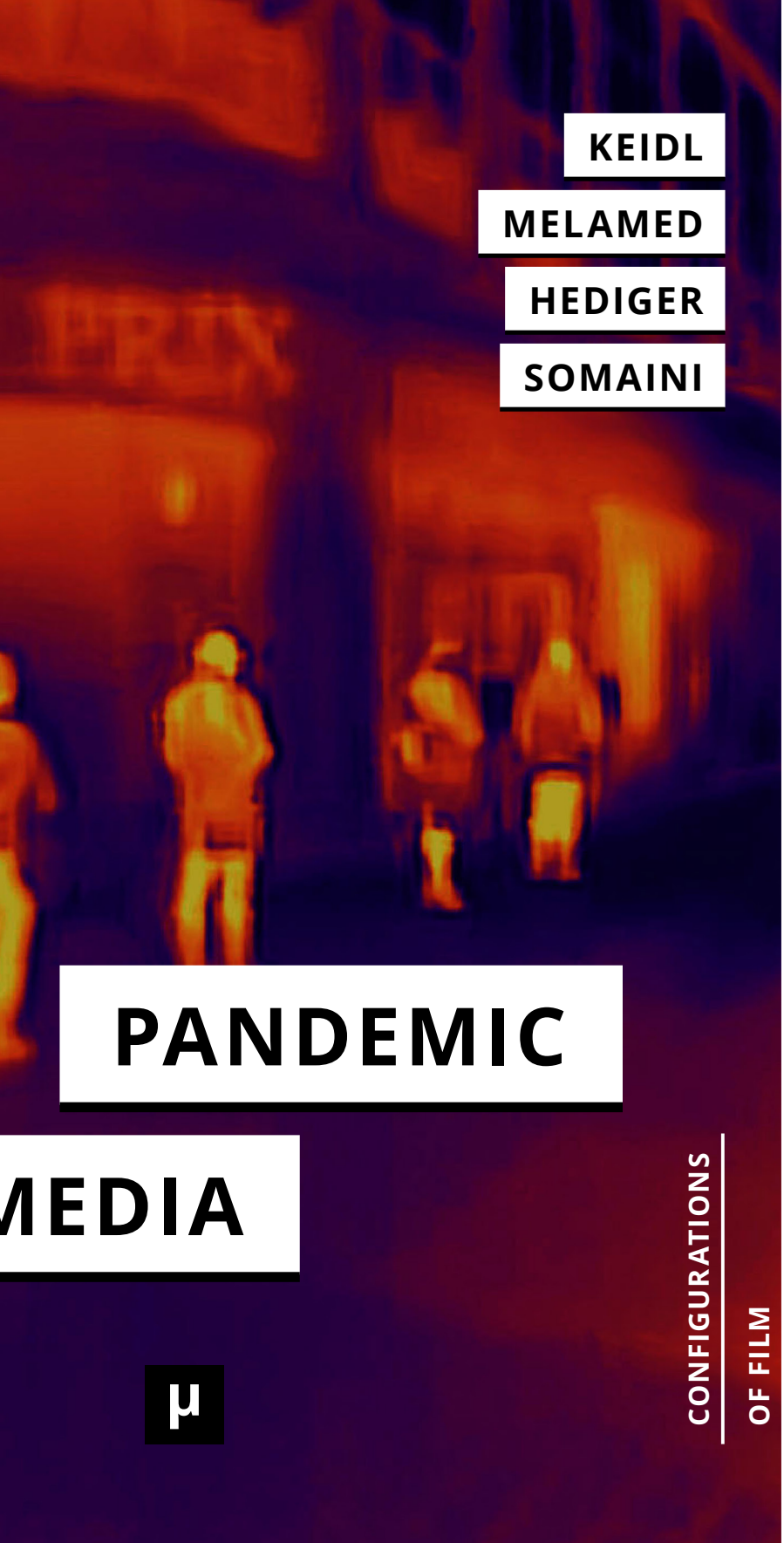

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Configurations of Film Series

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini

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KONFIGURATIONEN DES FILMS

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AIDS

HIV

PANDEMIC

BAREBACKING

ILLNESS

DISABILITY

[2 0]

Sex with the Signifier

Diego Semerene

The argument of this chapter is the shift from sex through bodies to sex through words, which the COVID-19 lockdown triggers. This shift is situated within a context of "autistic sex" which precedes the pandemic crisis, where the human subject doesn't recognize the subjectivity of the other in their attempt to enjoy sex. The forms that sexual (non-) encounters must take during lockdown reminds us of the role of fantasy, supported and enacted by the apparatus of the signifier, or *writing*, in bringing forth pleasure for the subject—particularly in sparing them from the inevitably unsatisfactory encounter with the fleshly other. When crises make certain enjoyments impossible, we may thus rediscover the fundamental function of the signifier—whose materiality can be more reliant, and malleable in obeying the shapes dictated by one's fantasy, than that of the body.

