

‘Hands, Face, Space’: Secular Rituals, Psychoanalysis and Magical Thinking in COVID-19 times

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‘Wash your hands to Happy Birthday’¹

On a Tuesday evening mid-March 2020, I caught myself frantically washing a bunch of bananas I had just bought from our local fresh produce store, with water and soap. This newly adopted washing habit was inspired by government advice and swelled up by YouTube tutorials from disinfecting experts who showed how to avoid catching Coronavirus from unsanitised products brought at home. Uncertain about whether I should laugh or cry at the ridiculousness of washing a fruit that can be peeled, I began to wonder whether the manic washing—which I simultaneously felt unable to give up at that point and included hands, face, hair and body parts which had been in contact with the so-called contaminated outside world—offered me a much-needed sense of purpose and control over an ‘unprecedented’ experience. After all, it felt hard to ignore all the handwashing videos pouring one after the other inviting people to pay extra care when washing their hands: twenty seconds is a must and a good rubbing of palms, fingers, nails, and thumbs. On behalf of the University Columbia Public Health School, British actor Kate Winslet made a plea to the public to observe hand hygiene rules. ‘Wash your hands, like your life depends on it’, she instructs. ‘If you’re feeling overwhelmed and a bit powerless at the moment, here is something we can all do to make a difference and it doesn’t require a medical degree, or a microscope or a ton of knowledge’.

Winslet’s plea was echoed by a plethora of celebrities such as Taylor Swift, Mariah Carey, dame Judi Dench and Gyles Brandreth all of whom presented regular handwashing as a means of protection. American singer Gloria Gaynor sang the lyrics of her all-time classic ‘I will

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survive' whilst washing her hands in her bathroom home, whilst Neil Diamond played in the guitar his popular song 'Sweet Caroline' to include the phrase 'Hands washing hands, don't touch me, won't touch you'. In the UK, 17-year-old student William Gibson created the 'Wash your Lyrics' website which generates a poster illustrating the correct steps of medical handwashing accompanied by the lyrics of a song of your choice, a refreshing alternative to those who disliked Prime Minister Boris Johnson's suggestion to 'wash your hands to happy birthday', twice.

Rather suddenly a mundane, ordinary, and non-spectacular practice, like handwashing, was placed at the centre of entertaining 'viral' videos on social media, being retweeted, shared and disseminated globally. UK government, in line with the World Health Organisation (which did not abstain from popularising handwashing by launching was the #SafeHandsChallenge on Twitter, featuring WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus explaining the correct steps of medical handwashing) proposed handwashing as the sole most effective measure in the fight against the pandemic. Guardian columnist Amy Fleming reflects on the incongruity between the war-like readiness rampaging as the pandemic spread across Europe and the astounding tediousness of handwashing. 'We can recall the moment', Fleming writes, 'when UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson emerged from the first Covid-19 Cobra meeting on 2 March and told us to wash our hands while singing Happy Birthday. The preppers among us had panic-shopped while awaiting his pronouncements, and others fretted about vulnerable loved ones, travel plans, the nightmare of simultaneous homeworking and home-schooling, and not being able to work at all. And all our leader had was this?' (Fleming, 2020)

Surely, Fleming speaks on behalf of most of us expecting a more spectacular, complex, and extraordinary plan to match the unprecedentedness of the situation. Instead, we were dropped into magical world of hygiene rituals. Evidently, the science behind handwashing is that for the virus' external membrane to dissolve, hands need to be thoroughly washed with soap and water for twenty seconds. Clean hands are safe hands—as the WHO campaign advocates—as they do not transmit viruses to the areas they touch; doorknobs, handles, elevator buttons, card machines, pint glasses, faces, other people. But if science and reason were enough to convince people about the effectiveness of an ordinary practice, why the

appeal to 'happy birthday'? And furthermore, what were all these public figures trying to achieve when pleading that we wash our hands 'like our life depends on it', or singing along 'Sweet Caroline' and 'I will survive'?

