

Introduction

Pandemics in the Western Literature and Culture (20th–21st centuries)

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Over time outbreaks of infectious diseases have ravaged humanity and sometimes even changed the course of history. Pandemics are massive outbreaks of common or emergent contagious diseases, such as the Black Death, leprosy, the Spanish Flu, Ebola, HIV/AIDS, or the worldwide spread now Covid-19. The current pandemic situation has had a noticeable impact on daily life across the globe, and is expected to have variable consequences for future societies. In other words, as Snowden argues, infectious diseases “are as important to understanding societal development as economic crises, wars, revolutions, and demographic change” (Snowden 2019: 15). Epidemics and pandemics have helped us to shape our cultural values and our political practices. Their impact can be examined not only in terms of individual life, but also in terms of religion, the arts and modern medicine.

Literature has represented communities suffering from contagion since ancient times. Beginning with Homer’s *Iliad*, which starts with a reference to a plague striking the Greek army at Troy, there are numerous examples of contagion fables (plagues, epidemics, infectious diseases, etc.) in the European literary canon. Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, written in the late 1340s and early 1350s, Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) and Albert Camus’ *La Peste* (1947) are among the most outstanding examples. Pandemics have been depicted in various literary genres such as poetry, prose, theatrical plays, biography, memoir, autobiography, letters, fable etc., and span a great range of non-literary texts as well. In this sense, each pandemic narration conveys knowledge and has its own set of figurations (Charon 2006: 9).

This issue aims to contribute to the study of pandemic poetics in Western literary texts of the 20th and 21st centuries as well as enrich our critical discussion about contemporary pandemics. Pandemics are represented as life patterns, either as phenomena or metaphors of specific individuals or social situations. Contagion can be broadly characterised as any kind of influence that threatens the agentic control of our health, behaviour, emotions and

social bonds. Elizabeth Outka's study of the depictions of pandemic outbreaks in modernist literature outlines precisely the difficulties of their representation. The representation task is further complicated due to the inherent tension between the way human factors are involved in the virus spreading and how it is nevertheless perceived as a nonhuman agentless threat (Outka 2020: 30).

A great deal of concern is about the rhetoric of contagion. During the 19th century, metaphors of contagion, which Cecil Helman terms "germinism", prevailed as "a way of talking, thinking – a set of beliefs, even a folk religion". Christensen expresses the view that "rational liberal thinking possesses no power to guide behaviour or the course of events; the only power is that of instincts and contagious forces" (2005: 283). Moreover, as Susan Sontag has pointed out in *Illness as Metaphor*, epidemic diseases are never merely a medical fact, nor is contagion only literal. She traced disease's metaphorical usages, which both shame and blame the affected person and how "feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched with meanings) is projected onto the world" (Sontag 1978: 58). René Girard's reading of the plague in *Oedipus the King* sheds light on the fact that the plague's metaphorical import revolves around social tensions and crises. Today the distinct medical, social and metaphoric roles of disease are deeply rooted, as Girard reveals, in ancient myths, rituals and practices. Reshaped by medieval associations and early modern fears, these roles are reinvented by each society within more recent embodiments and uses of plague (Cooke 2009: 11). In literature, the famous example of Albert Camus' representations of the plague is clearly perceived within its social and political connotations.

Pandemic narratives are placeholders for rich metaphors of life under threat. Contagious diseases are not just a biomedical phenomenon. They are often used as a rhetorical or political weapon in social discrimination or stigmatisation of antagonists, minority groups and regimes (Cooke 2009: 1–2). War rhetoric is often adopted, and a military narrative builds a cohesive and heroic identity of 'us' that also stigmatises a treacherous enemy who is not only aggressive but disconcertingly alien to us (Marchesini 2021: 17). Viruses remain a compelling metaphor, a way to demarcate 'dangerous' people and the frailties of human bonds. Finally, they are a way to spread fear. Yet these same depictions also suggest that the experience of a communicable pandemic could evoke a profound sense of social interconnection: the communicability of disease can be seen as configuring community (Wald 2008: 12).

