

Research Group *Pandemic Fictions*¹

From Pandemic to Corona Fictions: Narratives in Times of Crises

After the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic by the WHO on March 11, 2020, the corona crisis discourse quickly turned into a global pandemic crisis discourse. This discourse was and still is not limited to media and politics, but also penetrates into fictional productions constituting a new corpus, which can be subsumed under the term *Corona Fictions*. However, *Corona Fictions* pertain to a more generally assumed genre of pandemic fiction, i.e. literary and cultural productions, which rely strongly on the representation and functionalization of pandemics. Thus, *Corona Fictions* not only draw on everyday media and political discourse, but also on previous pandemic fiction. Analyzing *Corona Fictions* as part of pandemic fiction, this paper reveals parallel structures between pandemic narratives and the classical drama.

1. Crisis and Corona

1.1 The Concept of Crisis

The alleged omnipresence of the crisis concept, which has seemingly dominated the western media discourse at least since the financial crisis of 2007/08, already persisted since the 19th century (cf. Bebermeyer 1981). It was also the period in which the term began to detach from its actual medical meaning: in ancient Greek, the crisis concept indicates the decisive moment between life and death in a patient (cf. Tebben 2005: 458). In the course of 19th century, the term left the medical realm and entered socio-cultural and socio-political contexts (e.g. marriage crisis, political crises, supply crises such as the oil crisis in the 1970s; in recent years in Europe the so-called financial, migration or ecological crises).² This shift implies the metaphorization of the crisis term. The qualities of the medical source domain (*Bildspender*) are transferred to new target domains (*Bildempfänger*) and as a consequence, other medical terms such as 'illness', 'patients', 'vaccinations' etc. have also been adopted to describe elements of socio-cultural and socio-political crises.

The ubiquitous and almost eternal alternation of crises in everyday media discourse resembles wave-like structures as one 'crisis' succeeds after another. What seems to be a recent phenomenon dates back to a tradition of at least two hundred years: as Marx and Engels already noted, the concept of crisis, understood in an economic

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² For a chronology of different compounds with the crisis term, see Bebermeyer (1980; 1981).

sense, is an essential part of capitalist logic.³ Interestingly, in explaining these crisis phenomena Marx resorted to an epidemic metaphor: "In den Krisen bricht eine gesellschaftliche Epidemie aus, welche allen früheren Epochen als Widersinn erschienen wäre – eine Epidemie der Überproduktion." (Marx / Engels 1848: 7)

The crisis concept simultaneously constitutes a necessary template for media in attracting the audience's attention.⁴ It is thus not in the least surprising that media reports also embed the current global challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms (and therefore also logics) of crisis when referring to it as 'corona crisis'. As a matter of fact, due to the combination of the terms 'corona' and 'crisis', the latter conceptually returns to its medical roots. The related medical terms used as metaphorical expressions in every crisis discourse are, therefore, deprived of their metaphorical background: illness, patients and vaccinations are no longer used in a metaphorical sense – as e.g. during the financial crisis – but in their original meaning. Nevertheless, the corona crisis discourse still makes full use of metaphors: the media and political discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic rely on source domains, such as war metaphors (e.g. Macron's discourse of "Nous sommes en guerre") or crime metaphors (e.g. lockdown), as a means of discussing the current pandemic.⁵

1.2 The circulation of the corona crisis discourse

After the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic by the WHO in March 2020 (cf. Adhanom Ghebreyesus 2020), the corona crisis discourse quickly turned into a global pandemic crisis discourse. This rapid dissemination was fostered by politicians and journalists, and amplified through advanced communication infrastructure as well as (social) media platforms. Yet, the corona crisis discourse was and still is not limited to media and politics, it also penetrates into fictional productions constituting a new corpus, which can be subsumed under the term *Corona Fictions*. Corona Fictions pertain to a more generally assumed genre of pandemic narratives and further form part of a global crisis discourse. Thus, Corona Fictions not only draw on everyday media and political discourse, but also on previous pandemic

³ On how capitalist logic similarly applies to both economic and medical crises, see the examples of tuberculosis and cancer given by Sontag (1978: 62-63) and Beaumont's (2014: 83) analysis of *Contagion's* (2011) infection metaphor.

⁴ For the relationship between crises and media see for example Sellnow / Seeger *Theorizing Crisis Communication* (2013), esp. chapter 6. "Theories of Communication and Mediated Crises".

⁵ On the impact of (visual and verbal) war and crime metaphors in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and initiatives to promote non-war-related language, see #ReframeCovid (2020).

fiction,⁶ i.e. literary and cultural productions, which rely strongly on the representation and functionalization of pandemics.

