

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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RITUALISED SPACE

Jorge Figueira

The emergence of COVID-19 created a ritualised space that broke individual freedom and the sociability of communities. From the eye of the computer camera to “social distancing”, from masks to surveillance over the other, we live today in an airport ritual, with no planes departing: protocols, suspicion, shops with the lights off. There is “customs and baggage control” to the smallest and most intimate detail: the air you breathe.

In confinement as well as in deconfinement, space is ritualised, in the manner of a totalitarian and dystopian experience: steps are measured, distance is mandatory, the other is a possible agent of the virus, or perhaps even an alien like in John Carpenter’s *They Live*. Self-protection is also protection of others; after all, we ourselves could turn out to be the alien. And it is our face that permanently appears on the computer screen, in a ritualised online quotidian, with links, appointments, a raised hand. The laptop has become a digital mirror, at which we constantly speak; the mask gives us back the sound of our voice. The ritualised space is also that of disinfection, of washing hands and surfaces, before and after. Disinfection, as on a plane in an intercontinental trip; digitalisation, as in a future to which one must compulsorily adhere.

The ritualisation of space by tourism, which had been growing exponentially and apparently inexorably, was abruptly interrupted by this ritualisation imposed by a virus: an unknown silence with planetary rules and instructions has fallen upon us.

The de-ritualisation of space depends on the evolution of the pandemic, its peaks and waves, statistics and lethality. But it is a societal survival task; the prevalence of the social significance of communities and of our individual freedom will depend on it. Low density and the “countryside” as a retreat for the most privileged cannot replace high density and the city as the site of democracy *par excellence*, for that would be going back in civilisation. Regaining the city will mean opening doors, crossing all mobilities, stopping digital, physical and territorial surveillance from imposing itself as a model.

The Post-COVID-19 era is to commence the moment we return to the city imbued with a new sense, perhaps even a new paradigm: finding something we never thought of losing. The Streets and squares will be the same, but our gaze will be different; and perhaps this new gaze can ultimately invest the city with a new sense of inclusion and sociability.

The experience of ritualised space is structurally intrusive, inclined to totalitarianism, and cannot be normalised. “The romanticisation of the quarantine is a class privilege”, says the writing on the wall. The quarantine amounts to a ritualised space, which stratifies and exacerbates differences under a veil of apparent equality.

To de-ritualise space will mean to leave the airport of confinement, and deconfinement, and to return, by turning off the eye of the camera, to the city, which will be the same – and yet different.