The metaphorical properties of "contagion" and "immunity" also give pandemic narratives biopolitical resonances (Davis and Lohm 2020: 194). Foucault used infectious diseases as models of thought to organise forms of power according to ideal typical patterns. As pandemic threats are perceived in

terms of social revolution, upheaval and transformation are coded within them (Davis and Lohm 2020: 194). Thus, the fear of prospective social chaos breeds totalising discourses of disease's cause and cure. At the same time, this prospect presents an opportunity to reinforce the political authorities and reinsert new public sphere policies. Pandemic travels through our bodies, so, by following up with Michel Foucault's accounts (1961), any intervention of epidemiological guard inevitably becomes a form of biopolitics:

The plague as a form, at once real and imaginary, of disorder had as its medical and political correlative discipline Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of 'contagions', of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder. (Foucault 1995: 198, 195–199).

By spreading fear, panic, horror, guilt and confusion in the community, pandemics lack comprehensibility. The study of their nature includes the modes of anticipation, visualisation, and fictionalisation. The metaphors of destiny in disease narrations are often presumed to make sense of the phenomenon as an organisational principle of the plot. The various redefinitions of destiny in plague narrations tended obviously to shift with the economic, political and religious preoccupations of the time and the author (Reilly 2015: 10). For instance, many texts in past centuries have represented the plague as somehow fulfilling God's divine plan. A pandemic outbreak was frequently closely related to religion and viewed as a kind of divine punishment due to the community's immorality. Folk tales also supply a system of blame and moral status employed and reworked across pandemic storylines. As Priscilla Wald has shown (Wald 2008: 36), popular culture narratives about pandemic events feature characterisations of innocence, heroism and culpability.

The narration of pandemics conveys pandemic understanding via building blocks such as the organisation of time and space, characterization, focalization, description, narration tropes, etc. Wald has coined the term 'outbreak narrative' as a "paradigmatic story" about a disease's emergence. The outbreak narrative portrays bodily failure and decay and the ineffectiveness of borders by considering a viral outbreak in a borderless world. In modern pandemic narrations, globalisation is depicted as a causal agent or at least a major facilitator (Schweitzer 2018: 35). According to Pramod K. Nayar, "critics have argued that the 'outbreak' and contagion narrative – of microbes and diseases – represent cultural anxieties of modernity and globalization" (Nayar 2019: 19). The plot of the outbreak narrative frequently conveys the danger of strangers and the perils of human interdependence. Nevertheless, it can also envision humanity united

by its vulnerability. This case portrays the triumph of human connection and cooperation in avoiding impending disaster (Wald 2008: 2, 11, 31).

Tales of pandemic futures are offered to the public to make them aware of the possible dangers to expect in the future (Davis and Lohm 2020: 37). In this sense, pandemic narratives fall into two types: the apocalyptic and the post-apocalyptic. The former are oriented towards a 'final solution', i.e. the cleansing of society through disease. The gloomy tone is sometimes avoided by insinuating that pandemics would facilitate society's 'glorious rebirth'. Post-apocalyptic pandemic narratives explore what happens after the virus has already decimated the population and social and government infrastructures. By portraying post-apocalyptic wastelands these narrations are built as "aftermaths and remainders" and eventually propose a return to a more primal society (Cooke 2009: 10). A pervasive trope of the post-pandemic condition is the idea that the world becomes speedily 'naturalised' through a process of frenetic rewilding. In contrast, post-pandemic humans are deprived of mastery and relapse into a condition of "total animality" (Lynteris 2020: 142).