We therefore argue that pandemic narratives are based on reactivated consistent structures creating constants over time and space. These structures or consistent characteristics circulate across media, thus 'spreading' through "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins 2007/2012), hereby forming an overarching meta-narrative.⁷ Most of the narrative elements contained in pandemic fictions (e.g. outbreak, carrier, post-pandemic narrative) seize aspects of this meta-narrative and, in turn, transfer their genre characteristics to the content. Despite the corona crisis reactivating consistent structures of pandemic fictions, it is important to be aware of the fact that genre formations such as those of the chronicle, film, etc. affect the concrete characteristics of the pandemic discourse differently.⁸

In this regard, the way we perceive information and entertainment has changed greatly over the course of the past two decades. With the emergence of social media and numerous streaming platforms for audiovisual content (Facebook 2004, YouTube 2005, Twitter 2006), both the pace and the multi-faceted formats have transformed consumer behaviour as well. Similarly to the spread of the coronavirus itself, news now 'goes viral', spreading almost in a 'pandemic' manner, crossing language barriers, cultural and national borders alike. However, social media not only function as immediate news sources but also encourage 'participatory culture' (Jenkins et al. 2016), meaning that individuals are able to participate in a transnational, transcultural conversation on a current situation. Today, as narratives are often be-

⁶ Even though the term 'pandemic literature' has already been used sporadically by scholars such as De Paolo (2014) and systematically by Outka (2019), we opt for the term 'pandemic fiction' as the term 'literature' is often understood in its narrow sense as textual productions only.

⁷ For a differentiated view on the variety of the term of meta-narrative, especially in contrast to the use of metafiction, see first of all Nünning (2001) and Fludernik (2003) with their seminal contributions on the concept. Ayres (2008: 508) moreover states that a "[m]eta-narrative can be understood in two ways: (1) as a narrative *about* narrative or (2) as a narrative *above* narrative". Therefore, we point out that our understanding of the term meta-narrative refers to the second definition as it also functions within our transmedia approach in terms of one pandemic meta-narrative operating above other pandemic narratives.

⁸ While the dystopian view, for example, predicts the corona crisis to lead into a catastrophe, the dystopian narrative explains why citizens deliberately tend to support governmental decisions on the economic shutdown, to stay indoors, and to accept the infringement of fundamental rights. By overcoming the 'first wave', however, it becomes obvious how leaving this dystopian frame generates other generic expectations. One strong emotion, such as the fear of the virus, is replaced by another: the equally dystopian fear of authoritarian regimes and, once again, generic expectations play a decisive role.

ing created by 'community involvement' (cf. Jenkins 2009, xiii) throughout the digital world, spreading across different media formats and creating hybridity by merging video, image, text, and audio content with mutual references (cf. Nünning / Rupp 2012: 15), 'transmedia storytelling' (cf. Jenkins 2007/2012) encourages not only a way of constructing content, but also becomes a multi-modal approach for analyzing the current Corona Fictions. 'Transmedia storytelling' creates a common meta-narrative, since the participants of this communicative context may function as producers and receivers of stories alike (cf. Nünning / Rupp 2012: 15): "Jenkins' understanding of texts operating within transmedia, or as he calls it 'transmedia storytelling', does not describe simultaneously narrated phenomena of the same kind but rather narrates parts of one single, bigger story across different media (with transmedia-specific storytelling strategies)." (Obermayr 2020: 102f.)

Due to the interconnectedness of multiple media sources and the contemporary productivity of the pandemic discourse, it is imperative to take into account a multitude of factors in order to understand and analyze the 'pandemic circuit'. The following figure (fig. 1) of the pandemic circuit describes this specific dynamic of the hermeneutic process of the pandemic meta-narrative between (early) pandemic fiction and Corona Fictions as well as media and political discourse (related to SARS-CoV-2 pandemic) which in turn change the reception of previous pandemic texts:

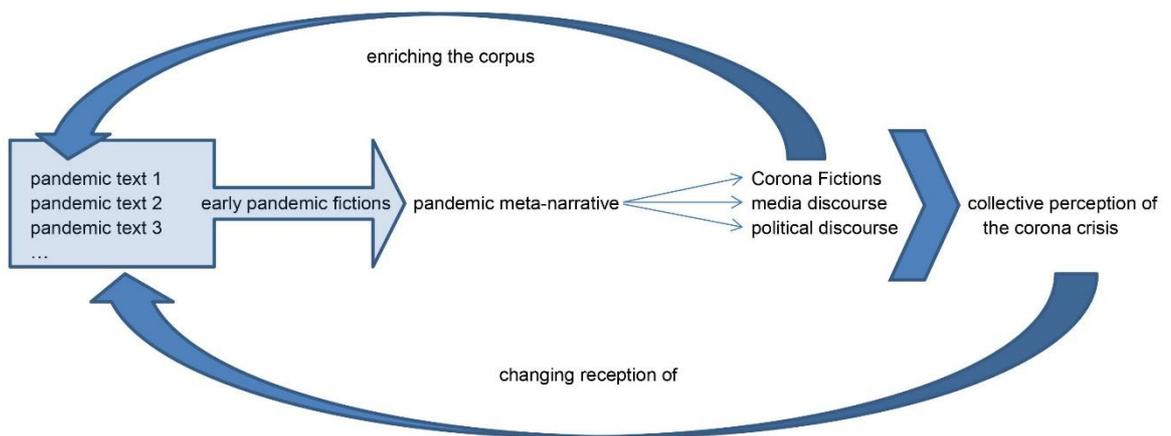


Figure 1: 'Pandemic circuit'

Historical pandemic key texts can be seen as part of pandemic fiction, which in itself is based on the pandemic meta-narrative it simultaneously creates. Today, the consistent structures of the pandemic meta-narrative greatly influence the aesthetic production of Corona Fictions as well as the political and media discourse. As a

global historical event, the corona crisis reactivates the pandemic meta-narrative, thereby merging it with today's technological achievements and the new media landscape. All these elements contribute to the collective perception of the corona crisis building the basis for a changing reception of the historical pandemic key texts, simultaneously being enriched by the Corona Fictions. Therefore, these factors cause a significant modification of the pandemic meta-narrative.