In this chapter, I explore magical thinking and its relation to secular rituals emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so, I first look at historical approaches of cleanliness and hygiene as practices imbued in symbolic meaning. Cleaning, washing, polishing, whitening, purifying and exploiting the magical powers of soap have been experiences deeply embedded in the imperial economy of domesticity and the colonial configuration of blackness as pollution and dirt. Bringing these racialised dynamics to light, I ask what happens to magical thinking in the post-imperial, Western, secular societies. Focusing on UK government's campaign 'Hands, Face, Space', I suggest that the popularisation of a science-based protection ceremony is an invitation to embrace not only scientific reason, but the magic of science too. I conclude the chapter with a psychoanalytic interrogation of magical thinking. I argue that instead of encouraging magical thinking in relation to scientific-based rituals, in the post-lockdown society we need to find ways of rekindling what the Hungarian anthropologist and psychoanalyst Géza Róheim calls the 'magic principle'; a non-psychotic form of magic that does not rely on magical rituals but on the anticipation of being looked after from others. Against the magical wish to 'wash our hands to happy birthday', I juxtapose a magical thinking that prompts us to place a demand for care on the external world. It is only through a decolonial approach to psychoanalysis that the psychosocial implications of care and the anticipation for a more caring society can be explored and pursued in the post-pandemic world.

Finally, I situate this study on the field of psychosocial studies for two reasons. Psychosocial studies acknowledge individual experience as a site where knowledge is generated in intellectual and embodied ways. As such psychosocial studies invite us to dethrone ourselves from the positions of the detached researcher looking at the effects of the pandemic from the position of an unscathed outsider, and instead reflect on the ways social phenomena affect us deeply, emotionally—how we become a 'meeting point of inner and outer forces' (Frosh, 2003, p. 1564). Secondly, this chapter is situated on the field of psychosocial studies to scrutinise so called 'scientific rituals' as manifestations of the need to rediscover magical

thinking. I draw on historical, social, and Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory to scrutinise the role of magical thinking as a repudiation of and a claim of power over reality. This disciplinary melange speaks to what Lisa Baraitser calls the ‘trans’ element of psychosocial studies (Baraitser, 2015), in the sense that the psychosocial do not eschew the boundaries of traditionally separate disciplines but is a writing from their margins and the points disciplinary traditions meet. The psychosocial is ‘transdisciplinary’ in the same sense the ‘trans’ body (of humans) of knowledge needs to be reinvented against a world where the trans desires, wishes and agency are unintelligible—perhaps then, being situated in the position of trans(disciplinarity) requires a bit of magical thinking too.

A Brief History of Cleanliness: Science and Hygiene

Almost every historical account about cleanliness begins with a similar admission: how infrequently soap and baths were in the past and how ordinary and necessary hygienic practices have become nowadays. While there is a common belief that cleanliness goes hand in hand with scientific developments and growing knowledge on the impact of germs, bacteria, dirt, pollution on public human health, this dramatic change from the ‘weekly bath to the daily shower’ did not occur unassisted from social, political and colonial ideologies (Ward, 2019). This is because historically the meaning of cleanliness has not been the same, but has fluctuated between signifiers of purity, respectability, and civilisation and most crucially whiteness. Cleanliness and hygiene are as ancient as most of the world’s religions. From the Turkish and Roman baths to Christian baptism rituals and to the washing of dead bodies, to be clean symbolised purification and sanctification necessary for religious faith. In English, the phrase ‘cleanliness is next to Godliness’ exposes this moral dimension: being clean equals being morally pure and closer to god, away from dirt and sin. However, these religious connotations are far from lost when we look at the modern history of cleanliness—namely, what it meant to be clean, how was cleanliness and hygiene taught and disseminated and what are the social, political, psychological and—to an extent—unconscious connotations embedded in technologies that deal with pollution and dirt. In this section, I focus on the meaning and symbolism of cleanliness through a historical angle and reflect on its links with scientific knowledge.

