1. Virocene imaginaries: colonising the ontic sphere

ONTLOGICAL CONUNDRUMS: BEYOND DEBATES ON ‘HEALTH AND SAFETY’

The most important Heideggerian contribution to the philosophy of being, featured in Actor Network Theory (ANT), is the present-ness of tools in the technic process. To execute anything, we need the appropriate tools, and yet we tend not to acknowledge their functional value before they break down. When such ‘withdrawals’ enter the space of social action, the premises of ANT theory generate another problem: if activity always takes place within a network of animate and inanimate actants, then we are faced with a flattened ontology. Such an ontology does not allow us to distinguish between humans and the laboratory tools they used to invent a vaccine. We need this differentiation because, otherwise, we cannot really determine who does what in the discovery. More importantly, we need it to establish the rules of access to reality: if everything is refracted through ontological absence, it becomes difficult to organise hypotheses on anything that is not based on pregiven concepts, which means not thinking at all.

As explained in the Part I, hyperobjects may be based on such a withdrawal, but this does not mean that they do not exist on the real plane. To grasp their ontic properties, we must concede that they are real, if not tangible, and that their vicariousness grants them with aesthetic form and content. This point bridges the Heideggerian and Kantian theses on judgement in more straightforward ways (Heidegger [1967] 1996, p.208; Kant, 1965, pp.84–86; Geertsema, 2018). The ‘aesthetic realness’ of hyperobjects may be dependent on the extreme conditions under which they emerged – what Morton (2013, pp.52–53) dubs ‘extremophilia’ and I explore in atmospheric terms as dystopian or utopian mobilities. Extremophilia refers to the inhospitable environments in which ontological processes occur as responses to external problems (as in the case with both good and bad bacteria, viruses and vaccines) but also the skills with which they were engineered (if we talk about science and technology).
I suggest that it is sensible to think about the ontic-aesthetic properties of the Virocene as such a response, but to consider it as an epochal stretch merits justification. The same would apply to the aesthetic dimensions of the discourses through which the Virocene can be understood as part of the New Hyperobjectivity. This is the right moment to enact a journey from aesthetics to ontology and epistemology, without reducing the latter to art theory. As an artistic movement, the ‘New Objectivity’ was contextually bound to the years of the Weimar Republic, and the need to order the world, generate social symmetries and, in its most conservative renditions, even maintain the political status quo (Gale and Wan, 2018, p.15). In his definition of this ‘post-expressionist’ project, Franz Roh stressed that art can be distinguished by examining how particular objects are selected by artists from all those available to them and how they perceive the objects. This act of selection, he said, ‘is already an act of creation’ (Roh, [1925] 1995, p.16). Where expressionism had shown a preference for the fantastic, the New Objectivity prompted artists to look at the real world with all the horrors revealed in the works of George Grosz and Otto Dix, but with new eyes (ibid., p.17).

Now we can also generate links to Morton’s observations on ‘extremo-philias’ ontological potentialities. The New Objectivity was the offspring of social unrest following a World War that had left humanity questioning its ability not just to grasp reality, but also make it liveable. Although we do not live in wartime contexts, the deep economic problems generated by constant lockdowns already involve hypotheses regarding the onset of a Third World War. The scenario placing humanity under an endless war stemming from world-systemic malfunctions, such as terrorism, is a corollary of such risk-talk (e.g., see Korstanje, 2019b, p.72). At this stage, much like Korstanje’s (2019b) analysis of terrorism, I am far more interested in exploring the frictional properties of the current COVID-19 pandemic, which can be put to truth and reality tests. Such hypotheses can be heavily influenced by the politics of mobility and the serendipitous contexts in which friction takes place (Cresswell 2014, pp.107–180).