The corpus of pandemic fiction extends from early pandemic fiction, i.e. canonized foundational pandemic key texts, to recent Coronas Fictions as part of the concept of pandemic fiction. Next to the Western European key texts by Thucydides, Boccaccio, Defoe or Camus, this corpus includes: Homer's *Iliad*, Manzoni's *Promessi sposi* (1827) respectively la *Storia della colonna infame* (1827) or Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (1995). These canonized pandemic fictions determine the overarching pandemic meta-narrative, persisting in the pandemic fiction in the wake of the millennium⁹ as well as in contemporary Corona Fictions.¹⁰

1.3 State of Research

A considerable body of critical studies investigates (early) pandemic fiction.¹¹ A large number of these pertain to the representation of the plague constituting the archetype of epidemics (e.g. Baden 2002; Boissier-Ricossé 2005; Cooke 2009; Coste 2007; Crawford 1914; Di Veroli 2014; Fass Leavy 1992; Geddes da Filicaia / Geddes da Filicaia 2015; Gilman 2009; Hobart 2014; Miller 2017; Slack 2012; Traversa 2018). More recent publications also put an emphasis on the literary representation of other communicable diseases, such as the Spanish flu of 1918–19

⁹ Just to mention a few: *Pars vite et reviens tard* (feature film, France, 2007); *Fase 7* (feature film, Argentina, 2010); *Contagion* (feature film, US, 2011); *Inquisitio* (TV series, France, 2012); *Containment* (feature film, UK, 2015); *Containment* (TV series, US, 2016); Mavrikakis, Catherine (2016) *Oscar de Profundis*. Novel. Montréal: Hélio trope; Fortin, Marilyne (2017) *Le potager*. Novel. Montréal: Québec Amérique; Paz Soldán, Edmundo (2017) *Los días de la peste*. Novel. Barcelona: Malpaso; Clouette, Fabien (2017) *Une épidémie*. Novel. Montpellier: Publie.net; Kurtness, J. D. (2019) *Aquariums*. Novel. Longueuil, QC: Instant même; *Épidémie* (TV series, Canada, 2019).

¹⁰ A collection of Corona Fictions – from comics, essays and poems to films, music videos and web series – can be consulted under: "Corona Fictions" (2020): <https://homepage.uni-graz.at/de/yvonne.voelkl/corona-fictions/>.

¹¹ Most of these studies are conducted in English (e.g. Carlin 2005; Christensen 2005; Fass Leavy 1992; Gilman 2009; Healy 2001; Lloyd 1995; Miller 2017; Reilly 2015) and in French language (e.g. Baden 2002; Boissier-Ricossé 2005; Coste 2007; Gualde 2016; Hobart 2014; Palud 2014; Vil-late Torres 2018). Other comparative research on the canonical pandemic fiction was carried out in German (e.g. Grimm 1965; Hoffmann 2007) or Italian (Paolo 2006; Pelagalli 2017). Research in Spanish language is mostly missing, but can be attributed to an absence of literary epidemic traces in Spanish fiction (cf. Grimm 1965: 7), which has come to a halt during the recent pandemic.

(see Davis 2013; Fisher 2012; Outka 2019) or HIV/AIDS (Grassi 2007). The seminal study of S. Sontag *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and its continuation *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1989) concentrate on the metaphorical use of diseases, such as syphilis, tuberculosis, cancer, and AIDS. More recent metaphor studies have shifted the focus on the metaphorical use of the virus and include the edited volume of R. Mayer and B. Weingart (2004) as well as the publications of E. Gredel (2014) and E. Outka (2019). In the past two decades, the focus has also shifted to more interdisciplinary publications, such as on the cross-fertilization of medical and literary discourse, e.g. by A. Bayle (2013), Ch. de Paolo (2014) or K. Nixon and L. Servitje (2016, 2018).

Several studies target the representation of pandemic diseases in a variety of cultural media productions at once, e.g. R. Crawford (1914) and P. Slack (2012) investigate the plague and pestilence in literature as well as in art, while P. Wald's (2008) classic monograph explores the conventions of the 'outbreak narrative' through media and their amplification in popular fiction and film. J. Cooke (2009) studies the continuation of the plague narrative within the range of literature, theory and film. Against the background of 17th century print culture, K. Miller (2017) looks at the plague writings emerging out of the Great Plague in London in 1665 and compares them with earlier plague writings. Additionally, A. Pozorski et al. (2020) edited a volume on the literary and visual representations of HIV/AIDS.

