences and the attendant focus on the burden of staying at home for a few weeks—while ridiculing other people’s ways to cope—ties into the different politics of the lyrics and (arguably tongue-in-cheek) music video of “Bring Back the Plague.” The longing for the end of human existence expressed in the song’s lyrics emerges from a very particular socio-cultural milieu in the Global North—a milieu that was quick to accept the large-scale restrictions on personal freedoms that COVID-19 and panic-stricken governments introduced to people’s lives in spring 2020 (and a milieu that quickly whined about how difficult staying at home was). Similar to how governments around the world prioritized containing and “defeating” the coronavirus over climate actions, the music video’s visuals and inserts—which locate “Bring Back the Plague” in the context of COVID-19 in the U.S.—overshadow the decid-

edly anti-humanist stance of the lyrics. Ultimately, the move from “eating / Humanity to nevermore” in the lyrics to “stay home” and “listen to Death Atlas” in a title card at the end of the music video demonstrates that once reality threatens to impinge upon the luxuries one has become accustomed to, one’s ideals are quickly forgotten. In addition, the reference to buying *Death Atlas* (even if meant jokingly) suggests that what Naomi Klein has dubbed “disaster capitalism” also defines the lives of bands who purportedly oppose the ill-defined “system.”

The inability to detach themselves from capitalism is encapsulated by the t-shirt Travis Ryan wears in the music video. The shirt remembers how rapper Teddy YG used the *Death Atlas* cover art (including the band’s logo and all) for a mix-tape he released a few weeks prior to Cattle Decapitation’s album. The band quickly turned this theft into merchandise, selling a limited edition of the shirt in question, which shows an image of the rapper’s Instagram post that made the copyright breach public, for twenty-four hours on October 10 and 11, 2019 (Cattle Decapitation, “YES, THIS IS REAL”). Typical of capitalist production processes, the work of artist Wes Benscoter was rarely (if ever) acknowledged in online discussions surrounding the incident, severing the connection between the actual creator and the final product in an attempt to capitalize on the environmental destruction of the planet.

To be sure, Cattle Decapitation’s exploitation of the devastating anthropogenic impact on Earth’s life systems does not bring them great financial profit; however, both the reference to buying *Death Atlas* at the end of the music video and the repeated references to transforming copyright breach into a commodity throughout the video seem to suggest that it may be “easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deteri-

oration of the earth and nature than the breakdown of late capitalism,” to quote an overused phrase by Fredric Jameson (xii). Indeed, by clinging to this capitalist worldview, human activities focus on short-term questions, while the ecological crisis has been unfolding slowly. But from a capitalist point of view, these long-term developments do not really matter, for, to quote John Maynard Keynes out of context, “[i]n the long run, we are all dead,” anyways (65).

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