In exploring Virocene ecologies, I move from the political to the cultural and the figurative, something that Cresswell does not do. I will explain in the following, in less abstract terms, how the ‘New Hyperobjectivity’ achieves a tragic progress in the realm of human desire to be free of structural constraints. The ‘cruel optimism’ such affective politics maintain is bolstered by the mediatised anxiogeny about the impossibility to be physically together as a group that is endowed with the power to change things or be happy (Berlant, 2011, pp.223–226). Locked-down humans continue to partake in capitalist mobilities and, while trying to preserve a sliver of autonomy in their work, they transform themselves into an early version of the traveller. Such travel subjects may even regress to the early styles of hermeticism, the progenitor of
Virocene imaginaries

However, ‘travel’ becomes a symptom of phenomenological movement, positing questions regarding the absent body’s role in future planning. Unlike Korstanje (2019b), I provide dystopian answers for heuristic purposes, so that I arrive at workable answers. The departure from reality only serves to amplify engagement with such movement. ‘Departure’ is not withdrawal, but a performative act akin to Kantian aesthetic judgement, so that we gain access to those things we struggle to grasp because of their abstract properties. We are in the socio-philosophical domain of new mobilities induced by the pitfalls of hyper-globalisation (Tzanelli, 2021b: conclusion).

I still need to justify the promotion of a viral outbreak to an era. So far, massive epochs have been defined and explored in the humanities and the social sciences through extremophile concepts and frameworks, so to deny the realness of dystopian ontologies is wishful thinking. Thus, it is helpful to commence with critical comparisons between different epochal tropes, especially that of the Virocene and the Anthropocene. The comparison will not support confutations but a rethinking of such eras in ecological terms beyond those we associate with ‘environments’ or ‘nature’ (Morton, 2007). The link increases the testability of my thesis: humanity has survived through a succession of spatial-temporal ‘scenes’ or ‘ages’ to arrive at what has been examined as both its zenith of creativity and nadir of (self)care and ecological solidarity: the ‘Anthropocene’. For those less familiar with the term, the concept belongs to Nobel Prize-winning scientist Paul Crutzen (2002), who used it to define a period commencing with the patenting of James Watt’s steam engine in 1784. However, I believe that it is far better to consider this particular automobile invention as part of a better established periodological discourse, which sees mobilities as more-than-technological phenomena (on which see also Sheller (2014a) on the making of ‘light modernity’ for a refined approach to automobilities). Let us try this alternative, which is better embedded in social sciences such as sociology and humanities such as philosophy, without ignoring the brief of geographical analysis.

The Anthropocene involved industrialising processes that escalated carbon dioxide levels, and led to the progressive extinction of various species, the destruction of oceanic environments and the general disturbance of ecosystemic equilibriums (Urry, 2011, p.39). The Anthropocene and the epoch preceding it, the Holocene, are often seen by some scientists as developing in coeval or identical geologic time spans. Some of these scientists, such as Crutzen, distinguish between these time spans to consider the former as more recent than the latter. To reiterate, I see the Anthropocene’s trigger in the Industrial Revolution – a thesis that complies with discourses of Western modernity (see Urry, (2005a, pp.242–243) on ‘proletarian adaptation’ and Giddens’ (1984) duality of structure), broadening understandings of the human impact on the planet (see Crutzen, 2002 and Douglas et al., 2002 on
It is both oxymoronic and understandable why scholarly-scientific and activist discourses both acknowledge and displace in the name of healthy post-human planning (e.g., see Braidotti, 2013) the ways human agency shapes the futures of our planet. At the same time, it is possibly falsifiable to think that human agency will be displaced in the coming ages in the name of a multispecies ecology. We will face more unpleasant ecological surprises but also more triumphs over ecological adversity, but these triumphs will still be anthropocentric with humans being the only sentient beings who can articulate (and thus efficiently destroy). No plant will break the codes of the Virocene’s new hyperobjective puzzle, even in a ‘network’ of actants.

I do not announce the Anthropocene’s end in my analysis, but a potentially recurring overlap with the periodological occurrence I term ‘the Virocene’. The Anthropocene was condemned for encouraging careless human action, impacting our planet’s social, environmental and cultural ecologies. Contrariwise with this imaginary of creativity and destruction (Schumpeter, [1942] 1976), which is historically incremental, if at times non-linear, the Virocene announces the governing of human fortunes in episodic and even more unpredictable ways. As Virocenic events come and go, an archive of biomedical phenomena is generated, and their successful, problematic or catastrophic management by centres of governance determines the curve of human mortality and wellbeing. Despite the evidently biomedical façade of Virocenic ruptures, my empirical focus is the socio-cultural, rather than biomedical characteristics with which the current COVID-19 pandemic endows the Virocenic epoch. For example, socio-cultural repertoires circulating in media platforms regarding the development of the present pandemic appear at first to follow the curve of infections as well as the new possibilities to combat the emergence of new variants of COVID-19 in systematically medical terms. Disaster-talk places all known variants (the original Wuhan, the Kent, UK, one, the African, the Brazilian, the second Kent mutation, and so forth) in a grammatical chain, denoting the siege of humanity by death and endless lockdowns. Contrariwise, announcements of progress with vaccination programmes, proofs of effective immunisation and ever more widespread testability of different vaccines follow a more disorganised pattern resembling the development of climate futures. Clearly, the second trend is that of darkness with a light at the end of the tunnel – or something resembling a passageway to sustainability and life. This is the equivalent of what Bloch envisaged as projected possibility. It is through such social imaginaries that the New Hyperobjectivity acquires workable (‘comprehensive’) aesthetic dimensions.

