



Red Alerts: A Reflective Assemblage

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
UNMASKING THE RED
DEATH

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LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the resonances between Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death: A Fantasy” (1842) and our contemporary moment and pandemic context by drawing this story’s central deployment of the colour red into relation with the “red alerts” of twenty-first-century crises. I place “The Masque of the Red Death” in connection with the UK government’s COVID-19 alert level chart, in which red announces the most serious level of risk, as well as the US Homeland Security Advisory System chart produced following 9/11, which the UK alert chart closely resembles. Marshalling Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda’s work on the cultural meanings tied to the colour red, and Brian Massumi’s reflections on the US Homeland Security Advisory System and contemporary power, politics, and affect, I discuss how the red alerts assembled in this article are each infused with stress, fear and uncertainty and subtended by exclusions and erosions of care.

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Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death: A Fantasy" (1842) tells the story of Prince Prospero's luxurious retreat from a devastating plague. Inviting a group of wealthy aristocrats to accompany him, the prince withdraws into his castellated abbey to wait out the threat, while disease decimates the lives of the inhabitants beyond the abbey's fortified walls. Proclaiming it "folly to grieve, or to think" in response to disease, the prince and his friends devote their quarantine to "pleasure" and revelry (Poe, 300). "Five or six months" after the prince's quarantine, during a "magnificent" masked ball, the Red Death, assuming an illusory human form, finds its way into the abbey (Poe, 300). The privileged act of retreat thus becomes a *danse macabre*.

Reading Poe's story in tandem with the current public health crisis unfolding around Covid-19, many points of resonance emerge. Poe's invocation of the pronounced relationship between life expectancy and the uneven distribution of wealth continues into our present: the castellated abbey brings to mind the property and resources available to the rich during times of crisis, while others are left without protection. The titular masque of Poe's tale can also be read in relation and contradistinction to the present issues around protective mask wearing. Within Poe's story, the masque is a luxurious performative item, donned as costume. This jars with the present-day context of Covid-19 mask usage, where masks have become central to a range of political and social problems, including the lack of mask availability for hospital workers and others in positions of heightened risk; racist attacks against people of East Asian heritage wearing masks in the West; and "anti-masker" demonstrations where mask wearing is equated with an attack on individual liberty.

While I return to some of these themes, my main focus in what follows is another example of Poe's convergence with the contemporary, one that occurs on the levels of colour codes and affect. I shall argue that Poe's vivid colour scheme, and particularly his use of red, gains new inflections when we read his story alongside the political image production circulated in relation to twenty-first-century crises. Moving through an assemblage of "red alerts", I position Poe's red in relation to the colour scheme employed in the UK government's coronavirus alert chart, first appearing in May 2020, a chart that assumed a similar form to the US Homeland Security Advisory System chart produced following 9/11. While Poe's red is not deployed as a strategy to manage the population—the prince's retreat is an abandonment of the population—some similar meanings emerge between Poe's red and the red used in contemporary governmental alert charts. Drawing on Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda's work on the cultural meanings tied to the colour red, and marshalling the reflections of Brian Massumi on the aesthetics and politics of government image production, I discuss how the red alerts assembled here are infused with stress, fear and uncertainty and subtended by exclusions and erosions of care. In accordance with the brief of this special issue, then, I am less invested in unpacking the original meanings embedded in Poe's tale than I am in thinking through the experience of reading Poe in relation to the political image culture of twenty-first-century emergency.

The following reflections were written relatively early in the pandemic, at the start of summer 2020. At that time, the influence that the UK government's coronavirus alert chart would wield was undetermined. Since writing this article, this chart receded from view as regional tiers were put into place, and then made a return in the press as the national lockdown commenced again towards the end of 2020. The chart became one of a number of governmental measures ushered out as a population management strategy during the pandemic and, though it never came to assume the prominence it might have, the wider meanings and impressions it communicated have long-lasting resonance. I have added some further contextual information to give a broader sense of how the pandemic management unfolded in the UK context. But, apart from these supplements, I have taken the decision to allow the article to preserve my initial impressions at the time of its writing. In doing so, it is my hope that this piece communicates something of the uncertainty of that moment—and, indeed, of the pandemic context more broadly: the sense of being enmeshed in an unfolding contemporary landscape where governmental management strategies, and their futures, are mutable.