Soap and Racial Hygiene

Historically cleanliness did not always belong to the realm of the domestic. In the 19th century Britain, cleanliness was a public health matter related to the need for clean cities. The four cholera epidemics in London between 1820-1840 generated an emphasis to the 'new cleanliness' which was achieved through an amplification of opportunities for bathing of the workforce in washhouses and public baths. However, colonial ideology and fantasies of racial degeneration due to the low hygiene standards of Britain's 'great unwashed'—those living beyond the boundaries of society—galvanised the shift of cleanliness as a matter of national responsibility to a private affair of the 'hygienic citizen' (Ward, 2019, p. 183). In her magisterial work *Imperial Leather*, Ann McClintock links the emergence of the British Victorian, middle-class to a new culture of domesticity shaped by anxieties of maintaining social and domestic order as separate. This was achieved by the Victorian obsession with cleaning and polishing liminal objects, namely those that lie in the in-between of private and public spaces, such as 'doorknobs, windowsills, steps, pathways, flagstones, curtains and banisters'. (McClintock, 1995, p. 170) The segregation of the domestic and the public, depended on the naming of that which has no place in the Victorian, middle class household. In Victorian, middle-class domesticity telling apart order from disorder, dirt from cleanliness had an additional symbolic aspect; it assisted the management of boundaries either between public and private spaces, or between individuals, 'classes' and 'races' that were viewed as polluting, contaminating, or, inversely, purified, respectable and clean. This bipartite grammar shaped middle-class fantasies around whiteness and helped maintain a sense of rational control through categorisation.

At the epicentre of the 19th century efforts to make hygiene a private affair in Britain, lies soap as a commodity whose excessive qualities depend on both its material benefits and emotional appeals. Primarily addressed to working class and middle-class women soap manufacturers produced two different kinds of soap: toilet soap—an impeccable soap for beautification and bourgeois indulgence—and household soap for practical and everyday uses, assisting with the hard labour of removing dirt. Pears soap—one of the oldest soap brands made in an Oxford Street factory in London—was associated with 'the refinements of life', while on the other side of the Atlantic, Ivory soap was aligned with the 'leading values in middle-class domesticity' (Ward, 2019, p. 170). Aside from the marketing of soap to endorse class respectability, advertisers also exploited imperial fantasies through titillating

images of a racialised hygiene. The most iconic examples are Pears' soap posters showing young black children whose skin is washed off, whitened, cleansed.² Reflecting on the emotional appeal of soap in the culture of middle-class, white domesticity, historians have argued that soap became effectively 'a technology of social purification' that highlighted the superiority of whiteness (McClintock, 1995, p. 212; Ward, 2019). As a domestic product it carried within a civilising force of a racial ideology that linked whiteness to purity and cleanliness, whilst symbolically equating blackness with pollution and dirt. It was not until the 1910s and the deepening of the microbial understanding that soap was marketed for its sanitising qualities, protecting therefore, from illness (Ward, 2019, p. 173). This means that the racialised grammar associated with soap and cleanliness constitutes the ground which scientific reason on infectious germs replaces. This leaves us with a question: as scientific discourses become popularised and disseminated into the 20th century British public, do they undo the harm that the racialisation of dirt and pollutants have done, or do they exploit them?

The Science of Personal Hygiene

Microbes as the aetiology of disease became part of medical orthodoxy by the beginning of the 20th century (Ward, 2019, p. 180). The discovery that microbes can be killed by frequent hygiene and antiseptic practices (handwashing, chlorine washing) was a rather unremarkable moment in science. Yet the implications of this theory for domestic life and technologies of hygiene triggered a cleanliness and hygiene frenzy (Smith, 2007, p. 300; Ward, 2019, p. 180). In Britain modern hygiene practices were mostly disseminated through two main avenues: public education and volunteer advocates and philanthropists. The former consisted of an organised national initiative to document, educate and inspire principles of hygiene and cleanliness to schoolboys, resulting in the 'national school medical service'. Peter Ward suggests that while this effort was primarily concerned with preventing disease outbreaks (some of the findings were that children living in poor areas had not removed their clothes for six months), it also aimed at reinvigorating national sentiment, which was seen as racially deteriorating as a series of colonial losses in South Africa (Ward, 2019, p. 198). The dissemination of scientifically based hygiene practices therefore, contributed to the making