In the past decade, researchers also studied the societal impact of epidemics and pandemics, e.g. P. Slack (2012) "demonstrates the impact plague has had on modern notions of public health and how it has shaped our history" (blurb). Following the SARS pandemic, J. Lee (2014, 185) investigates "the links between disease narratives, stud[ies] the various vectors through which those narratives have been transferred, and examine[s] the [e.g. xenophobic] effects that these narratives have had on the world." F. Snowden (2019) scrutinizes the impact of epidemics on medical science and public health and how they transform the arts, religion, intellectual history, and warfare. Moreover, the socio-anthropological study *Human Extinction and the Pandemic Imaginary* by Ch. Lynteris (2020) displays the role of the pandemic imaginary in the understanding of humanity and K. Nixon's (2020) latest monograph *Kept from all Contagion* explores the social effects of germ theory, disease, and the dilemma of human contact in late 19th century literature.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, D. Kiepenkracher (2020) issued an anthology of well-known literary pandemic key texts entitled *Grippe, Cholera und Pest. Seuchen in der Literatur aus vier Jahrhunderten*. An annotated anthology of texts concerning the literary and medical-scientific history of the plague was published in 2015 by C. and M. Geddes da Filicaia under the title *Peste. Il 'flagello di Dio' fra letteratura e scienza*. The physician N. Gualde also published a commented anthology of pestilence fiction, *Les épidémies racontées par la littérature* (2016), which he arranged thematically around topics such as the denial, the germs, the scapegoats, the contagion or the odours and colours of epidemics. Therein, he also stresses the importance of pestilence fiction as a valuable source of information concerning the conditions of occurrence, the physical and psychological pathogenic effects as well as the social and religious repercussions of epidemics (cf. Gualde 2016: 268).

In addition to these studies on pandemic fiction, we propose the following approach to pandemic narrative structures in fiction.

2. The Structure of Pandemic Narratives

Looking at the composition of pandemic narratives, one can distinguish between different kinds of recurrent structures, already perceivable in early pandemic fiction. One of these structures resembles the model of the classical drama as proposed by Freytag (1895) and comprises the following phases (see fig. 2): the outbreak of a new and frightening illness, rising infections without apparent reasons, the necessity to take official measures – such as containment –, the hope for a rapid ending of the pandemic and for a bright future.¹²

¹² A similar comparison between the cultural perception of epidemics and the drama has already been formulated by Charles Rosenberg (1989) from a medical historian point of view, trying to explain social reactions on the pandemics with a three acts drama. Priscilla Wald (2008: 2) also sees "[t]he repetition of particular phrases, images, and story lines" in what she calls the 'outbreak narrative'.

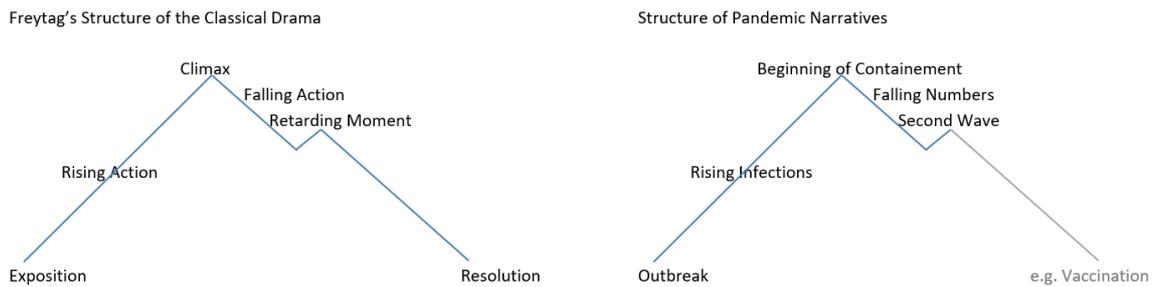


Figure 2: Structure of Classical Drama and Pandemic Narratives

In other words, the exposition (e.g. alarmingly high death rates in China) leads to the rising action phase (e.g. rising infections) further leading to a point of climax (e.g. start of quarantine), at which the previous narrative starts declining, and to a retarding moment (e.g. fear of second wave). This drama-inspired structure (outbreak, rising infections, containment, second wave, resolution) can be understood as a reactivated prototypical pandemic meta-narrative. Certainly, not all pandemic fictions follow this recurrent structure as some only reactivate a certain phase of the drama model. Due to the current situation, for example, it became apparent that many of the Corona Fictions created within the past few months are based on eyewitness accounts and personal experiences, commenting on what is happening at this very moment.¹³

The following chapters picture how this drama-inspired pandemic meta-narrative occurs in early pandemic fiction, reappears in contemporary Corona Fictions, and represents the five phases in different ways, primarily focusing on the trauma-evoking containment phase.

2.1 Exposition – Outbreak

The typical exposition of pandemic narratives goes hand in hand with the outbreak of a pandemic. The narration of the outbreak is often initiated with detailed descriptions of symbols that are not interpreted correctly yet. Their catalyst function (cf. Barthes 1975: 248) is inherent in the narration, already hinting towards an upcoming catastrophe, such as the rats in Camus's *La Peste* (1947):

¹³ Some bear the testimonial notion already in their title, such as Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City* (2020), Fernanda Krahn Uribe's graphic novel *Diario de estar por casa, o 'Mis conversaciones con un murciélago'* (2020) or the TV series *Diarios de la cuarentena* (2020). Other Corona Fictions bear the signature of a documentary, such as *Madrid, Interior* (2020) – a collective work filmed during and about the containment phase in the Spanish capital.

