

Contagi

by Liliana Dell'Osso

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For a long while, our lives seemed to revolve around the concept of contagion. The COVID-19 pandemic process changed our lives and our understanding of the western world. It's not far-fetched to consider the spread of the new virus among France, Germany, United Kingdom, Spain, and Italy a historical fact of great relevance in the context of the last 50 years. With more than 5 million cases and three hundreds deaths worldwide, the coronavirus pandemic has changed once and for all our present, and reshaped the future. A new book tries to explore this new horizon, taking into account the most recent psychiatric and psychopathologic research.

Contagi ("Contagions") is three-fold, and presents an interesting internal symmetry, and is available now both in ebook and on Amazon, by Liliana Dell'Osso, Pisa University. The book opens pointing out how safe the Italian society thought to be when receiving the first news of a new illness from Wuhan. The illusion of safety, in her reconstruction of facts, quickly left the population when the contagion curve in Lombardy first, and in the whole country then, began to rise.

The widespread reaction of mass panic is then well described, among the inevitable rise of fake news. The author invite the readers to immunize themselves through knowledge, and explains all the risks of the new COVID-19 pandemic, with several very interesting psychiatric remarks. As a matter of fact, and this is one of this book highlights, a new epidemic process is brewing; and this new wave of illness is likely to be linked to PTSD. Just like COVID-19, it will strike with particular momentum those who fight the battle of public welfare: healthcare workers, who found themselves in a very difficult situation during the epidemic and the lockdown, may present in great numbers and in the foreseen future, stress-related symptomatology.

It's worth noting how the public media, in Italy but also in many western countries, have described the recent efforts of medicine in heroic terms. This is, according to the author, a quick escape made by the political debate in order to avoid many hot topics, since "heroes are not allowed to complain", as the author poignantly notes.

It's not the first (nor the last) time we will face a contagion: and in the second part of the book, written with philosopher and historian of science Dario Muti, Liliana shows how widespread the concept of contagion is in western civilization, and beyond. Rooted in the sense of touch, contagion has been theorized since the classical antiquity, albeit in a very different form than the contemporary one. Contagion deals with illness, as the Plague of Athens shows, but also with "health", as the "healing touch" of royal bloodlines in the Middle Ages shows. Above all, contagion is a metaphor, contend the authors, which has been employed to describe a wide variety of phenomena. As such, it is one of the "total concepts" of our civilization. This point is analyzed in detail during the course of the latter part, where we also find a precious gallery. With psychiatrist Daniela Toschi, professor Dell'Osso realize an interesting psychobiography of Edvard Munch: the eponymous painter of *The Scream* and widely recognized as one of the most iconic author on the concept of trauma. This is no chance, explain the authors, since Edvard was exposed, since early childhood, with contagion and death. Edvard's father, Christian, was a doctor probably affected PTSD. Christian may have "infected" Edvard with more than a strict pietist education: he may have transmitted a very anxious view of the world as a dangerous place, populated by *revenants*. Edvard life had been difficult for a long time, as the painter led a *bohemian* life for quite a long time, with alcohol abuse, unstable relationships and multiple psychopathology. When Edvard undertook a resting period with a psychiatrist, his symptoms withdrew, leading to a new found health a renovating energy in his painting: as the authors puts it, thanks to psychiatry the artist of *The Scream* became the author of *the Sun*, a gigantic symbol of hope and rebirth.

Alessandro Rossi