² According to post-colonial scholar Anandi Ramamurthy, this poster makes use of an old racist theme of a black boy washing himself white. As such, its potency lies on the ways it mobilised past technologies of racial discrimination in a manner that speaks to the contemporary anxieties of the white middle-class (Ramamurthy, 2003, p. 30)

of the working classes into the citizen of new cleanliness exposing the preventing and the ideological role of modern medical practice. As for the volunteers and the philanthropists who pursued this new vision, these were middle-class women devoted to the purification of the social order, and relied on 'proselytising techniques from Protestant evangelicals' (Ward, 2019, p. 185). Visiting working class women in their homes and equipping them with brooms and soaps the so-called volunteer 'educators' offered 'friendly advice' on how to perfect the routines of domestic cleaning (Ward, 2019, p. 186) and live up to this new 'heavy burden of responsibility' (Smith, 2007, p. 299). Nevertheless, despite being prompted by advancements in science and therefore having a basis in rational thinking, neither the hygiene rules nor their dissemination were exempt from middle-class, racialised ideology of contagion.

On the one hand, the hygiene rules were swelled up by fantasies around germs, as a miniscule, 'invisible enemy' (Smith, 2007, p. 299). The 'educators' offered clear and specific advice on how to purify the domestic space against this newly found threat:

'Laundry had to have ten minutes of boiling to kill germs (and vegetables only slightly less). Every kitchen saucepan and utensil had to be burnished and sterilized, every work surface cleaned off and disinfected daily, food cooled and covered with cloths to prevent germs from settling and breeding [...]' (Smith, 2007, p. 299)

Or consider this piece of advice from a French manual on bathing and prevention:

'[...]to prevent microbes from entering the body through wounds. Bathing offered the best defence: the ears and eyes as well as the face, hands, and feet should all be washed frequently. A hot bath for half an hour once a month was indispensable as well' (Ward, 2019, p. 182).

On the other hand, the arbitrary precision is reminiscent of a religious ritualism also expressed in the way in which they were disseminated—akin to a religious conversion. Contrary to the well-established triumph of science, secularism and reason over the magical, the religious and the irrational in modern Western thought, this history of hygiene practices exposes how technologies of prevention in Britain depend on irrational, racial anxieties and have been warded off through ritualised interpretations of science. Although the psychosocial perspective allows us to question that which goes 'beneath the surface' of things (Hoggett & Clarke, 2009, 2), it is worth noting that from the perspective of the actors such rituals are experienced as entirely devoid of symbolic meaning, confined to the unambiguous space of

reason (Douglas, 2001[1966]). In her seminal work *Purity and Danger*, the British anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that the abstraction of meaning from cleanliness was facilitated through the discovery of bacterial transmission (Douglas, 2001[1966], p. 36). For Douglas it is impossible to think of cleanliness as having to do with anything else than making something hygienic—therefore, to think of cleanliness as going beyond the field of reason. What this means is that reason conceals the symbolic connotations of cleanliness and at the same time, the potency of reason to efface anything that is or might be symbolic, irrational and excessive is exposed. With this thought in mind, in the next section, I ask how we can open up the symbolic dimension of contemporary hygiene practices which are nationally disseminated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Do such practices rekindle the imperial fantasies about civically hygienic citizens? To what extent the current injunctions for frequent handwashing engender an ideological, ritualistic character? And what this rekindled ritualism can tell us about the expectation that COVID-19 can be ‘washed away’?

‘Hands, Face, Space’: The Magification of Science

Reflecting on the place of rituals in the secular world Kathryn Lofton argues that the secular and the religious are not opposite. What discerns the two is that contrary to religion, in secularism rituals can be invented, performed, celebrated regardless of ancient traditions, theological doctrines and ritualist debates (Lofton, 2017). The decline of organised religion in the secular, she argues, is replaced by ‘invented’ secular rituals that rejoice at their detachment from the religious canon as nothing less than a genuine expression of ‘religious freedom’ (Lofton, 2017, p. 81). However, alerting us to the concealed theology of the secular world (Newman, 2019; Szeszynski, 2005), Lofton proposes that the place of the ritual in the secular, is not vacated either—instead it is expressed through the marketplace (Lofton, 2017, p. 64).³ Secular rituals such as Netflix binge-viewing, or intermittent fasting diets are reminiscent to ‘all-night worship services, or extreme forms of monastic discipline such as fasting’ (Lofton, 2017, p. 23). Secular religious freedom becomes synonymous with the