Stereotypically pandemic narrations are peopled with characters such as various physicians, epidemiologists and public health experts, representing humanity's last hope in the struggle against pandemic collapse. "Spontaneous public responses" (Snowden 2019: 34) such as hysteria, fear, anxiety, trauma, isolation and stigmatisation are whipped up around specific communities which are targeted as causal agents. The virus carrier is the archetypal stranger, both embodying the danger of microbial invasion and transforming it into the possibility for rejuvenation and growth (Wald 2008: 10). In post-pandemic narratives, super-spreaders are also mythic characters who bring humanity back into a prehuman condition, often to a zombie-like state, i.e. that of humankind before techne.

Defamiliarising points of view are sometimes employed in 19th century narratives of contagion, as Allan Christensen argues. These are often found in disenfranchised members of society among whom are listed "children, women, the destitute, criminal, sick, deformed, insane" (Christensen 2005: 290). The descriptions are polished culturally in the narrations as they are a means of reference and offer an explanation of a pandemic situation. There are also occasionally privileged locations, such as hospitals, sick rooms, etc., which seem inevitably precarious and vulnerable (Christensen 2005: 291). Nevertheless, the conception of pandemic places gradually expands: while epidemiologists in various texts trace the microbes' routes, they catalogue the spaces and complex interactions of global modernity (Wald 2008: 2).

In the modern and postmodern literature of the 20th and the 21st centuries, pandemic narration has taken the risk to question anthropocentrism and

sustain moral claims about the intrinsic value of the natural world, which will in turn affect our principles and attitudes towards nature. Narrative theory has tended to be anthropocentric in its approach and the emphasis is given on human communication and interaction. The narration of pandemics imposes political and ethical ideas and sets of behaviours that operate our perception and interaction with contagious diseases. They also query how we emotionally and cognitively engage with the representations of pandemics and how the process of encountering variable environments in narratives might affect our real-world attitudes and behaviours.

The first direction of our research into pandemic narration concerns non-anthropocentric representations. Other end of the world narratives, such as asteroid impact or nuclear holocaust, envisage the annihilation of human and planetary life as such. In contrast, in an anticipated next pandemic, life on Earth continues and proliferates without humanity. According to Christos Lynteris, an ontological reversal is speculated in this case as the pandemic strikes not simply human populations – or even the human species in whole – but rather the core of humanity (which is conceived as a project for mastery of the planet). In such narratives, we are invited to reflect upon aspects of human life while reading the fictional, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic aspects of nonhuman narrators, whether they are animals, objects, zombies, indefinable entities, etc. By reading about these aspects, we are challenged to decode and further investigate what it means to be human, which relies upon the dialectics of empathy, defamiliarisation etc. In these narrations of pandemics, our interest lies not only in the nonhuman narrators, but also in the place of humans in the broader context of pandemics. In this way, outbreak narratives serve as imaginative tools for criticism and reconstruction of ideas about human selfhood in a modern world. Lynteris employs the notion of the “pandemic imaginary” to understand how pandemic-borne human extinction in contemporary techno-scientific societies refashions our understanding of humanity and its place in the world (Lynteris 2020: 6). Suppose mastery over the nonhuman world has ceased to be humanity’s condition (Garrett 1994: 36–37, 96). In that case, Lynteris notes that a wide range of popular and scientific representations of the next pandemic show “a projected inability of humankind to re-emerge in a world that is itself re-emerging as a result of humankind’s ‘loss’ of mastery” (Lynteris 2020: 141).

A privileged sector of this research is the aforementioned relationship between pandemics and the environment. Pandemics are a type of extinction that arises directly from nature, seen as the reservoir of microbial pathogens (Lynteris 2020: 6). The next pandemic is repeatedly depicted as a result of ecological damage, arising from a range of drivers involving the application of harmful human ‘culture’, usually in the form of global technological and

economic development in the Anthropocene. Mainstream approaches to the environment erroneously consider humans and the environment as separate, distinct entities. The entire biosphere, often reduced to a set of resources at our disposal, is therefore regarded as external and in some ways alien to the human condition. By placing our species above nature we fail to capture the interdependencies and hybridisation that form human identity (Marchesini 2021: 50). According to Roberto Marchesini there is no purity in human predicates as the logic of contamination and hybridisation supports every form of life (Marchesini 2021: 50). Furthermore, Stacy Alaimo, in her book entitled *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, asserts that one's body is

never a rigidly enclosed, protected entity, but is vulnerable to the substances and flows of its environments. [...] Imagining human corporeality as transcorporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment. (Alaimo 2010: 8, 17).

