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# Burnacini's Cloud

## Markus Wörgötter

The Plague Column in Vienna – the *Pestsäule* – is dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Completed in 1693, it is allegedly the monument to an answered prayer.<sup>1</sup> The supplicant of this particular prayer, Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I, was not in Vienna at the time of his petition, however. The emperor and his court had left the city in July 1679 when the epidemic surged and chaos erupted. In Vienna, the plague claimed at least twelve thousand lives within the first few months, and the ruler, powerless in the face of an enigmatic and inexorable calamity, invoked the grace of God as a last resort. The answering of Leopold's prayer was as incomprehensible as the plague itself.

Can one find encrypted in the Plague Column analogies between the miraculous nature of salvation and the mysterious nature of infection? Until the second half of the nineteenth century, the chief mode of transmission was believed to be the miasmas that were emitted by decomposing bodies and spread invisibly by the wind, known as *Pesthauch* (plague breath). However, deadly outbreaks of plague followed all too closely the panicked emperor's movements, spreading from Vienna to the Kahlenberg, Heiligenkreuz, Mariazell, Prague, Brandýs, Pardubice, Kladuby, and Linz. Little did Leopold know that he brought the plague with him in his luggage.

The itinerary of the emperor's flight outlined the territorial map of Habsburg absolutism, which



opposed the declining Holy Roman Empire with a new Austro-Hungarian-Bohemian ruling entity that legitimized itself through the concept of the Trinity of the Catholic God. In the 1680s, Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach designed the Plague Column based on the iconographic program of the Jesuit



Franciscus Menegatti. Fischer von Erlach ingeniously transferred the principle of the Trinity from Heaven to Earth: not only is the Christian God tripartite but also the Habsburg Empire. The Trinity is repetitively depicted on all parts of the monument: a three-sided pedestal bears a three-sided obelisk, three bronze prayer scrolls, three coats of arms of the crown lands, and three sets of four-stone reliefs. The camouflage for this profanation of transcendence is provided by a fantastic cloud structure, for the realization of which Lodovico Ottavio Burnacini, a theatrical

architect and master of stage design, was employed. As a theater architect, Burnacini had achieved fame for his spectacular stage designs. In 1668, for Antonio Cesti's opera *Il pomo d'oro*, he developed entire cloud structures in which actors dressed as gods floated down suspended from ropes, and he created room-filling cloud monsters with gaping mouths, inside whose maws entire landscapes and panoramas of burning cities appeared.

Burnacini's contribution was primarily concerned with the transmission of Grace, with media in both the literal and symbolic sense. Spatially, Fischer von Erlach's three-part division of the column was arranged vertically: at the bottom the pedestal; in the middle the cloud; at the top the glittering, gilded representation of the Trinity. Temporally, the emperor's prayer, "ascending like incense," makes its way upward via the cloud.<sup>2</sup> In the opposite direction, Divine Grace radiates down and—so history would have it—ends the epidemic. Burnacini's cloudscape, however, has so far received little attention in the literature, which is primarily concerned with the symbolism of the pedestal. Such clouds have their origin in the "intermedium" of baroque theater. While the actors occupied the expanse of the stage in its width and depth, the intermedium used the vertical. During scene changes in performances, this space was handed over to the wild ideas and mechanical effects of the scenographer. Was not the plague also, at least metaphorically, a scene change—an

interruption of the great theater of the world—and, at the same time, as Michel Foucault argued, an experimental laboratory for disciplinary power? “It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment.”<sup>3</sup>

The carved form of Burnacini’s cloud famously metastasizes into an enormous mass teeming with bodies. It towers unsteadily above the symbol-laden pedestal and almost engulfs Fischer von Erlach’s obelisk. The architect’s division of the spheres assigns the emperor his place on this side of the line between Heaven and Earth. The Habsburg, with all the insignia of his absolute power, knells—quite unlike his ancestor Charles V, who in Titian’s 1554-painting *La Gloria* is depicted in penitential robes and surrounded by squadrons of angels—in almost intimate proximity to the Holy Trinity. A first draft by Burnacini shows Leopold, like Charles V, integrated into the salvation event, but it was never realized.