Let us begin with some hard facts in policy domains. The new imaginary of destruction and rebuilding of ecological futures does not completely side-line environmental concerns, but certainly repurposes them in policy-making contexts. Rather than thinking of the Virocene as a traditionally self-contained
periodological narrative, we should consider it as a rhizomatic phenomenon of speedy, unpredictable, and dangerous qualities. Such unpredictability does not displace human agency, it amplifies human control over ecological ‘malfunctions’. Closer, but also dissimilar to Beck’s (1995) ‘ecological Enlightenment’ thesis on risk management, the Virocenic processes of problem-identification and problem-solving are filtered through independent (but intersecting because of the viral onset) ecologies, including the political and the technological (Fuller, 2011, 2012). Their contingent ‘alliance’ supports the survival and flourishing of humanity (Beck, 1995, pp.22–26).

I do not intend to endorse the environmental determinism that guided such Annales School theses, as those of Fernand Braudel or Jared Diamond (1997). My use of Braudel’s grand periodological terms, such as événement (the short-term duration, or the event) or la longue durée (the long temporal duration) repurposes their rationale in human emplotments of history and memory, which are determined by social and cultural contexts, with environmental factors overdetermining civilisational development, but never shaping it singlehandedly. Diamond’s (1997) thesis in Gun, Germs and Steel, is also contested: the idea that geographic, climatic and environmental characteristics, which favoured the development of stable agricultural societies led to disease immunity in organised European states, but decimated non-European colonised populations appears to be applicable in the Virocenic case. However, a serious modification is necessary in the thesis, if we are to proceed with this, involving the acknowledgement that COVID-19 has infected and killed indiscriminately, across East and West.

As becomes evident below, discrepancies between Diamond’s and my thesis multiply, when we consider my argument that Virocenic eruptions are a biopolitical occurrence, not an environmental accident. Lastly, although when one excises environmental factors from Diamond’s observation that Eurasian hegemony should not be explained based on some inherent genetic superiority but the development of military technologies (guns and steel) we have a sociologically sound thesis, modern Virocenic eruptions cannot be studied the same way. The Virocene is a phenomenon of mid to late modernity, not of premodern or early modern times. Its chronological placeness communicates better with the changes imposed by capitalist development – an issue discussed in the humanities through Moore’s (2011, 2016) concept of the ‘Capitalocene’, and in political and cultural sociology through Zuboff’s (2019) ‘surveillance capitalism’, Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2018) ‘new spirit of capitalism’, and Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006) methodological excursus on justification in pragmatic sociology (also Thévenot, 2014). In this respect, to talk about its coenic or novel/modern nature is paramount. However, the task of a sociologist would be to introduce variables in the epochal definition that address the problems posited by the Virocene’s new hyperobjective properties. If we are
to talk about COVID-19’s and other previous Virocenic eruptions, such as
the Spanish influenza, MERS and the original SARS virus, we need to con-
sider how race, ethnicity, age or even gender variables fit into socio-cultural
patterns of development, not natural-ecological adaptive capacity. The only
point I borrow from Diamond, who dropped the role of germs from his later
work altogether, is that the Virocene already has a biopolitical archive in such
previous occurrences, so it is not based on a singular (COVID-19) event. From
lack of space, I cannot elaborate on this archival depth, but future work on the
thesis may strengthen my hypothesis.