By transcending the fragile borders between the human and the more-than-human world, the virus reveals the core conditions of the pandemics: the permeability of the borders as well as the always mutually constructed nature of existence. As the “viral subjects” may include people, animals, and microbes, viral subjectivity emphasises the beyond- and more-than-human dimensions of human affective states and worldviews that evolve within particular places at particular times (Heise et al. 2017: 118). The pandemic can in fact be fact understood if we go beyond the anthropocentric model, which preaches an apparent discrepancy between human beings and everything else on the planet. In this sense, the virus paradigm can be very elucidating.

The second direction for research into pandemic narration is the discussion on pandemic narrative ethics and politics. Through these clusters narration of pandemics in the 21st century could eventually advance an interdisciplinary study of pandemics (for example epidemiological studies, popular culture, modes of scientific visualisation, pandemic preparedness campaigns). The arts, humanities and social sciences come to be viewed as productively included, along with the clinical and life sciences, within research on pandemics. The cross-sector collaboration between life sciences, immunology, critical theory, activist politics and other allied fields, could result in a more efficient “biomedical culture” (Viney et al. 2015: 2). Specifically, ecocriticism, cognitive science, psychology or philosophy could offer valuable critical tools in this investigation.

By foregrounding the ethical and political dimensions of narratives and setting narratives as persuasive acts that engage and influence the attitudes and behaviours, the study of pandemic narration has reconsidered its modes. Here, the study of pandemics focuses on the reflections of storytellers and readers on their cultural and historical contexts, as the effect of history and culture is critical in shaping the narration. In this sense, these narratives are seen as tools of ideology that relate to ideological and political concerns (for example gender, class). Thus, pandemic narration enacts the very ethics of our responsibility and care towards any damaging behaviour. For instance, these narratives expose human responsibility issues in terms of environmental destruction, placing the blame for the emergence of the virus on human presence in remote locations – a result of progress and capitalist expansion. The concepts of fragility, vulnerability and power relations across species as well as the resulting instability of life, the planet and species identity are central components in environmental discourse. This “ecoprecarity”, according to Nayar, is

at once about the precarious lives humans lead in the event of ecological disaster– and also about the environment itself which is rendered precarious due to human intervention in the Anthropocene (Nayar 2019: 7).

Pandemic poetics is ascribed to vulnerability and “ecoprecarity” in how disease vectors and risky interactions conjoin humans and other animals in common suffering, at the same time recognising that Earth’s effectiveness is our effectiveness. In this sense, the narration of pandemics is apt to the pragmatic sense of internship among nature and culture.

In this perspective, the study of pandemics includes human perception and imagination, and specifically the embodied and enactivist insights of pandemic narration. The pandemic generates insights from embodied cognition (the idea that cognition is unseparated from the experience of the physical body within *nature*) (Caracciolo 2012: 368), ecophenomenology (the idea of a smaller body within the world’s *being* and alongside the human *body*), and enactivism (the idea that human consciousness arises from the body’s interaction with its pandemic environment). The combination of cognitive science, ethics and philosophy can give us further insight into our internship with pandemics on the cognitive, phenomenological and affective levels in ways that are all culturally specific.