Across "The Masque of the Red Death", Poe's sentences are saturated with vibrant descriptions of monochromatic colours. Prince Prospero, who, readers are told, has a "fine eye for colours and effects" and "disregarded the *decora* of mere fashion", designs his castellated abbey in a "bold and fiery" manner, to the effect that the structure "glow[s] with barbaric lustre" (Poe, 301). His

abbey is divided into seven rooms, each decorated in a different unified hue. From east to west, the rooms are blue, purple, green, orange, white and violet respectively, and the final chamber is covered in black velvet drapes and punctuated by the deep scarlet tone spilling through a Gothic stained-glass window with “blood-tinted panes” (Poe, 301). As Poe describes it, this final chamber “was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the countenances of those who entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all” (301). While the final room forms part of a wider spatial landscape of distraction and revelry, the description of the red window as “blood-tinted” foreshadows the climactic connection between this seventh chamber and the disease announced in the title. The window serves as a red alert—an alert that gains its meaning somewhat belatedly, as the direction of the story becomes clear—reflecting as it does the central monochrome that haunts the tale from the start.

In the first sentences of the story, we learn that the “red death” is named as such because “blood” was the “Avatar” and “seal” of this disease: “the redness and the horror of blood” (Poe, 299). Red is associated with further corporeal signs of disease, which work as omens of rapid death (readers are informed that death occurs within thirty minutes of the contraction of the illness). Moreover, we are told that the appearance of red on the body catalyses social ostracisation and abandonment for fear of contagion. Poe relates: “there were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men” (299).

When, as the clock strikes midnight during the fated masquerade, the mysterious “stranger” appears inside the abbey walls, this figure carries the red corporeal markers described in the opening sentences. The stranger is “shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave”, his mask resembles the face of a “stiffened corpse”, and “his vesture was dabbled in blood—and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror” (Poe, 303). Readers are told that the eccentric prince and his guests—“the mad revellers”—would have enjoyed this irreverent costume were it not for the red stains, which, in their view, took the (assumed) joke one step too far, catalysing outrage and fear. The stranger’s red ends the distracted revelry linked to the other colours of the abbey—colours that divert our attention away from the red of the story’s opening lines. The stranger’s red also undercuts the imagined immunitary protection offered by the abbey, its iron gates and enforced bolts. One of several recurrent meanings affixed to red in cultural history is the idea of the corporeal vulnerability provoked by life’s exposure to death (see Menely and Ronda on blood, 25). This is implied at the close of Poe’s tale: everyone bleeds and, while the abbey delays this fate, it does not prevent it.

Poe’s use of colour has long intrigued critics. The abbey’s decoration has inspired varying, even clashing, interpretations. Some critics contend that colour primarily induces discord in “The Masque”, which may contribute to the text’s “aesthetic chaos” and excess, but is otherwise not bound up in the production of literary meaning.¹ Other critics advance claims about the different connotations embedded in Poe’s colour scheme, connecting the colours of the abbey rooms to an unfolding existential passage from birth to death, and exploring additional meanings tied to specific colours, such as the relation between purple and royalty (Zimmerman, “The Puzzle of the Colour Symbolism” 68). The black and red colour scheme of the seventh room has also yielded differing interpretations. Brett Zimmerman suggests that Poe’s use of “red with black” evokes “infernal love, egotism, hatred, all the passions of degraded man, possibly even damnation” (“The Puzzle of the Colour Symbolism” 69).² Other scholars have read the colour scheme of the seventh room in relation to slavery and racism in the antebellum South, pointing to Poe’s problematic racial anxieties. Paul Haspel contends, for instance, that “black and red emerge as the colours of danger, just as the white Southern elite of antebellum times

1 Eric du Plessis argues, for instance, that Poe’s “desire to represent aesthetic chaos and disorder leads him to choose a fittingly aberrant colour distribution” that prioritises violent clashes rather than painterly harmonies, and he concludes that Poe’s literary palette is “a carefully orchestrated masterpiece of discord” (41–42).