Therefore, my central thesis is that the COVID-19 pandemic is understood
in the context of global biopolitics: the political management of societies and
cultures on a single blueprint regarding differentiations of life opportunities
on the basis of intersecting variables such as race, class and age. However,
bipopolitics inform only specific Virocene ecologies, with other ones belonging
to more figurative domains. To consider methodologically the first group of
biopolitical ecologies, I utilise Imres Lakatos (1970). Following his approach,
I argue that the Virocene and the Anthropocene may share as ‘research pro-
grammes’ some hardcore assumptions based on a series of testable theories
(destruction of humanity and of nature, including humanity as the consequence
of human action), but, when we shift emphasis on the ‘protective belt’ of their
auxiliary hypotheses (e.g., social inequalities), we end up with two different
programmes (the former prioritising humanity and the latter a post-human
reality). In the following section I outline the context of the COVID-19 out-
break, as well as its regional, national and global spread, and upgrading into
a global pandemic to check commonalities in Anthropocenic and Virocenic
research programmes.

I propose a re-reading of the history of the virus as part of a coenic hypo-
thesis. The method shares much with Benjamin’s (2003) acknowledgement that
humans construct history as a site that is homogeneous, not ‘empty of time,
but filled full by Jetztzeit (now-time)’ (Benjamin, 2003, p.395). Now-time –
what Elias (1992, p.74) also connects to imagining things not immediately
available to us – is all the human monad has at their disposal to encapsulate
the massive – and yet, there is constant effort to return to the ‘origin’ of things,
the Urphanömen, an attempt to grasp things in their entirety: a ‘telescop-
and Technology Studies (STS) such as that of Fuller, Barad and Latour, so we move away from art-fiction but work with it as science-heurism.

My methodological portfolio does not reject the presence of figurative mediation in the data that I will provide. One cannot lie about using the very channels of technological mediation that both manipulate and restore reality. Such manipulations follow what Sharma (2012) has discussed after Massey (1994) as ‘power-chronography’. This accounts for the ways power relations play out in temporal frames (Sharma, 2014, p.4) and how this results in a material struggle over meaning, resources, and time (Sharma, 2012, p.70). It is not incompatible with Sharma’s argument that in my thesis on the Virocene I place more emphasis on the atmospheric evolution on such chronographic struggles. For Sharma (ibid., pp.68–69) power-chronography shows how media are embedded in power discourses, money and labour in a compatible with Habermas’ systems approach, whereas for me their power resides in their atmospheric instillations, which tend to mediate between materiality and phenomenality. Maren Hartmann (2019, p.49) also aptly remarks that Sharma’s work lacks a clear analysis of chrono-normativity, which would invite an exploration of the ways bodies become entangled in institutions of temporally-invested power (Freeman, 2010). This temporal ‘tag’ drives what I later discuss as the ‘colonial archive’ of the Virocene. Chrono-normativity asserts the ‘visceral pull of the past on the supposedly revolutionary present’, turning the body into ‘a channel for and means of understanding the past’ (Hartmann, 2019, p.49). The physical body and our modern technologies of mediation and representation begin to blend into a group of normative conduits of desire for change, progress, and flourishing. I will return to these chrono-normative reflections in Part IV, where I explore academic pronouncements of a revolution in tourism-friendly sustainability. At this stage, I cannot stress enough that the physical and the technological body introduce a re-configuration of temporality that acquires significance in the long run, as digital archives of crises store events which are passed from one generation to the next. I treat such data as heuristic/hermeneutic materials, not reified realities (Elias, 1992, p.46). This means that all data and statistics featuring in this study are useful as symbols – or, better, perspectives which are constantly subjected to new interpretations.

Hence, I follow the disease’s development into a global threat in media channels but focus attention on the key incremental scientific discoveries about its character, environmental behaviour, and socio-cultural and economic impact across the world. This sounds very much like the research programme of climate change analysts, but it is not. First, these global ‘discoveries’ produce a coherent ‘factual’ narrative about COVID-19, which is anything but objective in post-human terms. Second, I consider what the Virocene entails when we approach the COVID-19 outbreak and spread as a ‘constellation of
mobilities’ organised by humans (Cresswell, 2001, 2010). This highlights significant differences between the two programmes’ protective belt data. Then, I provide a series of observations on its epochal nature, which differs from those preceding it. My epistemological tools include a blend of mobilities theory and globalization studies, with the former focusing on the politics and cultures of viral movement, and the latter on the rise of a global imaginary of development that nevertheless facilitates a ‘micro-mapping’ of social and political space ‘through which we perceive … and act in the world’ (Steger, 2008, p.6). Between these two conceptual schools I place the imaginary of societal development, to investigate notions of what I call ‘Virocenic emplotment’ and coordination of response to the crises that this induces (Taylor, 2004).