For instance, the “pandemic imaginary” has obvious spatial elements as pandemics are perceived as happening to people and places (Hampton 2021: 17). Furthermore, cognitive science, ecophenomenology and affective theory have led us to develop our understanding of how the narrations of pandemics can affect our embodied experience, emotions, attitudes and principles. We can

mentally and emotionally inhabit pandemics, while the imaginary experience of a pandemic space is inevitably bound to the qualia of the narrator. Readers are invited to feel in response to a pandemic outbreak. In this sense, inhabited pandemic places introduce a functional, cultural dimension to discuss and study narrative spaces. The 'spatial turn' in the narration of pandemics provides us with more tools to analyse the human perception of space and place in order to introduce categories of space and time such as figures, grounds, topographic locations, etc. While a global sense of pandemic place is coming into existence in the sphere of literature, our embodied experience is both mentally and emotionally ascribed. Consequently, the rise of new pandemic identities through interaction with pandemic space is more likely to be both multivocal and multilocal. To sum up, we can engage with the narrative of pandemic environments, and this interaction might shape our attitudes, values and behaviours.

This multi-vocality and multi-locality of pandemics is portrayed in *Interlitteraria's* themed section entitled *Pandemics in Western Literature and Culture (20th–21st Centuries)*, which emphasises the different ways in which communities perceive pandemics, live with them and imagine alternatives within literary and cultural narratives (Reilly 2015: 2). The essays engage with a wide range of disciplines and fields, including Narrative Theory, Environmental Humanities, Posthumanities, Modernism, Environmental Ethics and Anthropology. Given the pandemic narration directions mentioned above, the essays have been grouped in two main thematic streams: a. Narrations of Pandemics and the More-Than-Human World, and b. Pandemics, Environmental Ethics and Bio-Politics.

In the first part of the issue, the essays highlight variable narrations of the more-than-human lifeforms that display an aesthetic evaluation of their own status affected by pandemics. They also attempt to reassess the meaning of human narrators as main characters in order to study nonhuman world agencies more efficiently. Throughout this thematic cluster, Ana Kocić Stanković and Marko Mitić examine the gothic narrative tropes and motifs in Borislav Pekić's *Rabies*. Although a contagious and man-manipulated rabies virus is perceived in terms of a mutual accord with humans, its effectiveness is profound on the human emotional world by raising a sense of uncertainty. The relationship between human and nature is extended in the presence of grotesque lifeforms, perceived in terms of madness and monstrosity. The human future is apocalyptic due to the internship among the human and inhuman rationality, nature and science. Here, the metaphorical conception of pandemics has rapidly shaped the current social situation, which is neither vanished nor demolished, but in a state of constant fluidity. This fluidity tends to create 'strange' more

than human lifeforms such as zombies and expands the study of their behaviour and individual senses within a pandemic environment. The 'zombie narrations' address apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic encounters of 'pandemic imaginary'. The image of the zombie is a stereotype that is being asserted to describe the infected community. The reanimated disfigured body is considered a grotesque resemblance of an earlier living state (Freud 1993: 380).

In fact, in these zombie stories, the infected human or collectivity does not disappear or die, but rather is transformed into something else (Marchesini 2021: 16). The transformations of human and inhuman lifeforms into virus-caused zombies are studied by Jenni G. Halpin as well. Considering the fluidity and uncertainty of the time, Halpin argues that the dialogue among literary and scientific discourses offers more knowledge of the study of zombie pandemic narratives and provides new pathways to perceive the continuity and discontinuity of different lifeforms. Furthermore, she examines the narrative mechanics of human and animal transformation into zombies caused by an uncontrolled pandemic substitute in Mira Grant's *Newsflesh*. Even if the zombies lead to the de-humanisation and vulnerability of bodies, Halpin argues that in a pandemic imaginary world, all lifeforms are in mutual accord and controlled by a new biopolitical policy which eliminates the human response to the pandemic through a zombie apocalypse.

