Christos Lynteris's *Visual Plague: The Emergence of Epidemic Photography* is a complicated but compelling analysis of the role of photography in the third plague pandemic (1894-1959). The book is the result of a five-year project funded by the European Research Council, through which Lynteris (and a team of postdoctoral fellows and staffers) collected over two thousand images produced around the globe during the plague pandemic. In categorizing and analyzing this collection, Lynteris has developed an important new contribution to the visual culture of medicine and public health. Rather than simply fitting these photographs into existing genres of visual representation, such as clinical photography, he argues that the third plague pandemic gave rise to a distinct genre of “epidemic photography.” Although it has some overlaps with other photographic genres, such as clinical photography, survey, or colonial photography, the most important feature of epidemic photography was its ability to institute “a new kind of epidemiological reasoning” that focused less on “singular epistemic objects (the sick body, the infected house, the pestilential corpse, the plague vector)” and more on “their pathogenic interrelations” (p. 9).

Lynteris successfully argues that epidemic photography emerged as a unique genre during the third plague pandemic specifically because of the particular features of that disease at the turn of the twentieth century. From a biomedical perspective, the identification of the plague bacillus in 1894 was an important victory; however, it did not immediately resolve plague outbreaks, as scientists still did not fully understand the disease’s transmission pathways. In addition to this ambiguity, the modern plague was also frequently associated (in both text and image) with the Black Death, leading to heightened anxieties about the disease’s potential for catastrophic mortality. Lynteris asserts that the plague’s elusiveness is what makes its photographs ripe for interpretation. More than mere documents of public health activities, these images were tools for conceptualizing the global interconnectedness that defined the pandemic. They also echoed the visual tropes of
the Black Death, contributing to the sense of existential threat of plague, while simultaneously acting as a kind of “theater” for demonstrating public health control over the disease. Finally, and most significantly, this corpus of plague photographs functioned as “an apparatus that brought together forms of ontological reasoning and pandemic imagination” (p. 19). Through their production and circulation, Lynteris argues, these photographs performed a constitutive role in helping to define what plague is (a bacteria), how it operates (its mechanics, ecologies), and what it could become (a world-catastrophic event).

The first chapter of the book articulates these ontological functions of the photographs through the theme of visibility/invisibility. Complicating the idea that photographs simply “reveal” truths about the plague, Lynteris approaches the photographs as explorations “of what one could not and did not see”—borrowing from Shawn Michelle Smith—to show how the images reified plague’s elusiveness and underscored the need for “extraordinary measures” to “master” it (p. 47).[1] He examines what is shown in the photographs and why, but also reads the symbolic or, at times, unintended meanings of the images in relationship to biomedical and colonial understandings of the disease. In this way, his approach to the photographs is less concerned with the reception of these photographs in their time and more interested in the generative impulses that led to their production.

After laying out his theoretical framing in chapter 1, Lynteris then uses the remaining four chapters to discuss several subcategories of plague photography to interrogate their multiple meanings and representational valences. Chapter 2 explores images of urban disinfection and fumigation, and chapter 3 discusses plague camps and lazarettos. Both chapters review the ways in which photographs of these spaces and the public health practices deployed within them projected notions of white, imperialist control over people and places. However, the analysis goes further to suggest the fragmentary nature of this control as health officials continually had to respond to plague’s epidemiological uncertainty and the political nuances of colonization. Chapters 3 and 4 shift slightly to focus on two potent symbols of the modern plague: the rat and the face mask. The former was identified as a major vector of plague in the 1890s, which gave rise to a global war on rats. Therefore, images documenting the study of rats and the practices of rat eradication became signifiers of scientific competence and mastery over the nonhuman world, even as photographs of rat proofing and rat catching suggested the Sisyphean nature of the work. Similarly, photographs of people wearing face masks operated on a symbolic level. The relatively novel adoption of masks reflected the medical community’s evolving technoscientific mastery of disease through prevention; furthermore, following anthropological theories on the transformative potential of masks, the visual representation of the face mask during the pandemic signified the wearer’s transformation into a member of an “enlightened hygienic-minded population” (p. 172). This last chapter, which remains relevant in the new COVID-19 era, is particularly fascinating as it relates the visual of mask-wearing to a longer history of beliefs about personal courage and plague transmission.

Throughout the book, Lynteris affirms that deep ties between colonialism, imperialism, and public health, but also unpacks additional layers of meaning in his images to provide a deeper interpretation of their historic and symbolic functions. For example, he analyzes a famous photograph, “In the Disinfecting Tub,” which appeared in the Karachi Plague Committee’s 1897 album (p. 110). The photograph depicts two British soldiers holding a half-naked Indian man in a disinfecting tub; situated in a plague camp, the scene also includes other colonial officers and several colonized subjects preparing for disinfection. As others have argued, this photograph clearly depicts racially coded colonial public health practices and frames plague as a disease perpetuated by racial-
ized Others who, according to colonial logic, need to be controlled through both “scientific technology and political technique” (p. 118). Lynteris acknowledges this reality but, believing the colonial vision of control to be an unstable one, he also delves into the specific historical context of the photograph, as well as its relationship to others in the album. In doing so, he seeks to build out the epistemic and political world around the picture. This allows us to see the many “historical affordances” of these images (p. 116); in this case, the disinfecting images of the Karachi album also represented sanitary hope about the model of “voluntary” plague camps established by the British.

Through such contextualizations, Lynteris does not mean to refute previous readings of colonial photographs or even propose a hierarchy of meaning for them; rather, he excavates his case studies with analytical care in order to reveal the multivalent nature of epidemic photography. This is part of what makes the book successful despite its ambitious scope. The brief but sharp readings of photographs in context help move the reader between the more abstract theories of visual representation to the concrete details of historical analysis. This is necessary for a book that proposes a holistic argument about a pandemic that lasted over sixty years and impacted populations in such disparate locations as Hawaii, Argentina, Ghana, Manchuria, and India.

Relatedly, another strength of the book is Lynteris’s ability to work with a rich collection of images, which are currently digitized in the Visual Representations of the Third Plague Pandemic Photographic Database at the University of Cambridge. He likewise draws from a range of secondary sources covering the histories of medicine and public health, visual culture studies, medical photography, and visual and cultural anthropology. He moves between these sources with ease, applying their analytical theories while successfully articulating the specificity and distinctiveness of epidemic photography. This also requires very solid writing, and Lynteris helpfully uses both chapter 1 and the framing of each subsequent chapter to lay out his arguments.

Admittedly, there are times when the author deploys heavy jargon, and the text is not always an easy read. Nonetheless, Visual Plague is a valuable read for historians of medicine, especially for graduate students who are seeking a model of thoughtful visual analysis and historiographic engagement.

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