³ Although Lofton focuses primarily on the place of the ritual in American popular culture and consumerism, writing from a British perspective Bronislaw Szeszynski adds that the contemporary turn to nature, vegetarianism, holistic healing can be read as manifestations of a need to rediscover the repudiated role of sacredness and religion in the secular world (Szeszynski, 2005).

(unlimited and illusionary) potency that any ritual can be constructed and popularised in what she calls ‘spirituality as a platter’:

‘Individuals pick and choose, cut and paste, select and deposit side orders into online shopping baskets which then become their individuated religious amalgam. Guided by personal concern and informed by the process of social formation, individuals make what they want from a world of texts and practices. So much choice, so much self-invention: what’s not to celebrate?’ (Lofton, 2017, p. 198).

Keeping in mind how hygiene rituals seemingly draw on the scientific, but also appeal to the fantasy of racialised protection through purification, in this final section I ask what the contemporary appeals to the ‘magification’ of science do. Akin to commodity-based rituals, do contemporary science-based rituals encapsulate a magical dimension that tantalise reason and irrationality?

In September 2020, UK government released the winter COVID-19 campaign ‘Hands, Face, Space’ to alert people to the three basic principles of protection against COVID-19: washing hands, using a mask, and keeping a two meters distance from others in public and private spaces. Alongside the campaign’s NHS-blue square logo featuring the words ‘hands, face space’, a two minutes clip offers a step-by-step explanation of how each of the three proposed measures protect us from catching and transmitting coronavirus⁴. The clip features three ‘reconstructions of everyday environments’: two women chatting in an IKEA-style living room, a man shopping in what presumably looks like a supermarket or a foodbank aisle and two strangers conversing whilst sat, sufficiently far apart, on public benches. The first time we watch each scene, we are prompted to identify with either of these actors and their ordinary acts—it is a ‘you could be in this place’ sort of situation. The second time, however, each scene is lit with black light which allows us to witness the otherwise invisible droplets (aerosols) pouring outside of the actors’ mouths, landing on and therefore, contaminating surrounding objects and surfaces; mugs, phones, doorknobs, carpets, supermarket trolleys, other consumers, benches. The representation of the droplets is rather astonishing. The droplets hang from the speakers’ mouths and are either expectorated forward with force, or hover around their front bodies forming a light blue, magical--invisible to the naked eye--

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IGqADEyxxw>

cloud. It is against this cloud that masks and social distancing protect and these light blue particles that soap dissolves. The clip offers rational explanation of why following the three simple steps, delivered in a form of a memorable mantra ('hands, face, space') are enough to make one feel protected from catching coronavirus. Yet, not unlike the viral video of the nursery teacher explaining to preschool children how soap works using oil and pepper in a container of water, the government's official video also communicates the efficiency of the protective measures by constructing a visual narrative that is both governed by scientific principles, but also seems rather magical too.

Psychoanalysis, Magic, Reality

Against the 'Hands, Face, Space' campaign and the unspoken magical dimension of the government's mantra, I want to juxtapose some aspects of psychoanalysis as a practice, epistemology, and theory, who does not have its magic concealed. Contrary to other social sciences (and so-called hard sciences) psychoanalysis embraces the mysticism and irrationality of the natural phenomena it studies, as well as the 'mystical means' it deploys to access and understand the natural world (Frosh, 1997, p. 31). Psychoanalysis draws on marginalised, occult and irrational phenomena such as telepathy, possession, mesmerism, hauntings, unconscious transference to promote knowledge and insight. Although this has resulted in a relentless contestation of its status as a science, psychoanalysis gains greater scientific stature *because* it exposes that which escapes rational knowledge and challenges the sovereignty and agency of the civilised mind and the subject of science (Frosh, 1997; Roudinesco, 1999). In fact, psychoanalysis' analytical and epistemological force resides in its earnest engagement with the irrational, the excluded, the liminal and the obscure, as well as the ways in which it navigates the tension between what Whitebook calls the 'disenchantment' of the world of modern science and magic, hermeneutics and interpretation (Whitebook, 2002). What can psychoanalysis then—as a theory and an epistemology that aims at incorporating the irrational in its reasoning—tell us about the fragile tension between magical thinking and scientific thinking witnessed in the COVID-19 cleaning rituals discussed above?

