Fiction as a Tool to Imagine the Pandemic
Insights from German, British, and US-American Print Media

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The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 in 2020 affected almost the entire world. Accustomed to the modern imaginaries of globalization, blurring boundaries, and biomedical progress, people witnessed how the pandemic forced political and public health actors to make abrupt decisions in the face of uncertainty. Territorial borders were re-established, previously free movement between and within states was restricted, and almost all institutions, from workplaces to schools, faced ad-hoc implementations of ever-changing regulations. Societies responded to the pandemic's health and social consequences with various prevention, mitigation, and treatment efforts that strained their public health and science systems (Caduff 2020). COVID-19 also caused a knowledge crisis (Briand et al. 2021; Zarocostas 2020): making sense of and keeping up with what was happening became a daily prerogative for everyone. The novelty, scale, and speed of a truly global emergency presented a challenge in which established routines and coping mechanisms were often too slow and disrupted by the speed and dynamics of the unfolding events. While scientific research rapidly expanded expert understanding of the virus and the disease, the public and many political institutions struggled to make sense of an uncertain but not necessarily unprecedented situation.

The uncertainty of the pandemic and its knowledge crisis also shaped the public sphere. Discursive constructions of the pandemic featured in broadcast media, social media, and traditional print media (Hart et al.2020; Mach et al. 2021). Media discourses on the pandemic constructed meaning in multiple ways, drew on established scientific knowledge, translated emerging research, and engaged with broader cultural knowledge about pandemics, emergencies, and crises. In addition to the processes at the intersection of science, the public sphere, and professional media, different modes of cultural and public engagement with COVID-19 proliferated across various media platforms. To understand the complex and multifaceted nature of the crisis, tools previously used by specialized experts (i.e., dashboards and preprints) became a new staple in public debates. However, to make sense of the pandemic, references to fictional narratives, characters, and elements also became popular features in media representations of the pandemic. For example, clas-

sic modern literature like Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) and Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947) was used to illustrate the development, transformation, and shortcomings of modern public health systems. Fictional icons of contemporary popular culture, such as Superman and Ian Malcolm, served as references for portraying virologists and epidemiologists in traditional and social media, highlighting their status as inadvertent public figures of controversy and admiration.

We argue that such engagements with fiction were distinct discursive practices within the toolkit of meaning-making employed during the pandemic. Our study of the reception of pandemic fiction traces how fiction was used to describe and explain aspects of the pandemic in the quality press during 2020 and 2021, the first two years of the pandemic. We compiled articles primarily from the feuilleton, arts and culture, and political sections of exemplary German, British, and US newspapers of record, such as *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*. From these sources, we constructed a purposive corpus of texts that dealt with pandemic-related topics, explicitly referenced fiction, and in which these references had thematic significance. Our analysis focuses on the thematic and communicative features to understand their use(s) as analytical blueprints of a society impacted by a viral disease. Before presenting our findings in the central part of the chapter, which reveals a pervasive presence of references to fiction and a considerable variety in their rhetorical and argumentative function in pandemic-related articles in the sampled publications, the following two sections outline conceptual and methodological considerations regarding the reception of fiction in the media.

Conceptual Considerations

Fictional imagination, that is, inventing, forming, and combining communicative elements, typically without a pragmatic function, is a fundamental aspect of all works of fiction, regardless of medium or genre. Assuming that fiction has "a second-order relation to the real world, via the mimetic logic of fictional representation" (Walsh 2007, 13), we understand works of fiction as communicative forms representing imaginary worlds, actors, events, processes, discourses, and other phenomena, "allowing them free dalliance with material of truth value because their ontological indifference renders them socially inconsequential" (Koschorke 2018, 9). However, both creating fiction and its reception are always subject to historically and culturally determined patterns (Franzen 2018, 269). From a sociological perspective that integrates linguistic pragmatics and literary theory, engagement with fiction can be a source to comprehend non-fictional physical, social, and cul-

tural experiences.[1] Regarding literary reception, a reader can interact with literary texts to engage with the extratextual aspects of literature (e.g., its social context) in a dialogic way, which, in turn, can lead to an expanded understanding of both literature and extraliterary experience.