Le matin du 16 avril, le docteur Bernard Rieux sortit de son cabinet et buta sur un rat mort, au milieu de palier. Sur le moment, il écarta la bête sans y prendre garde et descendit l'escalier. Mais, arrivé dans la rue, la pensée lui vint que ce rat n'était pas à sa place et il retourna sur ses pas pour avertir le concierge. (Camus 1980: 15)

Similarly to Camus's rats, in the TV series *Épidémie* (2019), the ferrets are equally unknown to the characters in the beginning and function as carriers for a deadly disease while simultaneously connecting not only the infected patients but also the protagonists.

Other typical exposition narratives introducing the pandemic theme are the narration of rumours (see Defoe) and of a perceived outbreak elsewhere (see Boccaccio).¹⁴ Another step in the storyline usually is an overall uncertainty or search for the cause of the infections (e.g. specific disease) and then the public recognition of the outbreak. This applies to Saramago's first cases of blindness as well as to Paz Soldán's novel *Los días de la peste* (2017), where several characters fall ill and one baby dies, showing symptoms of fever, vomiting and diarrhea. The doctor hopes that the disease can be identified as malaria to be able to offer a valid treatment to the sick (cf. *ibid.*: 62–63).

2.2 Rising Action – Rising Infections

When one of the protagonists of Camus's *La Peste* (1947) states "Les chiffres montent, docteur, annonça-t-il : onze morts en quarante-huit heures" (Camus 1980: 45), we read a typical enunciation for the second phase. At the moment of rising infections and deaths, statistics become increasingly important. This is true not only for today's media attention, but also part of early pandemic fiction like Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, which is based on a considerable number of seemingly objective statistics augmenting the *effet de réel* of his text (see fig. 3):

¹⁴ We find similar citations in Defoe and Manzoni: "It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbours, heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in Holland; for it had been very violent there, and particularly at Amsterdam and Rotterdam, in the year 1663, whither, they say, it was brought, some said from Italy, others from the Levant, among some goods which were brought home by their Turkey fleet; others said it was brought from Candia; others from Cyprus. It mattered not from whence it came; but all agreed it was come into Holland again." (Defoe 1722: 2); "La peste che il tribunale della sanità aveva temuto che potesse entrar con le bande alemanne nel milanese, c'era entrata davvero, come è noto; ed è noto parimente che non si fermò qui, ma invase e spopolò una buona parte d'Italia." (Manzoni 1840: 583)

			Of all Diseases.	Of the Plague.	
From	Aug. 8 to Aug. 15	—	5319	3550	
		to 22	5568	4237	
		to 29	7496	6102	
	Aug. 29 to Sept. 5	—	8252	6988	
		to 12	7690	6544	
		to 19	8297	7165	
	Sept. 26 to Oct. 3	to 26	6450	5533	
		to 10	5710	4929	
				59570	49705

Figure 3: Bills of mortality in *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Defoe 1722: 115)

Due to the rising numbers, some characters begin to feel uncertainty or fear while others react with panic, and others even downplay the situation. The description of fear of death itself first emerges in Lucretius (cf. Grimm 1965: 49-52) and regularly returns, as in *Il Decameron* (1966 [1349–1353]), *The Scarlet Plague* (2020 [1912]) or *La Peste* (1947).

The value of correct, reliable information in times of crisis is important for public health and safety, as is demonstrated in *Épidémie* (2019) and in *Contagion* (2011). The uncontrolled spreading of rumours, but also the exclusive predominance of official message control represent a risk to public health as well as to general safety and social peace. This is why already in Saramago's novel (1995) all the infected characters are imprisoned and left alone, isolated from society. Moreover, in both *Épidémie* and *Contagion*, the popularization of an alternative cure to the communicable disease through social media platforms wreaks havoc. As Sontag (1978: 59–61) shows, the less the characters know about the causes of disease and contagion, the more speculations circulate. The search for a cause frequently goes hand in hand with a beginning discourse of scapegoats, who are commonly searched for outside the community concerned. In *Épidémie*, the Inuit population of Montreal functions initially as scapegoats as the first deaths occur within this community. In Manzoni, the search of the scapegoat becomes evident in his *Storia della colonna infame* (1827), where two 'strangely' behaving foreigners are incriminated of having imported the plague.

This second phase is one of uncertainties: nobody knows where the disease comes from, but as everyone can seize (the discourse of) increasing infection and death rates, it is perceived as an epidemic (or pandemic). In order to contain a further transmission of the disease, the official authorities are compelled to take measures, which frequently consist of a radical limitation of the freedom of movement constituting the point of climax in the pandemic phases.