A man from Fabswingers, a British hook-up site where I have a profile as a crossdresser, sends me several messages, all of which go unanswered. "Hi. What are you up to? Hello? Hello? Babe? I am close to you. If I'm just wasting my time with you will tell me. Ok, I guess I am." He finalizes with a sad-faced emoji, which prompts me to reply with a "WhatsApp," also the name of the app we are using to communicate. He then summarizes the reason for being of our interaction with astonishing concision, laying bare the function of the signifier in enjoyment, the central argument of this essay: "I want you to speak to me."

I swear I am a much quicker texter with men who allow me time to respond. I, too, want them to speak to me. Particularly when I can't invite them over. But, when I think of it, also when I can. I often turn not to pornography to masturbate, and not even to the photographs these often good-looking strangers send me, but to the sentences they wrote me.

I scroll back on WhatsApp to find places where, for instance, a Matthew from Birmingham, who has told me he wants to marry me, says, "Hope you have a nice sleep princess, wish I woke up next to my angel." I zero in on "princess," I zero in on "angel," even imagining a "little" preceding each noun to make my coming inevitable. I remember his face, but the last thing I want to do before coming is read his words.

On Twitter the profile *DailyScally* offers photos of supposedly straight and working class English men ("scallies"). In one of them we see a handsome young man in a blue hoodie with a shaved head and a disaffected expression. He is made "scally" by the writing on top of the image, which provides his supposed age, 19, and his supposed name. "Mason cums so much and his spunk is so potent that he's made every girl he's ever slept with pregnant...6 kids and counting."

Words will be there to make claims about the body that the body itself cannot. They pick up where the body leaves off. Or is it the other way around? In any case, without the signifier there is not even a way of approaching the body.

Scrolling through my *Finstagram*, where I follow many MMA fighters from Ukraine, even though, or precisely because, I can't read their alphabet, one of them posts a picture of a tattoo he is getting across his chest. There it is, written on the body as anything ever was, astonishingly concise, too:

"I've been holding back tears," says the tattoo, in plain old English.

Someone responds to an ad I post on the French site Annonces-Travesti. After the pandemic, my plans to spend the summer in Paris have been scrapped, but not my eagerness to see what French men have to say. This guy sends me several texts claiming to want to be my boyfriend, "to walk hand in hand, admiring the sun going down." His description is so vivid I almost come even if

I am yet to know what he looks like. It seems I am not alone. "The more I write to you, the more my desire is only one…to see you," he writes.

Someone else on Fabswingers reads my profile, which states where I am from, or where I claim to be from, and writes not to ask for more nudes but to make an acoustic request: "Sexy would love to hear that accent."

Matthew from Birmingham, who wants to marry me after lockdown and will allow me to read all his text messages when we are married, "out of respect for my wife," disappears for a few days. When Matthew resurfaces, he apologizes. He is at risk of being furloughed and was swamped with work. I question whether he is serious. He writes, "How can I say what I've said and not be serious?"

A married 48-year-old from Grindr says he used condoms "pre-corona," but that he is "beginning to think life's too short to pass on real pleasure." He then tells me he needs a mistress, "a real lady," someone who can give him what his wife can't. "Care and respect offered in exchange for fantasy fulfillment."

It is quite striking how I have so quickly managed to adapt my urge for copious sex with strangers to the constraints posed by the pandemic. Like the man from Annonces-Travesti, the more I write the more I want to see them. But then I don't. In clinging on to the efficiency of their words, so competent when compared to the men's sexual abilities, I find pleasure where I expected to find suffering. There is, at last, something there where there was supposed to be nothing. Is that not at the core of their wanting to see, or write to, a cross-dresser in the first place?

I digress. The real question here is where the psychic labor devoted to symptoms that we judge to be fundamental to our everyday lives go when a crisis muzzles them. What do queer cruising subjects for whom a "post-AIDS" world has been governed by retroviral drugs and bareback sex aimed at an endless profusion of partners do with their bodies when such diligently crafted ecstasies are barred? I will argue that, when crises make age-old enjoyments impossible, we seek refuge in the more literal registers of the signifier, whose materiality can be more reliant than that of the body.