As an 'out-and-out unbeliever' himself, (Gay, 2006, p. 526), Sigmund Freud set the tone for psychoanalysis' scepticism towards the meaning of rituals (religious and secular) in psychic

life. Freud believed that rituals reflect so-called 'infantile states' of mind keen on escaping reality rather than thinking about it. Such rituals would often include everyday adjustments, for example, folding clothes in a particular way, that patients would come up with to contain overwhelming feelings of anxiety. Although Freud recognised that religious rituals carried meaning linked to tradition and the history of religions, whereas obsessive acts were 'mere formalities [...] quite meaningless to us', he nonetheless claimed that from a psychoanalytic point of view they both shared a similar libidinal economy (Freud, 1907, p. 118). The ritual is effectively a compromise mechanism that resolves a conflict; in most cases the conflict between a forbidden idea and insufficient repression. Insufficient repression means that the awareness of the impulse (the temptation, the forbidden thought) causes terrifying anxiety and guilt. To ward off these feelings, the individual comes up with a specific habit whose practice is libidinally exchanged with the temptation. The drive finds an acceptable (for the individual) fulfilment in an arbitrary ritual, which, in turn, cannot be given up.

Freud also examined the links between magical thinking, rituals and their intimate links to infantile narcissism. Freud viewed magic as a 'a technique for dealing with the external world' attributed to feelings of omnipotence, megalomania and a 'belief in the thaumaturgic force of words' (Freud, 1914, p. 75). Contrary to the irrational dimension of the subject he was writing about, Freud's explanation of magical thinking is remarkably scientific. He explains that magical thinking demonstrates an inability to fully invest libidinal energy to the environment, which is witnessed in narcissistic states and results in a distorted view of the external world. While there is an original 'libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects', Freud argued that this investment in the environment resembles the way in which an 'amoeba related to the pseudopodia which it puts out' (Freud, 1914, p. 75). Magical thinking is narcissistic because it hangs or stretches between the subject and the external world in the same way amoeba's pseudopodia create the illusion of a reaching out. In his paper on the uncanny, Freud called magic a 'narcissistic overvaluation of [the subject's] own mental processes' (Freud, 1919, p. 240) which is characteristic of the primary narcissism discernible in children and so-called 'primitive people' and is thus associated with regressed states of mind. However, because Freud's theory is underpinned by evolutionary assumptions that regarded Western civilisation as the capstone of complex social transitioning from animism and religion to contemporary societies governed by reason (Freud, 1913), magic,

therefore, is not just a mechanism characteristic of regressed mental states. But it is one with racial connotations too, in the sense of a process that is primitive and unrefined and needs to be abandoned in favour of a firmer grasp of reality—a more mature form of narcissism.

Our acknowledgment of psychoanalysis' engagement with the irrational requires a careful treading across the colonial discourses and racial fantasies that shape its conceptualisation of psychic mechanisms (Brickman, 2003; Frosh, 2013; Khanna, 2003). While Freud's engagement with rituals and magic largely reproduces the binary between Western and non-Western epistemologies, as an anthropologically trained psychoanalyst and a Freudian enthusiast Géza Róheim offers a more decolonial view on magical thinking, which, I argue only deepens our understanding of what these states of mind can achieve. Róheim grounded his argument in vignettes from his fieldworks in Australia, Somalia, New Guinea (1928-1938) and the United States (1947) (Róheim, 1968). Drawing on magical practices in aboriginal cultures, Róheim expands Freud's understanding of magic, as not purely 'narcissistic', 'infantile' or a primitive wish-fulfilment, but magic as constitutive of thinking.