Thus, a central meaning of literature lies in how a reader uses (their individual aesthetic experience of) literature. In this context, Rita Felski proposes four modes of textual engagement that "are neither intrinsic literary properties nor independent psychological states, but denote multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts" (2008, 14): recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. First, the mode of recognition in reading literature "revolves around a moment of personal illumination and heightened self-understanding" (Felski 2008, 30). For example, a literary character can act as a prism that explores and potentially transforms the reader's sense of self (Felski 2008, 35). Second, engaging with literature as enchantment "is characterized by a state of intense involvement, a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter" (Felski 2008, 54). Literature as knowledge, the third mode, precludes that "[t]he truths that literary texts harbor come, to be sure, in many different guises" (Felski 2008, 103). A reader may perceive literary texts as "semblance, shadow, or illusion, or analogously the counterfeit or imitation" (Felski 2008, 77) of the world beyond literature.

A multiplicity of mimetic devices and storytelling techniques can build the aesthetic effects that create fictional worlds in literary works. This aspect, Felski contends, underpins the notion of using literature as a mode of engaging with texts as knowledge despite, or perhaps because of, fiction's "epistemological shakiness" (Felski 2008, 90). Shock, the fourth mode of engagement, is less a conscious choice on the part of the reader than "a reaction to what is startling, painful, even horrifying" (Felski 2008, 105) about the (reader's reception of the) literary text. That is, shock reflects literature's impact on the affective state of the reader. We extend this notion of uses and engagement beyond literature to all types of fiction. Emphasizing the role that references to fiction can play in interpreting our experiences and in constructing and communicating meaning, we employ these modes as a general framework for analyzing the use of references to fiction in non-fictional forms of oral and written communication. References to fiction offer a variety of ways to do

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1   Although our conceptual framework does not directly address adjacent cognitive implications, we recognize that our formulation is partly inspired by, but not solely based on, the idea of conceptual metaphor. References to fiction can be understood in terms of metaphorical entailment (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), as their use can generate a series of semantic and pragmatic implications or extensions that shape how we understand, and reason about, related concepts. In a more interpretive or constructivist sense, we see this use of language as a particular form of framing (Goffman 1974).

this. We can use them as metaphors, examples, comparisons, and/or forms of evidence. Moreover, various forms of argumentation can incorporate such references (Toulmin 2007, 15–21).

Literary references are common in media discourses, such as in the press (Lennon 2004) and in scholarly communication (Beer 2016; Yazell et al. 2021). In everyday language, people often use such references by comparing, for example, a unique situation to a movie or a novel, given that their applicability is limited only by the user's imagination and cultural consumption habits. References to fiction are a regular part of speakers' communicative repertoires in different contexts, and their prevalence can be observed in written and oral discourse in various social spheres.[2] Different uses of fiction featured significantly in media discourses on the pandemic. For example, social media users compared scientists who gained public visibility during the pandemic with movie heroes or villains (Butler et al. 2021, 440–48). At the same time, references to fiction served as a significant rhetorical device in various discourses on the pandemic in traditional broad-cast and print media.

On the one hand, this use of fiction was consistent with broader cultural consumption patterns during the pandemic, which may be exemplified by the heightened public interest in pandemic-themed fiction (Doherty and Giordano 2020), such as Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011), a film about the global spread of a severe infectious disease caused by a virus with transmission characteristics similar to SARS-CoV-2 (Sperling 2020). On the other hand, works of fiction "are neither mere representations or translations of social dynamics nor [...] purely works of art to be considered for their aesthetic qualities alone or without reference to the individual and social contexts and developments of their creation and reception" (Gaines et al. 2021,

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2   Many implicit and explicit phrases originated or were popularized in fictional sources. First, these phrases can be grammatically, semantically, and rhetorically ordinary. Second, there is the question of the extent to which speakers consciously use references to fiction. Third, identifying manifest and latent references can be a challenging task. Consider, for example, the phrase in contemporary German: 'Das ist ein (zu) weites Feld' (That's [too] far afield). This phrase can be traced back to Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* ([1895] 1966, 287), a realist novel widely taught in German schools. It can be found in everyday speech, German sociology (Esser 1999, 177), and German politics, especially when political vagueness precedes clarity (Gammelin 2020, 17). Readers familiar with *Effi Briest* will find it easier to understand this phrase as a reference to the novel. For those unfamiliar with the novel, its metaphorical meaning, which conveys that a particular topic or issue is too complex, broad, or expansive, is still accessible. By contrast, consider references to Cassandra, the eponymous priestess from Greek mythology whose accurate prophecies were consistently disregarded in both everyday and professional discourse, particularly during the pandemic, where many experts were portrayed as "[b]lessed with uncanny foresight, doomed to be disbelieved" (Confessore 2021). While it is an explicit reference, its meaning is a black box for those unfamiliar with the background of the reference.

