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Reading Plague Images: Visual Literacy in the History Classroom

By Katherina Fostano

Rationale and Overview

In 2016 Peter Felten, Director of the Center for Advancement of Teaching and Learning at Elon University, wrote, “Our students live in a highly visual world, where images are fundamental in shaping their understandings of history before they ever enter our classrooms.” This observation prompted me to create a series of exercises that introduce students to general visual literacy skills in the History classroom. These exercises aim to help students use visual sources to make evidence-based interpretations of the past with rigor and efficacy. In this presentation, I focused on images of past plagues since the recent proliferation of plague-related memes, GIFs, and images reproduced on the web has made evident the critical role that images play in shaping students’ interpretation of historical events in today’s digital world. Over the last eight months, several articles have been published about past plagues and their relation to COVID-19. Many of them enlisting plague images to help reconstruct, interpret, and retell historical narratives in an engaging, visceral, and relatable way. Many of these articles use images as visual aids to help modern audiences envision the disease’s virulent nature and its devastating consequences on the human experience. However, most of these images only depict death or dying victims and communicate an overall feeling of hopelessness, which presents a one-sided interpretation of the past. Plague images have a remarkably rich iconography, and accurate readings of these images could deepen students’ understanding of the historical past.

These exercises aim to build students’ ability to construct an evidence-based historical interpretation of visual images by 1) getting students to slow down and just look at images for a sustained period of time to help them pay close attention to details, 2) getting students to read plague images with an informed understanding of the history and iconography in order to help them understand the function of images in historical research and help them consider images as important visual sources, and 3) introducing students to misreadings of plague images to underscore the critical role that visual sources play in shaping the general public’s understanding of the past.

These exercises were also designed to be facilitated in an introductory history course for undergraduate students, though they can easily be implemented in a secondary history course. The general and transferable skills that they help students develop can be applied broadly.

Furthermore, these exercises are meant to be done together to help students fully develop the skills needed to read visual sources.

Objectives: This presentation's overall goal is to underscore the critical role that images play in the reconstruction of history in today's digital information age and help instructors facilitate general visual literacy skills in the History classroom.

Resources and Materials

Preliminary Reading:

- Aberth, John. *The Black Death The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents*, Chapter 7: The Artistic Response (pp. 160-179).
<https://www.worldcat.org/title/black-death-the-great-mortality-of-1348-1350-a-brief-history-with-documents/oclc/961063054?referer=di&ht=edition>
- Boeckl, Christine M., 2000. *Images of plague and pestilence: iconography and iconology*. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press.
https://www.worldcat.org/title/images-of-plague-and-pestilence-iconography-and-iconology/oclc/237400237&referer=brief_results
 - Chapter 1: Medical Aspects of Bubonic Plague and *Yersinia pestis* Infection
 - Chapter 3: Visual Sources of Plague Iconography

Additional Readings:

The following examples of misreading visual sources related to plague can help instructors underscore the importance of teaching students how to think critically about historical images on the web.

NPR, "Iconic Plague Images Are Often Not What They Seem"

https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/08/18/542435991/those-iconic-images-of-the-plague-thats-not-the-plague*

Monica Green, Kathleen Walker-Meikle, Wolfgang Muller, "Diagnosis of a 'Plague' Image: a Digital Cautionary Tale," in Special Issue *The Medieval Globe*, "Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death." 2014: 9-26. **

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/tmg/vol1/iss1/13/>

Exercises and Assignments

First Exercise: Reading Plague Images

(Before the first assignment, students should read some introductory reading about bubonic plague and images during this time, such as Aberth's Chapter 7: The Artistic Response or Boeckl Chapter 1: Medical Aspects of Bubonic Plague and *Yersinia pestis* Infection)

Students will be doing a preliminary close reading of one or all of the following visual sources associated with plague. For this exercise, show students the images without any identifying information or caption. Ask students to spend five minutes looking at the images, paying close attention to the narrative or story being depicted and to the figures in the scene. After the first five minutes, ask them to write down five things they notice about the images and two lingering questions about what they see. Next, introduce the guiding questions below and ask the students to discuss them with their classmates. Encourage students to use their notes to support any of their answers to these questions. They are also free to introduce their questions here.