French gay writer Matthieu Galey suffered from a terminal illness around the peak of the HIV epidemic. The fact that his illness was not AIDS struck him as an incredibly funny dissonance with the times, "as though I had caught scarlet fever during the great plague" (Galey 2017, 788).[1] Galey's symptoms were a particularly demoralizing blow for someone for whom cruising, for sex and ideas, was a way of life. At first he develops a limp. Then he must use a cane to be able to walk. Ultimately, Galey is confined to a wheelchair and loses his hand movement. The first to go is his right hand, the one he uses to write.

1 All translations from Galey's diaries, which remain untranslated into English, are mine.

And write he does, continuing the diary he began in 1953, at 18 years old, until the day of his death in 1986. Almost one thousand pages detailing the inner workings of Parisian publishing companies, dinner parties and nights at the theatre with the likes of Françoise Sagan, Louis Aragon, Jean Cocteau, and Roland Barthes. He also documents his long love stories and brief sexual encounters, all culminating in the slow breakdown of his body.

This is a breakdown made livable through the written word. For Hervé Guibert, whose entire oeuvre is written with and through the breaking down of the AIDS-afflicted body, "one of AIDS's few mercies is the emphasis it places on the brief time it gives you. What to do with the unsaved life? Use it, Guibert implores his readers, and rage—or write" (Durbin 2020).

At a time when apps dedicated to making sexual intercourse possible thrive it is striking that so many of these app-mediated interactions seem bound to stay within the realm of signifier-ness in its more literal sense. So much cruising, so little sex: from the question, "What do you want to do to me?" as a strategy to fish for words that, unlike the body, can hit the fantasy at its heart, to the exposition of exhaustive scenarios of how the sexual encounter should take place even though, or precisely because, it never will. It can be quite frustrating for those invested in real-life meetings, because to enter this digital sexual economy is, too often, to remain in it. Although the cruising subject in this context can go back and forth between acting out the symptom through the bodies of others or their words, one can find very quickly that there is indeed enough, if not more, enjoyment in the scripting of the event, than in the event itself.

Bice Benvenuto refers to our time as "not that of eros" (2020). We are invested in the auto-erotism of the sensorial, predicated on thingness and surfaces, in lieu of the sensual, predicated on actual seduction. She calls this autistic sex. The subject, who is only interested in getting off, doesn't recognize the subjectivity of the other. That is, she makes do with the fantasy, with the words, with the signifier—the most stable variables given the other's tendency to turn into spoiled objects once they become something other than ghostly apparitions. Galey writes of the blues that follow a particular night of orgies in Avignon in July of 1984. "A pleasure much more intense prior than during. Why act things out? The prologue is so much better than the play" (2017, 750). When he goes to Salzburg to meet Peter Handke, the Austrian writer tells him: "The realization of desires, it's always a bit too much. Desiring suffices" (Galey 2017, 713).

A lockdown that reduces the sexual encounter to the subject's exchanging of images and words with one hand on their phone, and the other on their sex, is a rather fitting proposition for the autistic sex non-partners of our non-eros time. We don't need to meet. We cannot meet. Meeting is conveniently

barred. For some, this can of course become an incentive for breaking a newly externalized law. An Adam from *Fabswingers* writes to me, "Hey, total top here looking to make love during lockdown." Someone else on Grindr says: "Want to get slutty tonight? Fuck this lockdown…"

We are in the era of autism, Benvenuto argues, and the autistic subject is always already in lockdown. We can think of the supposed horrors of lockdown, then, as the culmination of a path we were already on. A path taken by those who take all the pleasure and give out none.

Enjoyment from the signifier obviously predates the digital, but digital sex without sex is a key item on the list of the so-called new symptoms, which have to do with technologies of instant gratification: panic attacks, attention deficits, addictions, hyper-activity, and eating disorders. When it is the mechanism of sex that makes us come, such as in the factory-style dynamic of sex parties where dozens of bottoms await side-by-side on all fours for tops to fuck them without seeing their faces, there can be all sorts of pleasures, but there is no eros.

If the baby wants to carry on living it's because of pleasure, Benvenuto reminds us. If the baby asks for milk it is not milk she is after but eros, which can only be granted by a mother who takes pleasure in the baby. This can't be a one-way mirror. Milk without the breast, and here we don't mean the organ, is automation (Benvenuto 2020). In our autistic times the body of the other might be the breast but it is the signifier that warrants lactation.

