

## **ARRANGEMENTS, SEMIOTIC LINKS AND EVALUATIONS: PURIFYING FAMILIAR ENVIRONMENTS OF COVID-19 AMONG SERBIA'S YOUNG PROFESSIONALS**

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Our research principally engages with the issue of encounters with COVID-19 within an everyday frame, underlining how the restoration of a “distorted” familiar environment occurs through gradual coping with such a mysterious non-human entity. The specific objective of our project was to discern how 20 young professionals from Belgrade (Serbia), whom we interviewed during the curfew, encountered, re-organized, and eventually re-settled into their common, everyday spaces and routines, while the virus was spreading in the background. Our examination first seeks to register how the distorted relationality of humans with a non-human entity – which the virus is – became distilled into everyday objectivity. More profoundly, we intended to seek understanding of what alternations the possibility of getting infected were associated with common, everyday arrangements, and how the actors pursued hygienic “purification” as a principal task. In this sense, we managed to unveil that – albeit this interplay with an invisible and rather mysterious non-human entity involved a number of confusing moments – the latter was ultimately stabilized within a specific evaluative and cognitive format that dictated the former’s actions. Being highly appreciative of domestic familiarity and intending to quite reflexively purify potentially contaminated zones and objects, our respondents also pursued a specific moral frame. In conclusion, we underline how these “purifying” actions were substantially guided by a desire to maintain the domestic order of familiarity and immediate care.

The starting premise of our research develops from a novel sensibility that is aligned with speculative developments in philosophy; specifically, object-oriented-ontology (hereafter: o-o-o) and the intention to register the gigantic

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life of objects and their vivid, mobile, and vital, actant-like efficacy. For the adherents of this movement, the primary interest shifts from the anthropocentric trends that are found in most modern philosophy to the detection of the robust life of objects more closely, and their relationship with each being, whether human or non-human, whose existence is formed exactly through concatenation with others. The genuine ontological enigma that o-o-o unveils is both a non-relational weaving among the objects that occurs without human intervention and knowledge, and the eventual merging of gigantic objects that stick together and evolve into a radically trans-local network of habitation – exactly what the 2020 pandemic managed to do. In relation to the existence of objects – understood as every way of being dependent on a number of other objects – o-o-o advocates underline that each object has a “surplus” that is inaccessible directly. A major dilemma then becomes how to access such a complicated reality, when a number of objects are hidden from the human gaze. To a certain extent, this theory appears as a rather convenient guideline for understanding an uncanny phenomenological situation in which many humans across the planet have found themselves in relation to their deep engagement with the pandemic. However, perceiving only the mutating relationality that emerged when the virus inhabited the zones in which the humans are engaged typically sparks an experiential puzzle for which o-o-o seems particularly insufficient for resolving, as it remains blind to the points of access to a trans-local reality that are formed in everyday sites when a concatenated network of objects finds a way in.

Our take on these issues starts from the concept of arrangement, understood as a domestic regime ruling a familiar environment. Arrangement here indicates a relational framework sustained through specific modalities of identity, order, and positionality between human and non-human elements in a domestic environment, also involving a certain format of apprehension and ethical frame that evolves into a nexus of practices. Moreover, arrangements such as homes represent an enmeshment established by relata that emerge from rather vivid settings. Arrangements can thus be considered ways of access organized through fluxes of organic fluids, the coding of materials, and the overall process of sensing the immediate environment, deposited upon the specific politics of beings that *in situ* define the spatial and temporal scope and distribution of their movement. Because each arrangement faces the problem of demarcation (that is, how to “communize” with other beings and elements recognized either as foreigners or intruders), the topic of hygiene here appears as a crucial practical operation. Its delicacy – particularly in terms of the 2020 pandemic – further involves a re-direction of theory towards the semiotic confusion of locating the invisible virus and the “surplus” reality it brings; that is, its only partially accessible qualities. This hygienic “purifying,” we assumed, was guided not only by a fear of being

contaminated, but also induced a rather vigilant mode of communication with the “intruder” who lacked referential stability. Accordingly, this distortion in the “regular” shape of familiar arrangements produced by such a viscous entity was distilled into delicate semiotic and evaluative operations of mutating the presence and the absence of the virus through shifts in the spatio-temporal nexus of hygiene and everyday practices. Ultimately, the purifying demarcation involves unique evaluative standards that involve a differentiation between the “good” that rules each arrangement. In other words, we assumed that actors also created an ethical apparatus which led their actions towards specific aims, and which developed around a judgmental frame which led to their departing from familiar arrangements in qualitative terms.

The methodological framework of our project was built upon a snowball strategy, involving finding 20 young professionals who were selected in such a manner as to expose the shift in their everyday lives that had been initiated by the pandemic. Most of them had relocated their work obligations to the home environment, and our intention in the interviews (which we conducted through platforms such as Skype during the very moments of the curfew in Serbia), included thoroughly examining the 1) zoning of home spaces and alternations of everyday practices, and 2) ways of coping and apprehending the risk of being infected with the virus.

Results largely indicate an abrupt distortion of everyday lives due to the non-human entity, which evoked confusion due to the lack of stable, cognitive references about the foreign object and eventually led to adaptation to the uncertain, mutating, and acting traits of the “other.” In most cases, we noted initial confusion that distorted familiar, domestic arrangements, after which the actors deployed different “devices” to cope with the invisible enemy: from exploring information on the performance of the virus to the micrological tracing of potentially infected areas in their homes and purifying them with disinfectant. More precisely, significant shifts in practices that encompassed the temporal and spatial conformity of arrangements were at first dictated by the presence of a “ghostly” object, before the former actors induced vigilant and reflective hygienic actions to solve the problem of demarcation. In this sense, the presence of the virus meant that the outdoors was comprehended as potentially risky territory. An entire hygienic scenario in all of the studied cases was grounded on recently produced references – such as official instructions about how to cope with the virus. This gradually evolved into the stabilized partition of demarcated areas in which there is no contamination, and those where the absent object becomes present.

All of the agencies working within the domestic regime developed a certain apprehension frame that also evolved into vigilant ethical work. Our findings

point once more to the issue of the evaluative background associated with specific domestic arrangements as different from other regimes of engagement. Thus, this “pandemic deontology” was deposited on a specific evaluative standard that involved a tense encounter with assumed “aberrations” that were perceived as capable of endangering the familiar environment – which included the excessive hoarding of goods, improper wearing of masks, or a lack of responsibility for others. Namely, our respondents multiply underlined that the motive for pursuing official measures against the spread specifically came from domestic attachments and familiar relationships. Against a general, civic deontology, we conclude that this purifying politics is rather narrow in scope and guided by different moral and cognitive frameworks in which actors indulged themselves in terms of situated, materialized endeavors in order to resolve the basic tension: how to protect and solidify familiar environments by drawing upon an ethical corpus of “taking care of the family.”