Suggested Images (these images were selected from the reading):



Left: Josse Lieferinxe, *Saint Sebastian Interceding for the Plague Stricken*, Oil on wood, 1497-1499.

<https://art.thewalters.org/detail/6193/saint-sebastian-interceding-for-the-plague-stricken/>

Right: *Detail of Plague Scene*, unknown artist, before c.1518. Fresco, St. Sebastian's Chapel, Lanslevillard, Savoie.

https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae_ID=43307

Bottom: Bernt Notke: *Surmatants* (Totentanz) from St. Nicholas' Church, Tallinn, end of 15th century (today in the Art Museum of

Estonia)https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bernt_Notke_Danse_Macabre.jpg#/media/File:Bernt_Notke_Danse_Macabre.jpg

Guiding Questions:

- What is happening in the image, what is the narrative, what seems to be the subject matter (if any)?
- Do you recognize any significant interactions embedded in the image? Can you recognize any of the figures in the images? Who are the principal figures here? Can you identify any biblical or historical figures?
- Can you tell who the intended audience was?

Short Assignment: Write down four “Keywords” that can help you describe these visual sources to others. Write a short descriptive text about one or two of the images using only what you see and can recognize from your preliminary reading of the image (300 words max). Focus on what you see in the image and what you recognize; focus on the story and the figures. Use your keywords or the five things you noticed during the exercise to support any interpretation made.

Learning objective: By the end of this assignment, students will be able to conduct a preliminary visual analysis of the sources listed below. This exercise encourages students to do a close reading of the sources by helping them pay close attention to the visual context. Students will be able to write about what they see and use what they see to justify their inferences about the source.

Second Exercise: Reading Visual Sources

(Before this exercise, students should read Boeckl Chapter 3: Visual Sources of Plague Iconography)

In this exercise, introduce the title of the source and any other identification provided by the website. Ask students to note the following; date of creation, creation location, creator, and the original format or medium of the image. Now, introduce the guiding questions and ask the students to discuss them in groups. As they discuss these questions, ask them to consider the Boeckl reading.

Guiding Questions:

- What does the image identification tell us about the source that you didn't already know?
- Given what you know about plague and the different outbreaks of plague throughout history, are these images directly associated with a particular outbreak?
- Do you recognize any prominent features or gestures that specifically denote bubonic plague?
- Can you recognize any distinctive plague iconography in either of the works?
- What do these visual sources tell you about this time you didn't already know from other primary textual sources?

Short Assignment: Students will write a brief explanation about what the images tell them about the time they were created; why is the image historically significant? Be specific and use direct examples from the images and from the readings and other textual primary sources you have read through the class (250 max).

Learning objective: By the end of this exercise, students will be able to understand what constitutes evidence of historical context and how it is used to support an argument or interpretation of a visual source. Students will also be able to recognize how the meaning of a source may be undetermined, lost, destroyed, changed, or revised.

Final Exercise: Evidence-based Interpretation of Visual Sources

For this exercise, let the students have a few minutes to familiarize themselves with the following Twitter thread about a misreading of a plague-related visual source.

<https://twitter.com/monicaMedHist/status/880851932402798592> After students spend a few minutes reading the revised NPR article, introduce them to the questions provided below. Ask students to discuss the Twitter thread and the NPR revision amongst themselves. Ask them where they think the article went wrong in its use of images as visual sources. Afterward, ask the students to read the full Green article and choose four keywords that could have helped the NPR reporter understand the context of the *Omne bonum*. Encourage students to repeat the first two exercises before they write up their keywords.

Guiding Questions:

- Do you think the NPR reporter failed to make an evidence-based interpretation of the images, how, and why? Does it matter?
- Why do you think the British Library gave an incorrect description of the image?
- What considerations should have been taken into account by the NPR reporter before reproducing said image?
- How may this misreading of a visual source impact the public's understanding of the past?

Final Assignment: Ask students to use the skills developed during the first two exercises to write up a new evidence-based interpretation of the following mislabeled image.

How would they have described and interpreted the image if they had to re-publish this in the British Library Website.

Learning objective: To help instructors underscore the important role that images play in the reconstruction of history in the digital age and to help students see why visual and information literacy matters. Also, to show students how these skills help them develop into critical consumers of visual and historical information on the web.