2 Elsewhere, Zimmerman has linked Poe’s use of black in this final room to the *vanitas* tradition in painting (“Such as I Have Painted”).

are known to have feared any overt reminder of the omnipresent threat of the red blood that might be spilled by black revolution” (56).³

Here, I am concerned with red’s function as an alert signal, with the specific affects red alerts catalyse in the twenty-first century and how these affects relate to contemporary governance, crisis, and inequality. Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda (2013) have highlighted red’s relationship to warnings and perceived “extremes” in different contexts. Noting that “red appears at the longest wavelengths of the visible spectrum of light and is considered the most acutely noticeable colour to those mammals and birds capable of perceiving it”, they point out that “on our verdant, terraqueous earth, green and blue are the hues of contexts, enveloping atmospheres, whereas red, in most natural environments, signals disturbance and rupture [...] much as a stop sign warns of danger” (Menely and Ronda 24). In political culture, Menely and Ronda enumerate red’s association with different types of political “radicalism”, “whether republican, anarchist, or socialist” (24–25). Though they do not mention it, in the context of twenty-first-century emergency red assumes a major new meaning in its link to terrorism through the US Homeland Security Advisory System alert chart. Finally, Menely and Ronda note how, across these different meanings, red has frequently served to bring into focus threats that are invisible: “because of its vividness, red is often the sign of what remains otherwise unseen: the absent cause, the hidden poison, the underground resistance. It signifies in extremis, borders and their rupture, consolidating but also interpreting the symbolic order” (24–25). In Poe’s tale, the masked figure carrying the red stains of disease makes visible, in human form, an otherwise invisible danger in the abbey walls—a danger that, as Poe criticism makes clear, has several different meanings, from the epidemiological to the racist. These ideas of “invisible threats” and visions of “troubled” or “ruptured” borders also infuse twenty-first-century red alerts.

To mobilise a term employed frequently during the Covid-19 crisis that makes use of the war-like analogies common to political discussions of disease, the UK government’s early coronavirus alert chart deploys monochromes to bring visibility to an “invisible enemy”.⁴ Upon publication, the chart had several different iterations, each with varying amounts of written information, but in all cases it was comprised of five colour blocks corresponding to five alert levels (see Figure 1). While the progression of colours does not coincide exactly with the progression of colours in Poe’s abbey, there is some overlap. The coronavirus alert chart starts with green, at the lowest level, moves through to orange, which it connects to a more serious risk of contagion,

