

Tele-Mournings: Actuvirtual Events and Shared Responsibilities

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Abstract:

This thought piece dealing with the Covid-19 ‘crisis’ was written – in the form of a diary that runs from February to July 2020 – for a special issue of *Derrida Today* entitled ‘Fire, Flood, Pestilence and Protest’, edited by Nicole Anderson, and published in November 2020. The piece deals with matters of biopolitics, telecommunication, death and mourning through Derrida and Agamben, and interrogates the eventness of what is called an ‘event’.

Keywords:

Derrida, Covid-19, event, telecommunications, politics, biopolitics, Agamben

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*Dans cette sarabande des spectres,
tentons de tenir à la fermeté au moins
apparente de quelques évidences.*

– Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*

February 26th, 2020

What is it that is coming, what is that ‘thing’ that is happening to us? How am I supposed to talk about ‘it’? Isn’t it too early? Too late, already? Do I even have the legitimacy to speak about that ‘thing’? But who can claim that they do, in all rigour, have the legitimacy to speak about an event that many have called, and will call, ‘unprecedented’? What will be the index of such legitimacy?

One rule, perhaps: let’s not dissimulate the fact of our doubts and uncertainties – they have, in spite of everything, a certain firmness, perhaps

the very firmness of factuality. Or, in the words chosen by Peggy Kamuf to translate our epigraph, ‘In this whirling dance of ghosts, let us try to hold on to the at least apparent firmness of a few obvious facts’ (Derrida 1994, p. 161).

March 16th, 2020

‘Solemn address’ of the French president Emmanuel Macron. It’s live TV, at once unprepared, precipitated, and highly orchestrated. There are not enough masks, not enough tests, but Macron declares a total lockdown in France, starting tomorrow. We are following the Italian example. The stated goal is to avoid the oversaturation of hospitals for the time being. Fair enough.

‘Nous sommes en guerre’, he said. But nothing seems to me as inadequate as the rhetoric of warfare that is deployed by many of our politicians in order to mobilise and to make sense of what seems to be happening to ‘us’, that ‘thing’ or ‘event’ ‘we’ are seemingly experiencing together, on the world’s stage, albeit with a myriad of local or translocal differences that make up the world or worlds ‘we’ live in. I use scare quotes, here, because I am not even sure who or what is the ‘we’ that is the supposed subject of this experience, and whether this ‘thing’ or ‘event’ even happens to something or someone that deserves the name ‘subject’. It is happening here, now, like a *déferlement* and a *débordement*, an outpouring and an overflowing, in and through the ‘here’ and the ‘now’ and beyond the presence of the present – ‘here and now’, where and when all borders are being redefined, displaced, deconstructed, where all our constructed frontiers appear simultaneously irrelevant and oddly reassuring, as that living-nonliving thing called ‘virus’ passes from bodies to bodies, in a *corps à corps* which traverses as many fronts and frontiers, despite screens and barriers, masks and helmets, making its way domestically and globally, bridging the most intimate with the seemingly universal.

The lexicon of warfare, used and abused by so many people in power, shares many traits with that of ‘crisis’: like the *krisis*, which originally comes from the medical sphere, the discourse of war supposes a beginning and an end; it wages on the exceptionality of a difficult moment that will pass, one that can be diagnosed and strategically contained within a certain present, through a series of practical measures and exceptional decisions that break away from the most normalised and routinised aspects of politics. The discourse of crisis and emergency is always, perhaps paradoxically, aimed at reassuring oneself: the crisis will pass, one day it will be behind us. It started one day (sometime in December 2019, when the virus was ‘identified’, as they say) and it will end someday. ‘Identified’: it *is* ‘this’ virus, as if it had a clear delineation, epidemiologically and ontologically – as if it were an ipseity, some ‘one’. It has a name, the name of the event, perhaps that of an enemy, a name which includes a date in its very name: the ‘Covid-19 crisis’. The crisis is *dated* and, being dated, it is already somewhat mastered, arrested. It’s *as if* it were already behind us.