The division between Heaven and Earth in the final execution emphasizes the autonomy of the column of cloud, evoking associations that reach beyond the orthodox interpretation of the baroque column. Stanislaw Lem, in his legendary 1968 science fiction novel *Solaris*, describes similarly strange entities called mimoids. They are products of the *res cogitans* of the ocean of an alien planet. This plasma ocean, “a sort of gigantic entity, a fluid cell, unique and monstrous,”<sup>4</sup> is capable of producing

a gelatinous substance that solidifies into recognizable shapes that slowly disintegrate again. The logic and sense of these formations is inaccessible to human reason; the intelligence presumed behind them appears indifferent to the terrestrial visitors. Lem's description of the abortive birth of a mimoid in an alien ocean — "the observer now becomes a spectator at what looks like a fight to the death, as massed ranks of waves converge from all directions like contorted, fleshy mouths which snap greedily around the tattered, fluttering leaf, then plunge into the depths. As each ring of waves breaks and sinks, the fall of this mass of hundreds of thousands of tons is accompanied for an instant by a viscous rumbling, an immense thunderclap" <sup>5</sup> — is nothing but a grotesque fantasy in the spirit of the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, who conceives of the grotesque body as a colossus that exceeds the possibilities of individuals:

*"it swallows and generates, gives and takes. Such a body, composed of fertile depths and procreative convexities is never clearly differentiated from the world but is transferred, merged, and fused with it. ... It acquires cosmic dimensions while the cosmos acquires a bodily nature."* <sup>6</sup>

My imposed reading of Burnacini's cloud as a grotesque body frees it of its servitude as a medium. The cherubs' bellies, fat limbs, and chubby faces belong to the same substance as the shimmering gray cloud substrate from which they wriggle, and

with which they are simultaneously fused. Unlike Titian's *La Gloria*, where the transition between countless angel heads and celestial architecture is fluid and where radiant clouds and putti merge into one another, the Plague Column's cloud's optical effect, which conveys the density of an aerosol frozen into stone, is based on fleeting, often ghostly phenomena caused by the incidental light. The intended overwhelming of the eye derives its effectiveness from the contradiction between the expectation of translucence, the reality of opacity, and the fragmentation of appearances, as Wölfflin explains: "the eye always remains in a certain restlessness in the face of the incomprehensible." <sup>7</sup>

The numerous drawings handed down to us from Burnacini prove that he was considered a master of the grotesque. Perhaps it was also his affinity with vulgar physical theater that was seamlessly combined on the seventeenth-century stage with an elevated style of declamatory rhetoric. In the structure of the Plague Column on the Graben, the affectively overloaded but symbolically undetermined, grotesque body becomes a point of reference for the question raised at the beginning regarding the place of convergence of different forces.

Bakhtin's treatise, written during Stalin's Great Terror and only published in 1965, celebrates the grotesque body as an anarchic symbol for overcoming eschatological fear experienced in the face of human catastrophes, which at the time of the late

Renaissance clearly included the plague. The humorous culture of the common people triumphed over cosmic fear by designing a body that, according to Bakhtin, was itself wrought from the flesh of the cosmos, and understood the death of the individual as part of a great renewal. Grotesque travesties and the speech of the common people sharpen awareness, for “natural catastrophes, like other catastrophes, usually also awaken historical criticism and lead to a revision of all dogmatic positions.”<sup>8</sup>

**Markus Wörgötter** is an artist and independent curator.

**1** Gerolf Coudenhove, *Die Wiener Pestsäule: Versuch einer Deutung* (Vienna: Herold, 1958), 12.

**2** Coudenhove, *Die Wiener Pestsäule*, 15.

**3** Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 195.

**4** Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*, trans. Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox (London: Arrow, 1973), 26.

**5** Lem, *Solaris*, 118.

**6** Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 [1968]), 339.

**7** “Das Auge bleibt angesichts des Unfassbaren immer in einer gewissen Unruhe.” Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock* (Basel: Kohler & Amelang, 1986 [1888]), 70–71. Note that the Kathrin Simon translation of this sentence runs, “in the face of this intangibility the eye remains perpetually in a state of unrest.” Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. Kathrin Simon (London: Collins, 1964), 64.

**8** Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 340.

**fig.1** The Pestsäule

Source: Markus Wörgötter (2021)

**fig.2** Matthäus Küsel, after Lodovico Ottavio Burnacini, *Höllenschlund* (Hell Mouth) from Act II, Scene 6 of the opera *Il pomo d'oro* (1668). Copperplate 29.2 × 43 cm

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