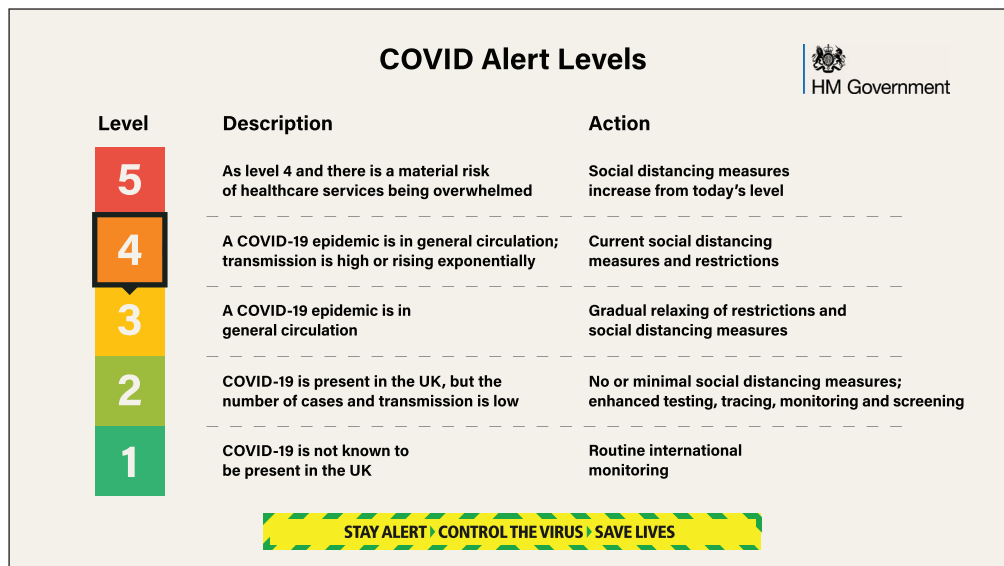


Figure 1 UK Government Coronavirus Alert Chart. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

³ Making particular reference to the Liberty Bell, Haspel’s essay on “The Masque” argues that Poe’s tale, “with its pervasive motif of a clock whose bell tolls loudly and interrupts the revels of Prince Prospero, and with its final image of an apocalyptic force that overwhelms and brings down all of the rich and powerful people of an entire society, expresses Poe’s fears for the future of the American South” (46–47). Joan Dayan avers that the use of blood in Poe can be read in relation to the racist obsession with the purity of blood in the antebellum South (417).

⁴ Among other notable writers, Susan Sontag, in her books on cancer (1978) and the AIDS pandemic (1989), highlights the militaristic lens through which infection and disease are so often viewed. The relationship between the coronavirus alert level chart and the US Homeland Security Advisory System reveals this convergence on the level of visual culture.

and finally arrives at red at level five. If, as some critics have suggested (see Zimmerman, “The Puzzle of the Colour Symbolism”), Poe’s colour scheme indexes an existential passage, the UK government’s image production also plays on such chromatic associations, in that green is a colour often tied to early life, orange to later life (the “autumn” of one’s existence) (Zimmerman 65–66), and red to bodily disease, vulnerability and danger (Zimmerman; Menely and Ronda).

The visual form of the early UK coronavirus alert chart is immediately familiar to us. We know it from another prominent alert chart produced in relation to a different state of emergency: the War on Terror. In March 2002, the Bush government’s Homeland Security office introduced an Advisory System chart (now no longer in use) as a mechanism through which to communicate the likelihood of a terrorist attack to the population (Figure 2). This Advisory System chart similarly links monochromatic colour blocks to five levels of risk, moving from green (the lowest threat level), through to blue, yellow, orange, and, finally, red. As Brian Massumi notes, the US population hovered between orange and yellow following the chart’s publication, to the effect that “life [...] restlessly settled, to all appearances permanently, on the red-ward end of the spectrum, the blue-greens of tranquillity a thing of the past [...] Insecurity, the spectrum says, is the new normal” (171). In his perceptive analysis of the chart, Massumi describes it as an instrument through which affect could be shaped by monochromatic “cues”. For Massumi, the chart connected the government “directly” with “each individual’s nervous system”: through “leaps between colour levels”, he notes, the population “register[ed]” “quantum shifts” in national “discomfiture” (171–72). He argues that the chart functioned by “address[ing] the population immediately, at a pre-subjective level: at the level of bodily predisposition or tendency [...]” (172). As this description evokes, for Massumi (2015) the alert system did not facilitate the production and interpretation of informational “content” but worked instead through a production of affect that was felt in the body and that had uncertain consequences.



Figure 2 Homeland Security Advisory System chart.