It is useful to consider Lacan's shift in theorizing the signifier in Seminar XX, prior to which the signifier was what represented a subject for another subject. He asks us to forget what we know about the signifier, explaining it as an enjoying substance: "As soon as we turn things into nouns, we presuppose a substance …." (Lacan 1998, 21). For Lacan, then, there is a materiality to the signifier, perhaps a milky one, whereas the body itself is a symbolic creation and mere consequence of signifier-ness. Jouissance, which can go from a pleasant tickle to an unbearable explosion, appears as an effect of the signifier. If there is jouissance, there is some sort of writing taking place. A sentence is being written. Bodies affected by lethal viruses are in a good position to know what kind of sentence that is…To be affected by the virus, in this logic, is to be under its sign, whether one suffers the consequences of the virus physically or, for now, fantasmatically.

A great part of what we enjoy about the symptom is in the fact that we find, in the words of poet Nuno Júdice, "paths without exit so we can stay inside them for a while (…)" (2019, 74). But enjoyment is supple. The symptom can cast its net onto newly found objects because it is ultimately about signifiers, not objects per se. When psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster volunteers at an Intensive Care Unit for COVID patients in New York, she finds herself yearning

for eloquence from patients in their last moments but only finds "desperate stuttering" (2020) and fumbling. There is writing here too, but of a different kind. The word appears, for Webster, as the go-to defense mechanism for academics, but the isolated terminal patients, many of whom in states of psychotic delirium, speak nonsense as if clinging on to signifier-ness instead of meaning.

For Freud, symptomatic somatization is an essentially creative act. To move something somewhere (i.e. the loss of a father to pain in the neck) is a metaphoric and productive act of representation akin to the dynamic between signifier and signified, which writing and speaking engender. In this sense, writing, on bodies or paper, is supposed to give one the same amount of pleasure as fucking (Webster 2020).

Galey refers to his defiance toward death as an "aesthetic" resistance (2017, 822). Because a death sentence is being written by every speaking subject the minute they come into the world, he sees a confrontation with death predicated on the idea of a cure as a futile proposition. Instead, he is interested in "the beauty of the gesture" (822) that emerges from writing the afflicted body down and away. "My impression is that I am writing my own obituary, except better" (821).

It wasn't in his being spared from HIV that Galey carved himself a space outside illness. AIDS, like COVID-19, haunts and re-shapes bodies even if the virus fails to enter them. In other words, the ravaging or emancipatory consequences of viruses are not contingent on infection, but on infectiousness. Galey resisted the crisis by writing it, "in order to look the beast in the eye. We never know; we might intimidate it" (2017, 831). He claims that if he was surprised by the miracle of the cure he would be disappointed. The sudden opening of yet another 50 years to be lived would feel like a catastrophe. "It is the brevity of my current life that makes it so beautiful and so precious. Something to be consumed *in situ*…" (757).

Edmund White remarks the many intersections between AIDS and COVID-19, such as the prevalence of misinformation traversing each crisis, while also listing their differences. For instance, the fact that AIDS posed a much lesser threat to health professionals, and that it "bore a badge of shame even in the gay community—if you were infected it was your own fault for not practising safe sex—whereas everyone feels sympathy for coronavirus victims" (White 2020). There are many reasons why it would be nonsensical, if not perverse, to compare AIDS to COVID-19. But there is surely a way to trace a relationship between them that escapes equivalence, but finds kinship in certain registers—such as fantasy. The signifier is surely a fundamental apparatus within fantasy as the interface that organizes jouissance and its objects. Fantasy is that which allows, for instance, some to think of masks and

condoms as equivalent figures in that they can both expose the male body as vulnerable, contradicting phallic claims it makes about itself. Right-wing YouTuber Brenden Dilley recently said he will never wear a mask to protect himself from COVID-19 "because he hardly ever wears condoms and, so far, he's only produced three offspring" (Gremore 2020).

For Guibert, enjoying the atrocity of AIDS is a gift between species that leads to lucidity and inspiration because "it was a disease delivered in steps." The virus "granted death time to live, the time to discover life at last, … a great modern invention that green monkeys from Africa had transmitted to us" (Guibert 1990, 193).[2] Gifts that retroviral drugs have perhaps robbed from those privileged enough to live in a "post-AIDS" bareback bubble but that COVID-19 has offered back, like a heirloom. Although the pace of COVID-19 is decidedly different than that of HIV, they coincide in the threat they come to represent as signifiers themselves. The possibilities of the gift lie in the potential usages the subject may make from the haunting that a destabilizing threat enacts. If AIDS was a gift because it allowed for an interim where death was mulled over before taking over, the status of COVID as a gift is perhaps contingent on its remaining in the horizon—neutered from pathogen into the fantasmatic safety, and multivalence, of the signifier.

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2 Translation is mine from the original publication of Guibert's *À l'Ami Qui Ne m'a Pas Sauvé La Vie.*

Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (eds.)
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and polities with which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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