The last essay in this section discusses the 'technological invasion' of pandemics in order to re-form the moment when the real meets the fictional. Vanessa L. Haddad's comparative study of the more-than-human lifeform narratives in both Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and video games of the 21st century is traced back to the epidemic novels of vampire mythology. Haddad juxtaposes two genres of pandemic narration in order to examine further the mechanics of their representations and perception historically. In her essay, she emphasises the rise of pandemic-themed video games in today's global market.

As we have already noted, globalisation establishes a pandemic 'invasion' in different spheres of human life and imposes an ethical enquiry into pandemics in today's world. Considering the environmental and ethical connotations of pandemics, Sissel Furuseth opens the second part of this special issue by examining narratives representing the bubonic plague in Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter* and traces the similarities with the current pandemic. According to Furuseth, *Kristin Lavransdatter* is structured on clusters of sacramental realism, which encapsulates a paradoxical way of perceiving and apprehending Undset's reality by recalling the realist and naturalist traditions of European Literature. In this sense, Furuseth guides her thought on how the narrative ethical structures function theologically and how Environmental Ethics might exploit these insights by providing a structural understanding of Undset's liturgical narrative.

Furthermore, through Environmental Ethics are explored in this issue the values that can be validated and challenged by climate fiction. The idea of an “epidemiological colonialism” is studied by Sanchar Sarkar and Swarnalatha Rangarajan via Paolo Bacigalupi’s call for action on an ethically managed environment. According to the authors, Bacigalupi’s eco-speculative science-fiction narrative, entitled *The Windup Girl*, addresses the need to practice environmental awareness. An eco-catastrophe and pandemics are the shocking after-effects of bioengineering and gene-hack modifications to food crops by neocolonial enterprises. Given the examples of both the structure of who provides the ethical elements to postmodern communities and who sets the ethical table, the authors argue that Environmental Ethics may provide another avenue through which ethical engagement with cultural forces such as consumerism can be conditioned.

To omit the embodied and emotional experience of contagion would eliminate the possibility to focus on cultural narratives about the consequences of pandemics in our daily lives and behaviours in a world of constant transformations and rapid technological explosion. Yvonne Förster engages with the disciplines of psychology, cognitive science and post-phenomenology in order to perceive the virtual world’s mechanics and the settings of a new kind of normality in pandemic times. Förster raises issues such as the changes in human bodily communion, the inhibitions on embodied rituals (such as eating, drinking and dancing) due to pandemics, and the effectiveness of technology in shaping new forms of co-existence. Finally, Roberto Marchesini points out the need for a paradigm shift in Western culture in order to understand our current viral pandemics. His philosophical, posthumanist and anthropological accounts of the present situation are based on the ecological and cultural impact of pandemics on 21st century societies.

Contagion’s social, cultural, or digital “metaphors” and narrations convey notions of fluidity, movement, permeability, and instability, affecting our conception of Western subjectivity as an autonomous and sealed-off self. It seems that the idea of contagion in the form of a devastating pandemic saturates the contemporary imagination and goes far beyond its epidemiological perimeter. This notion assumes a paradigmatic dimension, a principle of cohesion that has become endemic in contemporary discourse and provides us with new models for interpreting our presence in the world (Marchesini 2021: 57; Nixon and Servitje 2016: vii).

Our climate-changed world is a world of extinction, exploitation, toxicity; it is also proven to be a pandemic world. If we are supposed to learn to live within this normality, we have to be wary of pandemics, not just overcome their rhizomatic conditions. All the essays assist readers living amidst the current pandemics to recognise analogous patterns, reassure coherence principles in

our historical medium (Nixon and Servitje 2016: 227) and make the historical moment more comprehensible (Christensen 2005: 291).

In conclusion, with this issue we wish to consider further how the pandemic imaginary, which continually broadens by the literary and cultural narrations of pandemics, discloses the entanglement – material, but also ethical – of human and more-than-human actors and factors in order to unfold aftermaths of pandemics that unmount the essentialist binary between nature and culture. Our special thanks to all the contributors, the journal editor and Professor Jüri Talvet.

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