In Poe’s tale, red, as it is deployed in relation to the masked figure, is entangled with foreboding sensations, including “terror”, a term repeated several times. The story was of course written

at a time when “terror” did not have the meaning it has assumed in the twenty-first century, being, in Poe (like “horror” and “disgust” [304]), bound up instead with the fear animating Gothic literary aesthetics. Yet this combination of red and terror, when we read it today, amplifies the sense of the story’s resonance with the signs and affects of contemporary states of emergency. The “insecurity” and “fear” stoked by the alert chart that Massumi describes (171) occurred in tandem with a range of political and militaristic acts undertaken in the name of security in the broader context of the War on Terror. While the chart distributed mass fear, airport and border security, for instance, were ramped up. As we know, the intertwining of fear and security in the War on Terror had racialised consequences, from racial profiling and islamophobia to militaristic invasion. An interplay of insecurity and securitisation is also at work in Poe’s fortified abbey and, as mentioned, racism from a different US historical context similarly enters into Poe’s deployment of red in the abbey.

The general condition of fear and nervousness that Massumi ties to the Advisory System alert chart has particular links with temporality. Massumi posits that contemporary politics repeatedly appeal to an “uncertain” future threat to the effect that the (imagined, anticipated) future constantly looms over and shapes the present and its affective landscape.⁵ In differing ways, the future also hovers over the red alerts of Poe’s story and the UK coronavirus chart. In Poe’s tale, the clock chimes loudly each hour as the masquerade moves from room to room, momentarily pausing the festivities due to the trepidation felt with the marking of time. While most courtiers have avoided the seventh room containing the red alert (in the form of the red panes that echo the monochromatic disease), readers have the sense from early in the story that this room will be the future destination of the tale, given how the festivities progress westwards.

In the case of the coronavirus red alert, the temporality at play is twofold. On the one hand, the red of stage five is infused with the anticipatory fears that have animated the recent past. The chart, through its choice of form, clearly taps into the vein of fear associated with the post-9/11 Advisory System chart, and the fear announced by red is also amplified by “real” and anticipated fears linked to other pandemics. Massumi characterises speculations about pandemics as part of the anticipatory dynamic of twenty-first-century power, noting how “human-adapted avian flu”, as it was framed in the media, was “one of many non-existent entities that has come from the future to fill our present with menace” (189). He adds that, in the present age, “even if a clear and present danger materialises [...] it is still not over. There is always the nagging potential of the next after being even worse, and of a still worse next again after that” (189). In the summer of 2020, the much-discussed looming possibility of a second wave of Covid-19 in the winter, made more likely by crises in public health governance, animated our perception of the alert chart.

Massumi’s description of the US Advisory System chart emphasises how politics works by channelling affects, as mentioned. Marshalling this observation in her artistic and essayistic responses to the chart, including her evocative installation *Red Alert* (2007), Hito Steyerl (2007) perceives this affective governance as symptomatic of a broader representational lack within contemporary politics.⁶ Steyerl notes that the historical monochrome tradition in painting spoke to a crisis of aesthetic representation, and posits: “does the appearance of the political monochrome, almost a century later, not point out a similar ‘crisis of representation’ in politics?” (n.p.). Representational crises, in the form of exclusions, also haunt Poe’s text, albeit in a distinct way. In “The Masque”, only the privileged are “counted”; those left beyond the abbey walls remain, very literally, uncounted, abandoned, and left to die in what Steyerl has referred to, in relation to the contemporary context, as a space that “[drops] out of the frame”, the “blind spot of the politics of feeling” (n.p.).

5 Massumi states: “threat is from the future. It is what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined. Its nature is open-ended [...] The uncertainty of the potential next is never consumed in any given event. There is always a remainder of uncertainty, an unconsummated surplus of danger. The present is shadowed by a remaindered surplus of indeterminate potential for a next event running forward back to the future, self-renewing” (Massumi 189). Similarly, he writes: “Fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the non-existent, loomingly present as the *affective fact* of the matter” (Massumi, 191).