12). These cultural artifacts can be seen as imagination machines that explore "our responses to alien worlds and situations which, though they are make-believe, anticipate the kinds of alienness to which we may have to respond in our own lives" (Parrinder 1980, 142). Considering the reception of pandemic fiction, particularly in media discourses dealing with various aspects of COVID-19, the question arises as to how references to fiction were used to create meaning in a novel and unprecedented situation.

Methodological Considerations

To study the presence of references to fiction in pandemic discourses in the print media, we compiled articles from select German, British, and US quality newspapers published between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021. The corpus consists of documents from four daily newspapers—*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*—and four weekly news magazines and newspapers—*Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, *The Economist*, and *Time*. Neither the selected print media nor the final corpus constitutes a representative sample for making statistical inferences about the use of references to fiction in the print media and the public sphere during the period of interest. However, the sample does align with our qualitative aim of exploring such references in exemplary quality press. While our findings are substantial, it is important to consider the latent and manifest differences in reporting styles and rhetorical cultures within the public spheres of Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as between individual media publications.

In particular, the feuilleton culture in German print media differs from the culture and arts sections of British and US newspapers. For example, the editorial style of *Der Spiegel* diverges from that of *The Economist* and *Time Magazine*. We assume that the thematic and rhetorical range of the German and Continental European feuilleton culture, prevalent in many newspapers, is closer to the style of weekly magazines such as *The New Yorker* in the US and *The New Statesman* in the British print media. While the editorial diversity within and between the German, British, and American print media would require a broader range of sources for a comprehensive analysis, our current sample focuses on the occurrence of various types of references in each selected publication. We found such references primarily in feuilleton texts or in arts and culture sections but also in opinion and editorial pages, political and business articles, lifestyle sections, and occasionally in science sections.

Table V.1: Data Corpus

Documents in Total	179 = 106 documents from daily newspapers + 73 documents from weekly news magazines
Daily Newspapers	*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*
Weekly News Magazines	*Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, *The Economist*, *Time*
Accessed Databases	sz.archiv.de, faz-bibliothek.de, lexis.com, go.gale.com, ebscohost.com

We used purposive sampling to locate and select articles with identifiable references to fiction published in the selected print media between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021. Due to limited access to the selected publications, we had to use various databases to search for and obtain the texts (Table V.1). Specifically, we used *LexisNexis* to access *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, *The New York Times*, and *The Guardian*; *EBSCOhost* for *Time*; *Gale* for *The Economist*; and the digital archives of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Differences in the relational architecture and coverage of each database may have limited the accuracy and comparability of the data corpus. However, it was possible to use the same set of thematic keywords in a search string tailored to each database's search syntax, operators, and standards (Table V.2). The database search resulted in a significant overcount of articles, primarily due to texts that met the keyword requirement without containing identifiable references to fiction. A natural limitation of a keyword-based search strategy is the increased likelihood of missing references to fiction outside the scope of the search string. We, therefore, also expect a significant undercount, especially of articles with implicit references. Investigating such references requires a combination of text mining and qualitative analysis beyond the scope of this chapter.

Table V.2: Search String

(corona ∨ covid ∨ pandemic ∨ epidemic)
∧
(story ∨ narrative ∨ novel ∨ fiction ∨ literature ∨ film ∨ series)

In the next step of our selection process, we skimmed each document to select articles that contained keywords from both sides of the set and references to fiction. We then read each article selected in the previous step, both as a final step in our selection process and as the first step in our qualitative analysis, which allowed us to

select texts with pandemic-related foci. For example, we included a review of a pandemic novel because of its extensive discussion of the pandemic, while excluding other book reviews of the same or similar novels that did not emphasize COVID-19 as a thematic focus. In total, our final data corpus consists of 179 articles. Each document contains at least one identified reference to fiction and features COVID-19 as a salient theme. In the subsequent step of our qualitative analysis (Schreier 2017), we used MAXQDA to categorize the fictional source of each reference in the documents, their respective journalistic genre, and the professional background of their authors.