But what is the ‘thing’ that is happening *in that name*? What is this so-called ‘event’? Does it even have a name? Can we believe in that name? Yesterday I reread Derrida’s intervention on ‘9/11’ in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, entitled ‘Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides’. Derrida’s reflection deals with the difficulty of naming an event which exceeds, by definition, any and all given names. I was struck by the similarities – at least a number of formal analogies – with our current ‘crisis’. What is particularly striking is the paradoxical nature of an ‘event’ that seems at once unpredictable and strangely familiar. This uncanniness speaks to the strange feeling of ‘science-fictionality’ that’s taken over many of us as the pandemic unfolds – not only the pandemic ‘itself’, supposing that it may be isolated ‘as such’, but also the series of bio-political-juridical policies which have been implemented in response, for better or worse, with massive differences on national and international levels, and with effects that remain very difficult to calculate. Can we dissociate the event ‘itself’ from the autoimmune and heterogeneous techno-mediatic-biopolitical machinery which *informs* such

event, giving it form, giving it names, shaping up the many different *aspects* we are witnessing, with a great deal of uncertainty and powerlessness, on the world's stage? Everything happens as if the 'same' event came about, took 'place' only by diffracting itself, disseminating its disastrous effects into a multiplicity of differential contexts, virtual and actual stages, more or less fabricated scenes with barely anything in common. Are we even talking about the 'same' event? An event in *différance*, maybe, and a *différance* that is undecidably temporal *and* spatial. It is temporal because we know that everyone, every country is or will be struck, virtually or actually, but not in the same way and not at the same time – hence the terrifying uncanniness of a quasi-existential dread combining precipitated emergency and insufferable slowness, as if the event was taking place all at once, but in slow motion. It is a *trembling*, as Derrida would perhaps say, a differential trembling that started we don't know when, and which promises to continue. Of this we can be certain. On the other hand, the pandemic has brought to light a multitude of inequalities and intersectional violences on the global and local scales (as if we didn't already know!), and has become at the same time the subject of innumerable ideological, economic, ecological, technoscientific, and sociopolitical debates; a multiplicity of perspectives which contribute to separate 'the event' from 'itself', by making it the unfindable locus of a *Kampfplatz*, a space for differential agonisms and antagonisms always involving a certain theoretical and practical arrogance, hegemonic assertions often marked by racism and imperialism, hasty denunciations and more or less calculated accusations correlated to economic, geopolitical, and ideological interests.

But, once we have said that, once we have recalled that the 'event', the 'Covid-19 crisis' happens in *différance*, through a multiplicity of differential (and often incomparable) *aspects* and *effects*, is that enough? Are we even sure we can circumscribe the crisis by accounting for this essentially differential structure? Does it actually have the absolute specificity and unpredictability which should define an event 'worthy of the name', as Derrida would say? This is very doubtful. We can't say we weren't warned.

There was an overwhelming number of indexes and oracles, the sarabande of past epidemics and pandemics, many scientific, epidemiological and political experts' reports, testimonies we refused to listen to or to believe, and innumerable speculative works of what we call, perhaps with too much hastiness, 'science-fiction'. We had seen – one example among thousands – Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film *Contagion*, whose screenwriter Scott Z. Burns consulted with representatives of the World Health Organization and was inspired by recent epidemics such as the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak and the 2009 flu pandemic. We knew a pandemic was coming. It is impossible to ignore the fact that many epidemics and pandemics in the past were largely ignored because they affected what seemed and still seem like distant parts of the world for European and American sensibilities. The 'event' of a pandemic was already there, with us, before we 'experience' it in the present. It was haunting us, in actuality and virtuality, through the uncanny force of a science-fictionality blending faith and knowledge and involving violent resistances and forceful denials. We were already the vessels of the event and we didn't want to know it, to acknowledge it. Hence the pathetic unpreparedness of so many countries, exacerbated by the destruction of public services and the decrease in public funding allocated to health services, scientific research, and more generally social security and solidarity – all of this on the backdrop of environmental negligence and ecological devastation.