6 In Bollington, “Towards A New Model”, I discuss Steyerl’s brief deployment of the US Advisory Chart in her film *Lovely Andrea* (2007) as well as her abstract work *Red Alert* (2007) as part of a wider analysis of the specificities of the politics and aesthetics of Steyerl’s broaching of conflict images. On Steyerl’s response to the red of the Advisory Chart in her essays and in *Red Alert* see also Demos, *The Migrant Image*.

Despite the fact that the US Advisory System chart's publication was bound up in the government's desire to present an impression of management and clarity, a common criticism of it was that the different alert levels contained no meaningful information. As Massumi puts it, the alerts "remain[ed] vague as to the source, nature, and location of the threat" and "bore precious little content. They were signals without signification" (172). The UK coronavirus alert level chart could certainly be accused of vagueness. While the different iterations of this chart may provide more information than the Advisory System chart, much is still left unsaid and unclear. The early coronavirus chart didn't tell us about regional differences in infection rates and hospital capacity, for example—something that would be communicated in different ways as the government transitioned towards a management system comprised of regional "tiers" in the months to follow; a decision that would bring a further set of issues. Nor does the chart tell us much about the exact nature of the "lockdown" and "distancing" proposed, and it is animated by indefinite terms such as "likely". As per Massumi's comments on the US Advisory System chart, the early UK chart relies on the relationship between monochromes and affective responses, the equation of red with fear. Supplementing the monochromes on the coronavirus alert level chart is the imperative to "stay alert" (stamped beneath the alert levels), a highly charged but unclear slogan: we are implored to keep ourselves in a constant state of heightened awareness, but precisely what we should be "alert" to is unspecified. But it is not primarily through vagueness that uncertainty is produced in the case of the coronavirus alert chart. The uncertainty stems from the coupling of fear with an eroded trust in governance.

While, as Massumi and others have noted, a major problem of War on Terror governance are destructive "pre-emptive" responses to uncertain threats,⁷ in the context of Covid-19 the UK (and US) government's early response was reluctant, piecemeal, and insufficient. The UK's initial pursuit of "herd immunity" provides an early example of the lack of care displayed for the most vulnerable, those lives which, for reasons of health and structural inequality, would come under greatest risk if circuits of contagion were permitted to continue unchecked. If we return to the coronavirus alert chart, we see that the red alert is linked to the risk of the health service being overwhelmed—a lack of available healthcare is posited as the greatest threat to the population—but this warning sign exists in tandem with our knowledge of the government's steady dismantling of the NHS, an action that has, in turn, amplified the likelihood of the very future possibility the chart announces. The lack of care found in Poe's story—the privileged revellers' feeling that "the external world could take care of itself" (300)—finds echoes in UK governance. The red alert of the coronavirus chart drums up uncertainty because our fears find no reassurances.

When we read Poe's story today, its use of red powerfully resonates with governmental image production in twenty-first-century crises. This is one of the ways in which the story continues to grip us, to feel relevant to our present. The red alerts I have assembled in this article are commonly infused with stress, fear and uncertainty and intermeshed with exclusion and a lack of care (or forms of care that are unevenly distributed). Steyerl proposes that one strategy for changing the politics of the present would be to replace existing monochromatic affects with others: if red catalyses fear, as Massumi suggests, then perhaps by screening other colours we can provoke different feelings and responses (n.p.), responses which, as T. J. Demos adds in his engagement with Steyerl's work, should be linked to *inter alia* "social justice and economic and political equality" (89).

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⁷ See Massumi, especially chapter 1, for an extensive discussion of pre-emption. Says Massumi, *inter alia*: "Preemption is far more than a specific military doctrine of a particular administration. It can be plausibly argued that pre-emption is an *operative logic of power* defining a political epoch in as infinitely space-filling and insidiously infiltrating a way as the logic of 'deterrence' defined the Cold War era" (5).

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