Findings

In this section, we present the structural features of our corpus and our conceptual observations. First, we outline the frequency of references to fiction in our sample of articles; second, their changes over time in 2020 and 2021; and third, more broadly, the various functions of such references in different media and typical writing formats, such as general articles, opinion pieces, and literary criticism. We do this by presenting exploratory readings of various texts in which references to fiction are used as meaning-making tools.

Table V.3: Frequency of articles with references to fiction and referenced format

Source	Articles	Referenced Fiction	References
Süddeutsche Zeitung	44	Prose fiction	282
Die Zeit	26	Movie	114
The Guardian	25	TV Series	50
The New York Times	24	Poetry	11
Der Spiegel	22	Drama	11
The Economist	19	Visual Arts	9
FAZ/FAS	13	Other	5
Time	6	Video Game	3

Regarding the frequency of references to fiction in the print media of our corpus, prose, movies, and TV series were the most common formats of fictional narratives referenced in the selected articles published between 2020 and 2021 (Table V.3). In addition, there is a higher frequency of such references in German print media compared with Anglophone media. For instance, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (daily newspaper) had 44 texts with references to fiction, almost twice as many as *The Guardian* (UK) with 25, and *The New York Times* (USA) with 24. Similarly, *Der Spiegel* (22) and *Die Zeit*

(26), the German weeklies in our data corpus, had more references to fiction compared to the Anglophone *The Economist* (UK) with 19 and *Time* (USA) with 6. We expect these differences to result in part from the influence of the French concept of the feuilleton in German journalism, which blends journalistic and literary practices (Kernmayer and Jung 2017, 18–20; Kernmayer 2017, 57–65). While national specificities could be a factor in explaining these differences, our data do not suggest a strict link between national contexts and the frequency of references to fiction. For example, we found relatively few mentions of fictional sources in pandemic-related articles in the German *FAZ*, even though it is known for its extensive feuilleton culture (14).

Illustration V.1: Articles with references to Fiction in 2020 and 2021
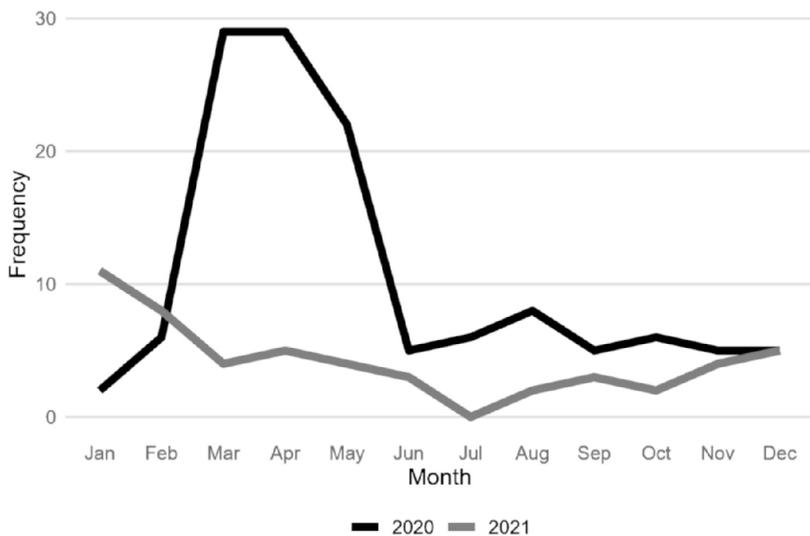

Illustration by the authors of this chapter.

The overall presence of references to fiction hints at their general relevance as a rhetorical device in these texts. In terms of their presence as a means of sensemaking and reassurance during the pandemic, Illustration V.1 shows that the frequency of articles with such references changed over time. It peaked at 29 in March and April 2020, dropped to five in June 2020, and stabilized in the single digits for the rest of the period, except for January 2021. We associate the increase in references with the first wave of the pandemic in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States when the first lockdown measures and stay-at-home orders were implemented in all

three national contexts, suggesting the importance of fiction as a source of sense-making in the immediate response to unfolding events.[3] In an unknown, threatening situation with yet little solidified scientific knowledge to rely on, media writers turned to fiction. While we discuss the observed uses of fictional sources in more detail in the following, the changes in frequency suggest the initial importance of cultural artifacts in situations of overwhelming uncertainty and a decrease over the subsequent stages of the pandemic.