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Emplotment, or the weaving of a plot through and within the generation of a web of associations, participates in the validation of facts as ontological realities (Ricoeur 1984–1988, I, p.28; Ricoeur, 1993, p.66). Much like the management of risk (Beck, 1999), it aims to eliminate uncertainty; much like the things and people it involves in relevant activities, it relays relations of movement and association – what Barad (2007) calls ‘intra-action’ – to account for the involvement of non-human elements in the shaping of these activities. However, such intra-actions are mostly governed by humans, who tend to dominate other ecosystemic agencies, especially through their power to narrate. Ricoeur (1984–1988) talked about ‘narrative events’, events that exist as guides within narratives to unfold a story that makes sense. Sense-making necessitates the establishment of a ‘phylogenetic trajectory’: how the virus was born and how it developed. Thus, I do not reject the presence of other ‘actants’ (Latour, 1999) in ecosystemic organizations, only I stress who is the real master of their fortunes. Karen Barad and Donna Haraway highlighted in STS the significance of inheritance and indebtedness in the production of spatial-temporal configurations of agential realism: ‘phenomena do not occur at some particular moment in time … [they] are specific ongoing reconfigurings of spacetimemattering’ that transcends the modus of a particular biographical story (Juelskjær and Schwennesen, 2012, p.12). Actants and human agents are equally real but unequally involved in the emplotment of reality.

Before unfolding the biography of the virus, I endeavour to delve deeper into the poetics of viral mobilities to expose the ways metaphors of the physical body inform the realist ontologies of the Virocenic archive. One might attempt a Deleuzean reading of the ‘virological event’ as a form of social reproduction ‘gone wrong’: a monster set to expand at the expense of human life by consuming energy and humans. Indeed, to inflect a bit of Deleuzean theory here, most
‘events’ concerning the infection of humans generate collective experiences that are registered in human bodies as memories. Hopefully, it is clear how embodied memory of this kind encodes Barad’s reflections on inheritance in agreement with Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit* and Steger’s micro-mapping: the human body matters in the articulation of the Virocene’s biopolitical ecologies as both an object of scientific investigation, a witness of the Virocene’s unfolding and the manager of preventative discourses. For Deleuze, any associations that people acquire with things such as viruses are the product of serendipity at best, or randomness at worst; their rhizomatic development may unleash different modes of becoming to the social domain (Deleuze, 1983; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). However, studies in organisational management of the unknown also note that discoveries with planetary implications, such as that of unlocking unwanted interrelations between the human body and COVID-19, are also products of good use of resources and undivided dedication to research (Merton and Barber, 2004, pp.200–203). The scientific unlocking of such uncertainties acquires a clearer association with the social production of the Virocenic archive: as such ontological processes of infection or mutation are recorded, they become fixed in the form of events, replete with spatiotemporal coordinates. These spatial and temporal frames are internal to the processes by which both physical worlds and their corresponding worldviews are organised (see also Urry, 2005b, p.4 on complexity). I believe that COVID-19 will be narrated to future generations as the moment humanity encountered the possibility of physical and moral extermination, and I do not preclude that such narratives will contain mythical elements.

The biopolitical arc of the Virocenic emplotment is rife with bodily imagery as the site of infection. This is when the archive acquires a figurative topological dimension through the policies of ‘social distancing’. Social distancing is a corollary of separating the living human from the experience of death, a technique of categorisation enabling biological growth and social immunisation from dystopian potentialities (but see also Bauman 1992b, p.138). Social distancing emplots life as a biopolitical project, which draws on the modern separation between living and dying or dead bodies. This boundary-making becomes an emotional survival strategy that effectively marries health with individualistic imaginaries of self-care (Bauman, 1992a, p.18). The biopolitical project’s effectiveness depends on the successful marriage between the promise to cure/immunise and the utopia of immortality (Shilling, 2012, pp.202–203; Turner, 2007, p.21) – only it intentionally confuses physical with social undying. Much like my master’s thesis on the Virocene, I contend that the project of biopolitics can take different directions, some of which may not be dystopian.