2.3 Climax – Containment

In early pandemic fiction, lockdowns and travel restrictions already appear in the form of a 'sealed city', such as Athens in Thucydides and Lucretius, Constantinople in Procopius, Syracuse in Livy, and Amida in Marcellinus. Also in (early) modern texts, the sealed city continues to be represented: Florence in Boccaccio, Milan in Cinquanta and Manzoni, London in Defoe, Bergamo in Jacobson or Oran in Camus (cf. Grimm 1965: 42). While the inhabitants of the sealed cities are generally able to move around freely within the city gates – at least as long as they are healthy – as is the case in *La Peste* (1947), more drastic restrictions appear with the 'locked house', where the sick and the healthy are confined together in order to contain the spreading to a minimum and to secure further contagion. The narrator of the *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) even reproduces London's Lord Mayor's 'Orders concerning infected houses and persons sick of the plague' indicating in detail under which circumstances and how (long) houses should be shut up (cf. 1722: 49–54). With regard to leprosy, leper colonies are a common practice to protect the healthy (cf. Gualde 2016: 57). At the end of the 19th century and with the advancement of medical insights, convalescent homes, so-called sanatoria, were installed for the treatment of tuberculosis, as depicted in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1924). The 'literature of the sanatorium', which is characterized by a specific introspection (cf. Vidal et al. 2007: 718–719), developed out of this treatment practise.

Many of the contemporary Corona Fictions lack the exposition and rising action phase; they thus plunge into the story *in medias res* because they address a contemporary audience who has already followed the developments of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak in China. E.g. *El amor en los tiempos del corona* (2020) – a web series through its title alluding to García Márquez's *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (2015 [1985]) – starts with the protagonist Alberto returning to his apartment from

empty Valencian streets with his grocery bags. He wears diving goggles and gloves and carefully washes all groceries before storing them in the kitchen.

Recent cultural productions commonly focus on the containment phase (and/or in parts on the resolution phase in terms of a positive envisioning of the future) as it often imposes social restrictions on the protagonists of the narratives, such as a lockdown or quarantine. When, despite the first attempts to contain the spreading of the virus, the numbers of infections keep rising, country or city governments often enact physical/social distancing rules or lockdown measures. The physical/social isolation is depicted as an unknown situation causing, on the one hand, a certain unease of being all alone, as described in Cécile Coulon's poem "Demeurer" (2020): "[C]e fut, au début, un effort considérable d'être avec soi comme avec un ami qu'on n'a pas vu depuis longtemps et qui nous donne de ses nouvelles au moment où on ne s'y attend pas." Using the example of four friends communicating via smartphone with each other, *Monologik – A Smartphone Film* (2020) depicts the difficulties the quarantine brings about for the students, whereas the character Elke in the web series *Die Maßnahme* (2020) describes the exertion of home-schooling for this mum (cf. episode 1 [4:12–5:15 min.]). On the other hand, social isolation forces the protagonists to change their perspective, which can result in a positive focus on oneself. For example, in Ana Bolivar's music video *Pasará* (2020), she sings about what matters most during the corona crisis: "Es un tiempo bueno para repensar [...] Lo único urgente es cuidar. Lo único urgente es amar y ya" and in Ricky Martin's and Sting's song *Simple* (2020), they address "Las cosas grandes siempre son simples//Como el amor que hay en un suspiro//Que me recuerda porque estoy vivo." However, the perspective can also result in a complete decline as depicted e.g. in the Spanish HBO series *En casa* (2020)¹⁵ made of six independent 'capítulos'. Entirely shot during quarantine while upholding the new rules during the corona crisis, the actors/creators – confined to their apartment in real life and whatever technical equipment is available on location – in the first episode of the series offer insight into a mixture of real media discourse (e.g. real news in the background on prolonging the lockdown), realistic routine during a pandemic (e.g.

¹⁵ *En casa* (as well as *Monologik*, *Diarios de la cuarentena* or *El amor en los tiempos del corona*) reflects cultural production during the corona crisis in two ways: firstly, by the technical limitations and/or possibilities while shooting a series during a lockdown due to a pandemic; and secondly, the storyline itself as it portrays not only the questionable mental state of the protagonist/s but also points out the dreariness of quarantine as a couple (or as individuals) in limited space.

leaving the apartment only for grocery shopping, washing hands after returning home), and fictional elements – evoking magic realism – reflecting on the mental state of the protagonists Sara and her boyfriend (e.g. various different versions of Sara appear every time she returns from the store while her boyfriend keeps track of the differences in personality, recording her and marking the Saras with different numbers on her arm in order to make them aware of themselves). In Marlene Streeruwitz' novel *So ist die Welt geworden* the protagonist is suffering from the social isolation and invents a fictitious character Fiorentina Evelyn, a woman described as "überschlank und perfekt frisiert", who urges her to go on doing the housekeeping and body care (S1E2, March 21, 2020).

The social distancing rules¹⁶ have an indisputable effect on social practices. They not only transform what was hitherto considered 'normal' behaviour (handshakes, hugs, physical contact in general) into inappropriate or even dangerous practices but simultaneously stimulate hope and solidarity in cultural production, particularly in music videos, e.g. in Carlos Rivera's *Ya pasará* (2020) when focusing on overcoming the current corona crisis ("Sin dudar sé que puedo aguantar//Sé que puedo volver a empezar//Ya pasará la tempestad//Traerá la calma//Y lo que hoy duele sanará//Ya lo verás que este final//Será el principio//Y lo mejor podrá pasar.").