Everything is thus happening as if the current 'crisis' – *this* so-called 'crisis' – were merely the deployment of a virtual course of other past events, as if it were enough for a minuscule event to happen (the modification of some molecules in the protein of a virus, perhaps the encounter with a pangolin or a bat) for triggering the methodical and chaotic rolling out of the multitude of catastrophes that we are experiencing now, but that were, *in a certain way*, always-already there: announced, spectrally but without teleology. Virtually, but in actuality. Actuality and virtuality of an event that remains nonetheless *undeniable*, although it has in fact never *properly* started, and will never *properly* end. Because, of course, we know that what we calmly

(and somewhat anxiously) call ‘the Covid-19 crisis’ is in fact enmeshed with many other so-called ‘crises’, past, present, and future: ecological and environmental crises with largely unforeseeable implications, multiple pandemics, and of course many socio-economic crises and political unrest to come. Like the virus, as well as its future mutations, these events-to-come are undecidably endogenous and exogeneous. For all these reasons, *we tremble*, and we know that none of these so-called ‘crises’ in fact deserves the name ‘crisis’ – but all of them are and will be deadly. Always and without exception: there will be deaths. Death, ‘real’ or ‘symbolic’, is the non-virtualisable of the event. But it remains inaccessible as such. Hence the impossibility of mourning. The time of mourning is out-of-joint: always-already too late in its structure of anticipation.

April 3rd, 2020

I am currently writing an essay on the articulation between violence and law in Benjamin, Agamben, and Derrida. It’s still a little tentative, but the article is coming together.

It just so happens that Agamben has published a series of short texts vehemently denouncing current measures of exception, likening them to totalitarian and fascist policies. Agamben denounces the capture of humanity by biopolitical rationality in the context of what he calls ‘the invention of an epidemic’. As if there were something like ‘biopolitics’, one, pure and homogeneous, to which one could oppose (in the name of who knows what concepts of life, pure potentiality, humanity and freedom) something entirely different, a nonbiopolitics, a life-politics supposedly pure from any biopolitical logic or traces. Very problematic hypothesis, of course, even before Agamben starts blaming the ‘religion of science’ wholesale, and conflates current emergency measures with fascist and Nazi policies.

One thing I found more interesting in those short texts is Agamben’s treatment of mourning, perhaps because it is interestingly symptomatic.

Several times, Agamben denounces the interdiction of holding an in-presence funeral, and calls this interdiction ‘truly barbaric’:

The dead – our dead – do not have right to a funeral and it is unclear what happens to the corpses of our loved ones. Our neighbour, our close one [*prossimo*] has been erased [*cancellato*] and it is curious that churches remain silent on the subject. What do human relationships become in a country that habituates itself to live in this way for who knows how long? (Agamben 2020, my translation)

What Agamben refuses is to mourn mourning, a certain idea of mourning. He wants to believe that there is something like mourning, that mourning takes *place*, that it *has* a place, and that it takes place on the presentational stage of a funeral: it happens in a present, in the presence of the dead body and of the dead person’s family and friends. Agamben goes to say that the suspension of the ‘actual’ funeral, of the gathering ‘itself’, around the corpse ‘itself’, signifies the beginning of barbarism. When the funeral stage described by Agamben disappears, we become barbarians. We don’t even know what ‘they’ did with the body! Could the dead person be alive? Undead? Could the dead return? What is ‘barbarian’, it seems, is that these tormenting questions persist even in death, beyond death. The funeral is meant to put an end to these questions. Barbarism, it seems, ends when these questions are put to rest. When there is a proper wake. In Agamben’s description, it almost feels like the phantasmatic funeral stage is conceived as the human proper. And maybe it *is*, to an extent. For I understand, of course, that gatherings are important for mourning – and yet I wonder if there is ever something like mourning *as such*, and if this great scene of exorcism – the funeral – ever happens in a presence, if it is not always-already somewhat tele-technicised, socially distanced, interrupted or pre-interrupted within itself by the infinite distance of a fallibility, an always possibly failed incorporation. As if all wakes had always taken ‘place’ on Zoom, virtually, out of focus and out of sync. In this way, all mourning (human or nonhuman, always tele-technical) would already be tele-mourning – and, by the same token, mourning would always be somewhat

haunted by its own impossibility, impropriety, or undecidability, always-already affected with irreducible fictionality, spectrality, and technicity. Never quite proper to itself. Always ‘tele’.

May 5th, 2020

Lockdown since March 17th. Alone in Paris in my small studio. I am not allowed to see anyone, besides the people working at the supermarket, occasional joggers and homeless people on the streets, and the policemen and women controlling my papers and self-signed authorizations. I can hear the sirens of ambulances on the streets. Every day on the news I listen to the death toll, *le décompte des morts et des cas*. They talk about how much more difficult the situation is a few kilometres away, in Seine-Saint-Denis. They also talk about the hardships of mental health patients, of women victims of domestic violence, of LGBTQ teenagers who have nowhere to go, about the dire situation in prisons and in residential housing for senior citizens. There are sarabandes of viral memes on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok (some of them are funny), and innumerable interventions by public intellectuals, doctors, and politicians talking, knowing-not-knowing, sometimes not knowing how to know or not to know.

