

## CONCLUSION

The examination of visualizing plague in the context of the third pandemic has shown that at the time of its emergence epidemic photography was not a means of creating “ontological certainty” about a given disease.<sup>1</sup> Nor was it used to simply illustrate the outbreaks whose image it captured or to support and bolster epidemic response policies in different parts of the world. Rather, epidemic photography forged complex interrelations between epidemiological certainty and uncertainty through tropes and stagings of plague’s visibility and invisibility. In this way, photography contributed to the establishment and development of modern epidemiological reasoning, which continues to inform scientific research and understandings of infectious diseases. At the same time, epidemic photography forged for the first time a coherent and efficacious image of the “pandemic” as an event of immediate relevance and indeed simultaneous urgency for humans across the globe.

By capturing local outbreaks in their situated specificity and as part of a global event, epidemic photography emerged as a scientific practice and at the same time as a symbolic form, which has come to define the way we see, visualize, and imagine infectious disease epidemics as threats to human existence. In the process of its emergence, epidemic photography added an important layer to understandings and experiences of the “global” by creating a visual field of pathogenic interconnectedness and exchange: a vision of how the global is constituted through the spread of infectious diseases and how, in turn, the spread of diseases is fostered by the intensification of global connectedness.

By creating a new visual field for “contagion,” “infection,” and other categories of disease transmissibility and maintenance as forces of global integration and risk, photography advanced an experience of the world as a unified terrain under the bane of existing epidemics or pandemics. But it also created an image of the world as facing a fatal threat: the return of a pandemic of world-catastrophic proportions. Through its assertive and imperative

faculties, epidemic photography became central to the emergence of a new understanding and experience of the world and of new scientific and symbolic ways of acting in it as a place where connectedness is irreducibly the source of power and wealth as well as death and destruction.

More than sixty years have passed since the declaration of the end of the third plague pandemic by the World Health Organization in 1959 and more than a century since the peak of the pandemic. In recent decades, a series of important works from across the medical humanities have examined the visual culture of contagion since World War II and the visual culture reflecting and fostering the transformation of epidemiological thinking brought about by the emerging infectious diseases framework and the anticipation of the “next pandemic” since the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Under these frameworks, a projected pandemic of a new pathogen has been portrayed as threatening humankind with extinction. This pandemic imaginary, as anthropologists in particular have argued, relies on complex viral ontologies and supports the biosecurity apparatus stemming from pandemic preparedness.<sup>3</sup> In this context, photography has been shown to play an important role, especially as regards the framing of human/nonhuman relations in ways “meant to transform every element in them . . . into a sign of spillover and ultimately of human extinction as a never-completed but always in-the-process, inevitable event.”<sup>4</sup>

It is not the aim of this book to examine the development of epidemic photography through these epistemic, social, and epidemiological transformations. My hope is that this work provides tools to readers who are examining the latter in their engagement with the role of photography in these developments. However, in concluding this book, and in light of the context of the immediate experience of its readers, it is worth noting that the current COVID-19 pandemic has come to show that a number of the tropes, functions, and themes of epidemic photography as they emerged in the course of the third plague pandemic continue to play a significant role in the framing and experience the pandemic today. Still, new tropes and perspectives are also at play, including critical uses of photography and other visual media that have made a significant contribution to negotiating the experience and meanings of the pandemic from nonhegemonic perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

Visualizations of anti-epidemic masks in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic have presented a tantalizing challenge to dichotomies of continuity/

discontinuity.<sup>6</sup> To a significant extent, mask images have been in constant dialogue with works and commentaries about the historical genealogy of personal protective equipment (PPE) as material and visual devices, but they have also generated innovative ethnographic, artistic, and theoretical approaches.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the photographic coverage of India's devastating second wave of COVID-19 in the spring of 2021 relied on depictions of public cremations, which offered themselves for both an orientalizing and distancing of the pandemic from the West (which in that period was experiencing a pandemic ebb) and national as well as international criticism of the disastrous way in which Prime Minister Modi's government has managed the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the visualization of China and its wet markets as the probable source of the pandemic presents a less complicated image insofar as it follows closely similar Sinophobic configurations developed during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) 2003 pandemic. In fact, several media outlets covering wet markets as the supposed source of COVID-19 (which at the point of this writing in December 2021 has yet to be scientifically proven) have used images from the SARS 2003 outbreak to illustrate their point.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, an entirely new photographic angle to the coverage and configuration of pandemic-related quarantine has emerged in the context of the imposition of lockdowns across the globe in 2020–2021. This involves photographs focusing on the depiction of “emptiness.” The trope has taken several forms so far during the pandemic, involving photographs and videos of wild animals reoccupying locked-down urban spaces, portraits of hitherto iconically “busy” cityscapes turned into apocalyptically “empty” cities, and the cartographic depiction of skies over China “empty” of pollution in the early months of the epidemic.<sup>10</sup> As journalist Sophie Haigney has noted, the systematic coverage of lockdowns through the trope of the “empty” or “deserted” city during the “first wave” of the pandemic (and of lockdowns) in the spring of 2020 was “part of an exercise in myth-making,” which portrayed the world as united under the bane of the epidemic and in the struggle against it.<sup>11</sup> “In fact,” Haigney explained, “the world never really stopped or emptied out. In fact, we were never all in this together. In fact, the virus was not the great equalizer that put everything on pause. Many people continued to commute to their jobs, either because they were suddenly deemed ‘essential’ or simply because they had to.”<sup>12</sup>

The history of the emergence of epidemic photography in the course of the third plague pandemic urges us to understand how visual media (photographs, films, videos, diagrams, graphs, and maps), the apparatus through which the lives of millions have come to be mediated and changed over 2020–2021, are not just ways of illustrating or providing evidence about COVID-19 but also means of configuring the disease, supporting and challenging pandemic response, and, most importantly, transforming epidemiological reasoning and our pandemic imaginary.

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# Visual Plague

## The Emergence of Epidemic Photography

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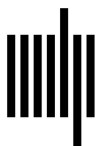
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