Whereas behaviour considered as unusual in some parts of the world is represented as 'normal' in Corona Fictions. For example, in *El amor en los tiempos del corona* (2020), viewers see Laura wearing her face mask while having her hair done (capítulo 2), disinfecting her hands (capítulo 2, 6), or measuring physical distance between her and another person on a park bench with a measuring tape (capítulo 6). Similarly, in the first episode of *En Casa* (2020) Sara removes her gloves and washes her hands when returning with her groceries. In Quebec, Mat Cyr and Jérémy Demay point out the new hygiene practices, among other confinement issues, in their song *Le CoronaVirus* (2020).

An important aspect of this phase of the pandemic is the division of society into the groups responsible for the basic maintenance of the economic, social and health care system and the groups able to retreat from the dangerous situation and keep

¹⁶ Although it was only in the 19th century that scientists provided proof of how microbes work in causing or spreading diseases, the ways of contagion had already been suspected and described in ancient texts. The protagonists of the *Decameron* retreat from the city in order to stay safe (Wald 2008: 12-13).

their distance. Numerous narratives focus on the work of medical staff during the corona crisis, requiring a special dedication to the community. Vanesa Martín's music video *Un Canto a la vida* (2020) broaches this necessity of people working together and in her YouTube song description explicitly calls "a la unión, la empatía y la solidaridad". In *Contagion* (2011) the female protagonist, a doctor, catches the disease herself and dies (cf. Vidal et al. 2007: 733). *Épidémie* (2019) depicts the female character's heroism: the virologist Dr. Anne-Marie Leclerc steps into the breach, not only risking her career, but also her life several times in the interest of public welfare. Similarly heroic is the depiction of Camus's Dr. Rieux who also risks his life in his attempts to cure the sick.

Furthermore, the heightened awareness of a state of emergency or crisis triggers diverse societal reactions: To express gratitude towards the essential service workers, the practice of clapping established across national borders. This collective applauding at a certain time of the day became a collective experience, thereby reinforcing the sense of community. The willingness to help others and the feeling of solidarity are often reconsidered as important values. The collective clapping is illustrated in many Corona Fictions, such as in the first episodes of *En casa* (2020) and *Diarios de la cuarentena* (2020) [26:52–27:53 min.] and in numerous music videos, such as *Un Canto a la vida* (2020) and in Jack Savoretti's first song in Italian *Andrà tutto bene* (2020). Thus, through cultural production and/or collective action, the crisis can have a unifying effect.

2.4 Retarding Moment – Second Wave

The retarding moment in terms of the pandemic discourse can be understood as the moment, when the climax seems to be overcome, the evolution of the exponential drift is interrupted, and the characters feel the need to recommence a normal life after the crisis. After the first fearful uncertainty, people start to deny or underestimate the disease and the dangers related to it. They frequently criticize the measures taken to contain the pandemic and cease to respect the new societal rules. Manzoni (1827) creates this image, when he states "Ci furon però di quelli che pensarono fino alla fine, e fin che vissero, che tutto fosse immaginazione", revoking Boccaccio's depiction of the escalating reactions among part of the Florentine population:

Altri [...] affermavano, il bere assai ed il godere e l'andar cantando attorno e sollazzando ed il soddisfare d'ogni cosa all'appetito, che si potesse, e di ciò che avveniva

ridersi e beffarsi esser medicina certissima a tanto male: e così come il dicevano, il mettevano in opera a lor potere, il giorno e la notte ora a quella taverna ora a quella altra andando, bevendo senza modo e senza misura, e molto più ciò per l'altrui case facendo, solamente che cose vi sentissero che lor venissero a grado o in piacere. (Boccaccio 1966: I,1)

The term of the 'second wave' going along with the description of epidemic outbreaks is by no means an invention of the corona crisis discourse. Talking about 'second waves' dates back at least to the 19th century when talking about cholera or the yellow fever.¹⁷ The wave metaphor, dominating the contemporary media and political discourse,¹⁸ according to our experience has not yet been integrated into Coronas Fictions with the same frequency.

Nevertheless, several examples of today's Corona Fictions allude to the second wave: in the *Journal d'un médecin au temps de coronavirus*, Bertrand Legrand (2020, Friday 13 of March) denies the concept of a second wave, stating that it would be a purely 'French concept' ("Il n'y a pas de deuxième vague. La notion de 'deuxième vague' est franco-française.").

As Gianfranco Flammini mentions in his diary entry from April 17, 2020, he considers the second wave to be a certain event but approaches the official crisis discourse and management with mixed feelings: "Poi ci si mette qualcuno a darci 'delle certezze', che ci rallegrano: 'Una seconda ondata di epidemia da coronavirus in autunno? Più che un'ipotesi, è una certezza'." (ebook: n.p.). In any case, Corona Fictions can be expected to also include second wave structures in the near future.