Every day I think about my family in Marseille, about Francesco in Salerno, Jonathan in Atlanta, Henri in Yaoundé, Masha and Luke in Berlin, Emile in Winchester, Peggy and Ronald in California, Mauro in Santiago, Eszter in Budapest, Lenka in Pretoria, Ryan and Jonas in New York, Héctor in Taiwan, and many, many others – even Jeppe in Copenhagen (although I know very well I shouldn’t think too much about him). One day we celebrate Makda’s 35th birthday on Zoom. One day I become a little worried about Ifan and Pedro in London. Another day, I hear about Marguerite’s death. Yet another day, Arnaud calls me on the phone after having spent a week at the hospital, including two full days in a COVID 19-related coma. He’s asking how I am. We saw each other in early March, just before the lockdown was implemented. At the time, the French authorities

denied the gravity of the situation and displayed unforgivable arrogance towards the Chinese and the Italians. I tell Arnaud that I am fine, that I think I am fine. Sure, one week I had hives on my wrist, perhaps a mild fever. Was it the sign of something? Did I contaminate anyone? Did I kill anyone? What does it say about ‘my’ responsibility, virtual or actual? What does it say about responsibility in general?

Every day I try to work, read and write. It is all ‘tele’: telephone, telework, teleteaching, webinars, televideoconferences, tele-mourning. I swear I can almost move things telekinetically. I never felt so close to Cixous, Derrida, or to my friends Elias and Naomi. I read Walter Benjamin, Pablo Neruda, and Marisol de la Cadena. I can say ‘we’, ‘us’ without ever twitching. Quasi-telepathically. I also think – ‘telefaunically’, Cixous would say – about my dog Houdi in Marseille: what is she making of all this? On the phone, my mum says they’re all fine.

I know I’m lucky.

June 13th, 2020

Initially I thought I knew what I wanted to write about: how can all ‘this’, taken together, constitute what we call an ‘event’. What is an ‘event’ *worthy of the name*, as Derrida puts it? But *now* – now what? Since last week, the video of George Floyd’s murder has been shared millions of times, through a process of proliferating virtualisation and online viralisation that showed the horror of police violence, structural racism, and white supremacy to many who seemed to ignore it until then – and in the middle of a pandemic that overwhelmingly affected BIPOCs and poorer populations, in the USA and in the rest of the world. Now, as we are marching today on Place de la République, as we walk in circle, with Paul, Nathalie, and Octave, under the Black Trans Lives Matter banner, trapped, encircled by the cops who are using against us the ‘kettling’ technique (in French we call it *nasse*) – a tactic that was ruled lawful by the European Court of Human Rights in March 2012 – as we see the cops provoking us, one of them running after a Black

teenager and hitting him with a baton, we scream and we don't know any more if we're wearing masks to protect ourselves against the virus or against the tear gas. In the evening we leave the protest, angry, defeated and depressed — but also, oddly, somewhat hopeful. We think about George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Adama Traoré, and it is as if something like a mourning – difficult, imperfect, complicated – were in progress: a certain work of tele-mourning, one that promises to be endless – a global movement of reckoning, protests, and transformation (as many figures of mourning) which was in part triggered by the virtualised proliferation and dissemination of an online video. (I wonder what Agamben would say about that.)

July 9th, 2020

Today's my mother's 76th birthday. I am spending some time in Marseille with my family. The lockdown was lifted on May 11th.

For years now, I have seen my sister's physical and mental health deteriorating rapidly, due to what has been diagnosed alternatively over the years as Multiple Sclerosis, Fybromalgia, Neuroborreliosis, and chronic Lyme disease, although the latter condition is not recognized by most doctors, and none of these diseases are well understood or curable. We do not know what to do. Now she can barely walk. She speaks with difficulty. Yesterday she fell and couldn't get back on her feet. She's 52.

Is 'this' part of the 'same' event?

How could it be? How could it not be?

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