My observations foreground the socio-cultural logic behind COVID-19’s emergence. Despite the attempts of World Health Organisation (WHO) to
rectify what has already been noticed by others as a problematic description (what does ‘social’ stand for in ‘social distancing’?), problems of conceptual appropriateness lingered for a long while after the imposition of lockdowns. WHO suggested that ‘physical’ replaces the word ‘social’ in social distancing, so as to clarify that experts recommend the preservation of safe physical distance from the virus carrier to prevent its transmission, not the end of socialisation, which the carrier can maintain via technology (WHO Conference, 20 March 2020). However, if we watch some the earliest WHO (31 January 2020) videos instructing citizens how to observe the practice, we realise that they do more than explain process: they map the journey of infection in the body, thus dividing it into territories. For already infected bodies, such diagrammatic narratives follow a different method: emulating the precision pen of an artist or the even finer line-drawing provided by computer software, their instructions show us what can safely be ‘contained’ (through social isolation and the use of props such as tissues) and what may inevitably escape to the outside world and wreak havoc (viral particles can apparently be spread as far as eight metres by sneezing). Most instructions on hygienic rituals turn the human body from a uniform entity into multiple territories (mouth, nose, eyes, hands), some of which are more vulnerable to viral invasion, and others acting as medial passages for the virus to its final destination, the lungs.

The instructions invite further observations on the medicalisation of bodily knowledge: first, viral passages and entries are these body territories that enable our sensory apprehension of the world (in fact, taste is supposed to be affected for some during the infectious phase); second, that ‘first contact’ zones in the body (e.g., the hands), are what defines our ‘kinesphere’ (i.e., the calculation of territorial spots our stretched limbs can reach without much effort; Laban, [1966] 2011, p.29) – hence the two-metre rule of ‘social distancing’, which ensures that we will not come into physical contact with potentially infected people; and, third, that because the virus’s final, possibly fatal destination, the lungs, belongs to an interior we cannot see, we must learn to police our kinespheric activity through a set of strict regulations (e.g., use tissues when we sneeze, cover our mouth and above all, wash our hands all the time). This phased narrative of viral travel is nicely presented in a BBC News video advising on social distancing (BBC News, 24 March 2020). At all times, the instructions emulate the anatomo-clinician’s gaze, who deals with the complexity of spatial data and has to resort to a sensorial triangulation ‘in which various atlases hitherto excluded from medical techniques, must collaborate: the ear and touch are added to sight’ (Foucault cited in Cregan, 2006, p.53). If we take a step back to reflect on these activities, a replica of geopolitical micro-mappings emerges, with healthier and sicker or frictional contact zones, in which battles between life and death are enacted. Regardless of their accu-
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racy or efficacy, in medical terms, such videos achieved what we thought was impossible: they solved the material aspects of the new hyperobjective puzzle. Enter phenomenologies of illness and things are slightly different: the infected body suffers immensely, and videos deliberately do a poor job at representing this, as people are scared. However, the artistic dimension of technoscientific discourse becomes even more important, because, as I proceed to explain, its transmutation into global governmobility networks affects specific populations’ welfare and psycho-social opportunities. Let me return to magical realism here: no artist has explored the magic of the body in more poignant ways than magical realist painter Frida Kahlo. Some of her self-portraits expose the imagined interior of her own broken body (she suffered from a crippling disease that led to disability and painful paralysis) to articulate the emotional complexities of love, loss and separation. But the display of the body’s vital organs (Kahlo’s most vivid depiction of a doubled image of herself) on the artist’s surgical table can also facilitate a less individualised, more visceral social observation on ‘social distancing’ in the Virocene. If we think about the trauma of such fragmentation from a sociology of illness (rather than disability) perspective, we encounter a contradiction, which acquires epistemological dimensions: ironically, the fragmented body of medical knowledge re-acquires its unity during and after the completion of the viral invasion. When the fever spikes, and the patient becomes short of breath, the body is lifted from its physicality and the suffering subject departs on a very unpleasant endoscopic journey, during which what is felt is communicated from the central nervous system: the brain. The brain’s involvement in this communication locks the experience of illness into the body, but at the same time, makes the human subject whole again.