Fictional narratives seem to offer an archive of experience and knowledge flexible enough to provide some temporary, ad-hoc guardrails of orientation when other forms of sensemaking do not work because of a lack of subjective experience with the situation or institutionalized knowledge about it. In the first wave of the pandemic, most people in Europe and North America found themselves in the first lockdown of their lives, and scientific knowledge about the coronavirus was only beginning to emerge and had to be translated. During the first two years of the pandemic, both dimensions of uncertainty diminished in different patterns. While lockdowns were lifted and reimposed several times, the scientific understanding of the new virus increased rapidly, leading to the improvement and invention of countermeasures–the most important of which were vaccines. For the brief period of the first wave, however, our sample reveals a situation in which fictional sources gained increased importance as a means of sensemaking and reassurance.

Our corpus discloses a wide range of uses of references to fiction in print articles. They function as descriptive devices and, in some pieces, as essential means of making sense of the argument in the given text. Such applications go beyond purely aesthetic connotations and provide an understanding of the physical, social, and cultural experiences of the pandemic. In the following section, we discuss the use of such references in an exemplary set of documents from our corpus to illustrate the heterogeneity of strategies we found in their use. References to fiction were used in news articles and interviews, as seen in the first section. They also appeared in opinion pieces (section two), in features by guest authors from the social sciences written in the tradition of either commentary or social/cultural criticism (section three), and in essays by literary critics and writers (section four).

New Articles and Miscellaneous Pieces

The corpus includes references to fiction in very different forms of journalistic writing about and during the pandemic. While the following sections present their use in more specific thematic and stylistic forms of writing, we first highlight their use

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3   While this is beyond the scope of our study, we would assume that the total number of articles on the pandemic also peaked during these months.

in miscellaneous pieces. Most of these articles deal with the situation during the initial outbreak in Wuhan or the initial lockdowns in other COVID-19-affected regions in China and beyond.

Xifan Yang's text from January 30, 2020, asked whether the local, provincial, and national authorities of the People's Republic of China authorities had waited too long with their initial response. When the text was published, it was known that the first cases of the then-novel coronavirus were identified in December 2019, while the central government did not impose a lockdown on Wuhan and other parts of Hubei province until January 23, 2020. The first two paragraphs describe the silence on the streets of Wuhan, in contrast to the speculative noise that characterized Chinese social media immediately after the first lockdown began. Yang notes that Camus's *The Plague* and *Chernobyl* (HBO and Sky Atlantic, 2019), a television miniseries about the 1986 nuclear accident, had gained considerable traction on various online platforms shortly before the first outbreak in December 2019. Citing a user comment on douban.com–a Chinese social networking platform and media database where users discuss fiction, among other things–she compares the events depicted in the miniseries with the reality on the ground: "Wuhan and Chernobyl! How distressing are the parallels!" (Yang 2020).[4] In terms of the use of fiction, we categorize Yang's reference to the fictionalization of historical events depicted in the series, which shows how ignorance guided policy in the face of a nuclear meltdown, as a double-layered form of recognition of, and shock at, the similarities between the unfolding crisis and historical antecedents. Within her argument, the comparison supports her claim that a delayed policy response of a similar nature, not only in China but globally, could have unintended consequences that would exacerbate the impact of COVID-19.