In his posthumously published work on *Magic and Schizophrenia* Róheim juxtaposes magic with schizophrenia to show that thinking depends on the ability to separate between thought and object. Extending Freud's theorisation of primary narcissism, Róheim argues that contrary to the narcissistic foreclosure of reality in psychosis, the separation between ego and object in magical thinking is temporary and reversible. In the schizophrenic mind words, things and thoughts coagulate. The internal and external realities become indistinguishable because the schizophrenic personality in their wish to control reality '[fails] to tolerate (or compensate for) the amount of tension involved in the separation from the mother' (Róheim, 1955, p. 195). Schizophrenia therefore represents the ultimate separation from reality, paradoxically because the psychic separation from the mother has not been achieved. Róheim describes this separation in two steps: a libidinal withdrawal from the environment *and* a 'failure to maintain the *link* that connects these incorporated objects with the environment' (Róheim, 1955, p. 170). Schizophrenia, thus resembles a state of 'fictional autarchy', which is akin to magic (Róheim, 1955, p. 170) —recall Freud and the 'thaumaturgic force of words'.

However, in magical thinking the world is experienced ‘*as if* it were governed by our wishes, drives or emotions’ (Róheim, 1955, p. 82, my emphasis). This is the point Freud misses when examining the role of animism in so-called primitive societies (Freud, 1913). The key here is the ability to experience the world through the ‘*as if*’ quality. Magic can only be possible when the separation from the object has been achieved and the object ‘exists in thinking’—the mother’s breast exists in thinking even when the mother is not physically there. When the internalised object exists internally, both separate and introjected, ‘there is [...] an attempt to return to the object *via* the image or in other words, *via* magic, which is an important component of thought’ (Róheim, 1955, p. 201). While for Freud this is a ‘narcissistic overvaluation’ of thought, for Róheim this imaginary anticipation of the fulfilment of our wishes is ‘the only way in which we can achieve something in reality’ (Róheim, 1955, p. 83). Contrary to Freud and his amoeba example, Róheim’s theorisation of magic does not depend on a pseudo-libidinal investment in the environment (akin to ‘pseudopodia’), but on a libidinal investment *proper* that propels the subject to exit the psychotic withdrawal from reality.

After Lockdown, Opening Up

In ‘COVIDeology in six parts’, Lacanian theorist Clint Burnham compares ‘handwashers’ to Lacan’s story about the jealous husband, whose jealousy is pathological even if his wife is actually cheating on him (Burnham, 2020). Even when there is a rampaging global pandemic, handwashing, ‘is still an obsessive behaviour’. This is because the act is not in response to a real fear, but to the subject’s need to ‘occlude desire’ (Burnham, 2020). For the obsessive, neurotic handwasher reality is not what motivates the compulsion, it might kick start it, but the reality is irrelevant to the act. The secular rituals like compulsive handwashing, singing and handwashing, germ-killing and so on perhaps reiterate the theme that the obsession is always about something else—like jealousy is, even if the wife *is* cheating. Echoing what Lofton calls ‘spirituality as a platter’, secular total religious freedom only amplifies the compulsion. Through Róheim’s theorisation of magical thinking, I have insinuated that there is another way outside of this narcissistic state of mind. Against the kind of thinking that frantically avoids reality, Róheim proposes the magic principle as a *subjection* to reality but also as an *anticipation* to be cared for and attended to. In fact, we could go as far as to argue that perhaps Róheim proposes that being cared for by the (m)other is *the only reason* why we reject a psychotic state of narcissistic fulfilment. Perhaps then, this is the hopeful point

we can take forward as we move from lockdown to the post-pandemic society—as a decolonial gesture as much as a reparative one: how to energise the magic principle, namely, how to move away from states of narcissistic foreclosure that ritualise prevention to the reactivation of our innate expectation to be looked after—by governments, institutions, social structures. In other words, what is at stake is how to substitute the need for a compulsion to escape from reality with an anticipation of being cared for by others.

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