I have been oscillating between realist observations on a little-known illness and metaphorical elaborations on social distancing for reasons that will become apparent in the second part of this chapter. As Haraway explained, in medicine the biological world is a strategy involving the accumulation of significations. The strategy enables the collapse of boundaries between metaphor and materiality and what she calls the ‘animation’ of technoscience (Haraway cited in Cregan, 2006, p.157). In the Virocene the ‘felt-body’, the visceral experience of infection and social isolation, has become part of a globalised illusio (Bourdieu, 1998): an en masse subscription to the idea that humanity is in danger and in need of protection. Needless to note that the ‘custodians’ take liberties in the management of the crisis, which is organised around the accumulation of more significatory clusters, not necessarily contained within the medical domain. The infected body is not monadic in an individualist sense anymore, but an aggregate of a polity’s citizens’ bodies, a ‘judico-political metaphor’ enabling sovereign rule (Esposito, 2019, p.137). A similar analysis is extended in Korstanje’s (2021, p.207) ‘wicked gaze’, which is posited as an
antithesis to the tourist gaze of hospitality, but his thesis seems to blend tropes of migration and tourism (Korstanje, 2020, p.147). All the same, what he argues also supports the significatory power of scopic engagement with reality. As a result, the *illusio*, which was originally experienced as a collectively panic attack due to a viral attack, helps to transmute the technoscientific into a governmobile enterprise. This grants the world’s biopolitical centres with unprecedented powers over life and death in new styles, which elevate cultures of thoughtlessness to an alternative art of governance.

Emplotments of viral movement are embedded in the politics of mobility (Cresswell, 2006) and their cross-cultural extensions. Unlike Cresswell (2010), who is interested in the ways mobilities facilitate the development of political relations, here I want to primarily assess how relations of viral movement are *framed* culturally and politically. The COVID-19 or coronavirus pandemic is an ongoing pandemic at the time of this article’s writing, caused by a virus that induces severe acute respiratory syndrome, coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The outbreak was first identified in Wuhan, China, in early December 2019. WHO’s ‘Naming the coronavirus disease’ formal document (WHO, 11 February 2020) mentions that the term ‘COVID-19 virus’ was selected so that experts avoid ‘creating unnecessary fear for some populations, especially in Asia which was worst affected by the SARS outbreak in 2003’. Scientists are still not certain about the origins of the virus, but a current hypothesis is that it was transmitted to humans from pangolins via a mediator, possibly a bat species. There are also other coronavirus strands infecting humans and causing serious illnesses, such as the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS, fatality rate ~34%). COVID-19 is the seventh known coronavirus to infect people, after 229E, NL63, OC43, HKU1, MERS-CoV, and the original SARS-CoV (Zhu et al., 2020).

As part of the SARS family, SARS-CoV-2 (heretofore identified only as COVID-19) already has an archival trajectory comparable to that of avian influenza, which was detected in and transmitted by birds (Lavau, 2014, p.299). COVID-19 is believed to have a close genetic similarity to bird-born coronaviruses. Despite the ubiquitous conspiracy suggestions that it was laboratory-born (to which I return in the following chapter), reliable scientific research using maximum-likelihood methods (e.g., testing different phylogenetic hypotheses by calculating the probability of a given model of evolution of the virus – Benvenuto et al. 2020) suggests that it emerged from a bat-borne virus. COVID-19’s human-to-human transmission was confirmed on 20 January 2020, when two cases of infection in China’s Guangdong province were reported by China’s official Xinhua news agency (Kuo, 21 January 2020). Authorities reported 139 cases of the new strain of coronavirus, which brought the total number of infected patients to 217 since the virus was first
detected in late December 2020 in the central city of Wuhan. By late January, four deaths had also been reported.

