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Following reports of the President’s coronavirus infection, Twitter was replete with a certain kind of comment, expressing consensus that something—the presidency, the country, the year 2020—had decidedly jumped the shark. A throng of commenters including Dr. Bob Wachter, Chair of the UCSF Department of Medicine—who has tweeted copiously about COVID-19 in an effort to correct the spate of disinformation in constant circulation on social media—deployed the idiom to describe a shared incredulity at the escalating absurdity of the news cycle. We seemed collectively beset with the uncanny sense that, in some crumb-strewn cosmic writers’ room, some narrative logic, some essential Aristotelian unity, had been irreparably breached.

Of course, this is hardly the first occasion on which the current administration has been leveled with charges of shark-jumping. It seems we cannot escape the suspicion that we are being unwittingly authored. Like the eponymous characters of Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, we have discovered ourselves stumbling through our unlikely *mise-en-scène*, in a fruitless search for meaning, for the cohesion of our plot.

“There’s a design at work in all art—surely you know that?” Stoppard’s Player informs the hapless pair amidst their play-within-a-play. “Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.”

When, we ask, will the proscenium be sufficiently strewn with bodies? When will the stage directions introduce our invitation to catharsis: *Enter Fortinbras*?

Act I: Orientations

In a mid-March address, West Virginian governor Jim Justice attempted to describe the escalating pandemic: “It’s like we’re all lost in a movie that we can’t relate to in any way.” We were bewildered, tempest-tossed, emerging astonished as from a Shakespearean shipwreck: *What country, friends, is this?*

And yet the search for relation was well underway. Culture critics pointed toward the resurgent, viral popularity of films like Steven Soderbergh’s 2011 epidemiological thriller *Contagion* to argue that fictionalized disaster afforded viewers a script, a blueprint to direct our epidemic expectations. This impulse—a grasping after the spectacular for mimetic satisfaction—is a familiar one, recalling the ubiquitously-articulated remembrance of the hyper-mediated 9/11 attacks as having been “like a movie.” It was “like a scene from *ET*,” one of the first coronavirus patients in the UK reported of her quarantine—a reference that hit particularly hard with me, my 1980s childhood haunted by the scene she means: the isolated, tube-tethered Elliot; the Hazmat-suited scientists; the otherworldly plastic-bubble tunnels.

The terror was not in aliens, I learned, but in alienation.

In Ling Ma’s 2018 novel *Severance*—a piece of pandemic fiction that has been re-assessed for its prescience and uncanny resonance—one of the survivors offers a familiar reflection on fictionality: “It’s like we’re in a horror movie,” he says, “Like a zombie or vampire flick”—prompting the group’s leader, Bob, to launch into an armchair analysis of the characteristics of vampire versus zombie genres. But as Ma’s protagonist, Candace, rightly points out, the comparison is overly simplistic: “the fevered aren’t zombies,” she insists. “They don’t attack us or try to eat us. If anything,” she continues, “we do more harm to them.”

Bob dismisses her correction out of hand. “When you wake up in a fictitious world,” he declares, “your only frame of reference is fiction” (29).

In seemingly-fictitious worlds, we seek orientation in simile. What form most closely approximates our situation? Pandemic seeks genre: reality show, horror film, Greek tragedy, commedia dell’arte, existentialist tragicomedy.

Who governs here?

Act II: Plot & Plotlessness

In his 1992 essay, “What is an Epidemic? AIDS in Historical Perspective,” field-defining historian of medicine Charles Rosenberg contended that, as social phenomena, epidemics assume a “dramaturgic form,” following a rough four-act structure as they “start at a moment in time,

proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, following a plot line of increasing and revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift toward closure” (279). In Rosenberg’s view, drama affords a sort of formal architecture to the epidemic, rendering it meaningful by granting it a familiar—and predictable—narrative framework.

A decade and a half later, Priscilla Wald similarly offered a structural assessment of the epidemic, examining what she influentially termed the “outbreak narrative”: “a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment” (2). This dominant plot can accordingly obscure and delegitimize that which does not conform to its frame, as Elizabeth Outka points out in her recent monograph *Viral Modernism*. As Outka argues, the 1918 influenza pandemic “lies decidedly outside the formula” of Wald’s outbreak narrative—resisting, in particular, the tidy conclusion of containment. The pandemic’s concomitant “sense of plotlessness,” Outka writes, “contributed to the unreality of the experience and helped prevent the pandemic from getting clear purchase within the cultural story” (30).

A century later, we are navigating new unrealities. We are, we say, “in the middle of” a pandemic. I am still unsure if this is a temporal metaphor—that we are *in medias res*, rising toward the climax of containment—or a spatial one: that we are at sea, at the farthest point from anything, awash in plotlessness.

Act III: Enter Shark

This summer, in deference to irony, I went to a drive-in screening of *Jaws*. Over and over and over in the popular press, the 1975 film had been invoked, with varying degrees of sincerity, as a morality tale for our moment: a warning about privileging economic interests over public health.

I hadn’t seen the movie since my childhood, when my brothers and I wore out the VHS tape during alternate-weekend shared custody visits at our father’s apartment. Spielberg’s film may have produced a generation of kids afraid of the ocean, but for me it inculcated a more specific fear: not of swimming, but of swimming naked, horrified and enthralled as I was by the opening scene, the first teenage victim—aptly punished, it seemed, for an act of sexual provocation.

Sharks, after all, are not just for jumping.

Because there must be blame. The pandemic as any well-made play hinges on peripeteia, the reversal of fortune that secures heroic triumph. “We follow the directions—there is no choice involved,” Stoppard’s Player explains to the bewildered Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. “The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.” Guided by this logic, for some, Trump’s COVID diagnosis seemed to signify—and perversely satisfy—as a climax of dramatic inevitability.

But illness is not justice, poetic or otherwise. It is not punishment for ill-laid plots. As many were quick to point out, to invoke the moralizing rhetoric of disease-as-comeuppance is to perpetuate a

culture of ableism, victim-blaming, and stigmatization.

The identification of epidemiological causality can exist in the absence of moral valuation.

Act IV — ?: Absurdity

Every so often, I inflict irreparable damage on my relationships with students by assigning Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. They hate it because it is unforgivably unfunny. They hate me for my complicity as minister of the unintelligible.

We can analyze what we despise, I assure them. We can exist in this discomfort.

If there is motivation in *Endgame*'s absurdity, it is in the quest for the cessation of pain. And ultimately, it is in the effort to endure what is intolerably chronic.

(*Calmer*).

The end is in the beginning and yet you go on.

Cover Image: "The play scene from 'Hamlet' (Hayman c. 1745)." Wikimedia Commons.

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