2.5 Resolution – Remains to Be Seen

Early pandemic fiction does not narrate the end of the plague for centuries, with the exception of the *Iliad*, Virgil's *Georgica* and the Bible (cf. Grimm 1965: 58): "[...] David built there an altar to the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel." (Samuel 2, 25)

Interestingly, many Corona Fictions conceive the end of the pandemic with the end of the lockdown. The seven collected prose and poetry texts in *Imaginer L'après* (2020) – written during the period of confinement in spring 2020 – emanate from

¹⁷ See for example Bryden (1869: 147).

¹⁸ The second wave discourse intensified in Europe as of Sept. 13, 2020, when Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz 'officially announced' the second wave in Austria (cf. N.N. 2020).

the idea of what comes after the lockdown. Cécile Coulon also 'dreams' about what she will be doing after the confinement in her poem "Quand nous sortirons d'ici":

Quand nous sortirons d'ici/ les yeux clos comme ceux des chatons et des chiots,/ les lèvres un peu sèches de n'avoir pas embrassé,/ le cœur un peu sec de n'avoir pas mieux aimé,/ je piquerai dans mes cheveux longs/ la première fleur du printemps.

Furthermore, in *En casa* (2020), even though using an open end, the protagonists manage to overcome their relationship issues and Sara hints at having 'murdered' her other versions, returning to her boyfriend without telling him which version of her has 'survived'. The tumultuous state fades and this ending offers hope in the form of the couple's love to the audience. Additionally, numerous music videos envision a time after the corona crisis, underlining the importance of human touch and relationships with loved ones, e.g. in Rozalén's *Aves enjauladas* (2020) where the singer shifts her focus on what matters to her in the future: "Cuando salga de esta iré corriendo a aplaudirte//Sonreiré, le daré las gracias a quién me cuide//Ya nadie se atreverá a burlar lo importante//La calidad de la sanidad será intocable [...] Contagiar mis ganas de vivir y toda mi alegría//Construir, construir [...] Recuerda siempre la lección//Y este será un mundo mejor//Cuando salga de esta iré corriendo a abrazarte". In Italy in March 2020 the hashtag *#andratuttobene* emerged during the first weeks of the lockdown. As the title already indicates, also Savoretti's *Andrà tutto bene* (2020) underlines a positive outcome: "Quando finirà tutto//Ci troveremo davanti a un tramonto//Sentiremo più forte//La magia di un momento [...] Andrà tutto bene//Non sentiamoci divisi//C'è ancora tempo per amare//Andrà tutto bene//Siamo distanti ma uniti//Dal desiderio di tornare". Elisa, as many other artists, uses the phrase *Andrà tutto bene* (2020) as a song title, imagining a similar, more carefree future: "Ritournerà//L'abbraccio tra la gente//Il sole sulla pelle tornerà//La libertà//Di correre per strada//Baciarsi alla fermata e a un tratto//Guardarsi negli occhi per poi dire//Andrà tutto bene//Andrà tutto bene".

All these abovementioned Corona Fictions not only distill the importance of human connection, touch, and freedom to move outside, but also indicate the willingness for social change after the lockdown.

3. Concluding Remarks

In our interconnected and globalized world, not only viruses can spread within a matter of hours, but also images, videos, and texts regularly 'go viral' and reach out

to a massive audience. In the wake of the SARS-CoV-2 confinement, which affected the Western world almost simultaneously, we have seen an instant rise of artistic, media, and literary productions staging Corona Fictions. This leads to an ever-expanding text corpus in a wide range of genres in both traditional and also in new media, which lies at the centre of the current article; also taking into account the political and public media discourse.

Given the broad media scope today, a limitation to printed literature falls short in a scientific discussion on cultural production and sociocultural discourse about SARS-CoV-2. To enable a comprehensive understanding on the subject it is imperative to consider the mutual influences of different types of media, including audiovisual cultural productions. From a transmedia storytelling perspective, they are embedded in an overall socio-historical pandemic context, also touching on the contemporary productions of Corona Fictions. In the chapters 2.1 to 2.5, we show how the drama-inspired pandemic meta-narrative occurs in early pandemic fiction, reappears in contemporary Corona Fictions, and represents the following five phases in different ways: 'Exposition – Outbreak, Rising Action – Rising Infections, Climax – Containment, Retarding Moment – Second Wave, Resolution – Remains to Be Seen'. Each of these phases offers a different range of fictional representations. Their overall interactions within the wave-like structure play a significant role for the overarching pandemic meta-narrative, thus greatly influencing the aesthetic production of Corona Fictions as well as the political and media discourse.

Therefore, it can be argued that pandemic narratives in general have a great impact on both individual and collective world-making. They shape the perception of reality¹⁹ influenced by potentially traumatizing events, such as the WHO's proclamation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its worldwide aftermaths.

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¹⁹ This assumption is based on Nünning's (2013) reflections on the fact that narratives massively influence our perception of reality. They can be understood as “*Means of Living and Means of Survival*” (Ette 2016, 7). As recent studies have shown (cf. Scrivner 2020; Scrivner / Johnson / Kjeldgaard-Christiansen / Clasen 2020), people watching pandemic movies and fans of horror genres in general exhibited an increased resilience during the corona crisis.

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- Die Maßnahme* (web series, Austria, 2020)
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- Monologik – A Smartphone Film* (smartphone film, Austria, 2020)
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