After these occurrences, COVID-19’s genealogical development does not involve multi-species transmission but transmission from human to human via automobility routes, especially air travel, which usually spreads a virus globally and extremely fast. Lavau’s (2014, pp.299–300) suggestion that there are two modes of viral mobility, ‘movement’ (from place to place) and ‘mutability’ (physical transmission and genetic development through interactions with host immune systems) applies to COVID-19, but here I am more interested in the quintessentially human mode of figurative movement, which involves the emplotment of viral trajectories and mappings of infection. As new cases were confirmed in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong province in the south, ‘heightening fears ahead of the lunar new year holiday, when more than 400 million people are expected to travel domestically and internationally’ (Kuo, 21 January 2020), a scenario of movement from Eastern to Western centres of governance emerges. It is significant that, to date, the world’s viral centre remains Europe, as it is this continent that hosts the densest mobility constellations, including recreational and business travel. In fact, whereas this narrative of movement from East to West commenced with Italy’s highest reported death rates during March and April, in May the UK subsequently became the new COVID-19 European centre, with more than 40,000 deaths (Booth and Barr, 12 May 2020; Dickinson, 16 May 2020). By May, stringent lockdown policies had helped China mark its third week with no new reported deaths, while South Korea had restarted its baseball season. Elsewhere in the world, at the same time, Russia had reported a sharp rise in new cases, Brazil had reported 19,148 deaths and 296,033 infections, and the US had been declared itself to be the hardest hit country in the world, with over 95,571 reported deaths on 21 May 2020 (Worldometer, 20 November 2020). By 20 November 2020, there have been 12,070,712 recorded infections and 258,333 deaths in the US; India has moved to the second place in the world on infections (9,004,365) overtaking Brazil (infections: 5,983,089), which nevertheless kept its second place in deaths (168,141). The UK had recorded a whopping 53,775 deaths, staying just ahead of France (47,127), which nevertheless showed an accelerated level of infections (2,086,288), moving to the fourth world place just below Brazil (Worldometer, 21 May 2020). In the Asia-Pacific region, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand, appeared to have successfully suppressed outbreaks, and so had Greece at the margins of Europe (Ekathimerini, 12 May 2020), whereas India was preparing for the peak of its outbreak (Lawless et al., 5 May 2020).

Steger’s (2008) conception of a global imaginary proves useful for the organization of such regional/national micro-mappings of the disease into a global imaginary of infectious border-crossing narrative. The spatial arrow
of COVID-19’s movement (from East to West), but also its horizontal spatial and temporal spread and effect (between ethnicities, genders and classes) bestows the viral plot with a particular political and cultural profile. On the one hand, this profile instils ideologies of felicitous and infelicitous cultural movement and immobility into the Western scientific canon, by reinforcing parochial plots about the ‘yellow peril’ in an interconnected world; on the other, it further mutates and distributes fragments of such plots across centres of viral governance, while erasing the participation of such plots in the archive of colonial memory. Thus, although the viral journey may not be narrated in racist terms anymore, its effects across technologies of population management continue to interact with the histories of racist policies, constantly reinterpretting them in new contexts.

Following Girard’s and Benjamin’s reflections on any community’s ordering of history on myth as a practice of self-preservation, Esposito (2019) cautions us that the communal is the effect of a ‘doubled double’ circulation of violence. We may even describe this mutability and spread of violence as ‘liquid violence’ absorbed by anyone who comes into contact with it in the political domain and, paradoxically, wishes to survive. Otherwise put, as liquid violence contaminates and circulates, the community that mobilises/absorbs it does not die, because it has pre-set defensive mechanisms in absorbing it in small doses (Esposito, 2019, pp.36–40). The Virocenic archive will contain various infectious elements that entered various national communities from the outside of the globe, both as unknown vagabonds and distinguished knowledgeable scientists and physicians, and some will be from China. However, many Western branches of the global Virocenic archive will downplay their strangeness/infectiousness as keys to both a metaphorical Girardian and a real vaccine. Scribano (2020a) inflects this through Durkheimian metaphors of the individual body as the mirror of the social body: a representation that does not occur without acting on the body and the mind (Durkheim cited in Scribano, 2020a, p.40). If we follow Barad (2007, p.90), we could conclude that COVID-19’s ‘ethico-epistemo-ontology’ bears the mark of inheritance and indebtedness, the twin basis of human autobiographical substance. Who and what is acknowledged in the Virocenic archive will be overdetermined by their perceived immune properties. The methodological core of such praxis-produced knowledge unfolds in time and space. Otherwise put, the assortment of all these viral movements into a plot merits critical realist inspection because it is not value-free. It is associated with the implication of body politics (viral infection) in validations of idea(l)s of freedom, citizenship, and equality, while obscuring their geopolitical (Western) and ideological ([neo] liberal) entanglements (Cresswell, 2006, p.166; Adey, 2017, pp.107–109). In the following chapter I expand on the ways such entanglements have begun to articulate an epochal rupture from established Anthropocenic imaginaries.