In other articles, references to fiction are used to compare and understand the individual and collective experience of the first lockdowns in 2020, recognizing parallels between factual and fictional events. Mark Bishop, a university lecturer in journalism writing for *The Guardian*, captioned an autobiographical summary of his daily life in the closed city of Nanning in Southern China with "It's like being in a science fiction film" (2020). A similar genre reference, but to a specific subset of science fiction, was made in *Der Spiegel* (Pitzke 2020), which compared the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City, the hardest-hit area in the United States at the time, to movies directed by Roland Emmerich, most of which emphasize destructive stakes on a global scale. Alexander Osang, a journalist and a writer, referenced *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow, 2008), a film about a U.S. Army ordnance disposal team during the Third Gulf War, to describe the cautious nature of his movement through Tel Aviv, the epicenter of Israel's first wave, during the city's first lockdown due to the perceived and real possibility of contagion: "I began to leave the house

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4   Translations of German texts are by the authors of this chapter.

wearing only a face mask and viewed people I met on the street as a threat. I walked around town like the bomb disposal specialist in the movie The Hurt Locker" (Osang 2020). He emphasizes how the risk of contagion rewrote the rules, that is, the situational properties that govern an individual's behavior in public places (Goffman 1966, ch. 12). COVID-19 normalized physical distancing and mask-wearing in face-to-face encounters and social occasions, and social gatherings were forbidden, postponed, or held with limited attendees and stringent health protocols.

In terms of his engagement with fiction, Osang primarily recognizes the similarity between his public behavior and that depicted in the film. Moreover, we argue that enchantment is also at play, but not enchantment with literature, but in the sense of being entirely caught up in the particular moment of the pandemic that, as the all-encompassing context, imperiously dictates his perception in general and that of fiction in particular. We find this latent element of negative enchantment by the crisis in many of the articles in our corpus, especially in those that employ a deep intersubjectivity in terms of style and content, depicting people as "embedded and embodied agents" (Felski 2008, 91) and focusing on the particular view from the inside of experiencing the "qualities of a life-world" of the pandemic (Felski 2008, 89).

In addition to using references to fiction to contextualize the situation in the early stages of the pandemic, not only journalists but also persons of interest featured in various forms of reporting on pandemic-related issues occasionally used such references. In an interview about the political response to the pandemic with Der Spiegel, Markus Söder, the prime minister of the German state of Bavaria, referred to Emmerich's 2012 (2009), a movie about a cataclysmic disaster caused by a geomagnetic pole shift, to explain his general political approach aimed at preparing German society for the political, social, and economic consequences of the pandemic: "I don't want us to end up feeling like in the last scene of the movie 2012. You look at the planet, and the world is different. The continents have shifted, and Europe has become smaller" (Clauß et al. 2020).

In a feature report on his central role in spreading conspiracy narratives about the extent, origin, and treatment of the pandemic and in organizing protests against the German political response, Bodo Schiffman, an otolaryngologist, compared his decision to doubt such measures and downplay COVID-19 to that of the main character in the movie The Matrix (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999): "How did it all begin? When he talks about it, he is referring to Neo, the hero of the movie The Matrix. Neo is offered two pills, one blue and one red. If he takes the blue pill, he returns to his dream world. If he takes the red pill, he will know the truth. Schiffmann says he took the red pill, just like Neo" (Großekathöfer 2020).

Although the corpus only contains three references to fiction that we attribute to scientists in biomedical disciplines, Stuart Turville, an Australian virologist, referred to Nanny McPhee (Jones, 2005), a film based on the Nurse Matilda books (Brand

1962), in an article about the importance of understanding the connection between humans, animals, and the environment in planning for future pandemics. In terms of argumentation, we interpret this use of fiction to support his understanding of the role of a scientific expert to policy-makers and the wider public sphere before and during the pandemic: "When you need me, but do not want me, then I must stay" (Davey 2021). Moreover, we argue that Turville's use of *Nanny McPhee* amounts to engaging with fiction as conceptual knowledge. While this reference remarkably expresses a normative principle of expert behavior in the form of a proverb, the limited number of references to fiction used by biomedical scientists and science journalists suggests, among other things, that referencing fiction may not be part of their core communicative repertoire, at least in their public role as experts when they appear in a non-scientific medium aimed at a general audience.

Opinion Pieces

Most of the editorials and op-eds that contain references to fiction in our corpus, published primarily in the feuilleton, arts, and culture sections of the publications we examined, use them as relatively isolated elaborations to illustrate a singular aspect of their respective points of view. One notable use of fiction as an object of recognition and knowledge is Alexander Kluge's conceptual analysis of SARS-CoV-2, elaborated through references to Greek mythology, especially Homer's *Odyssey* (800 BCE) and German folktales in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm. It is part of an open letter by Kluge, a German author, philosopher, academic, and film director, in response to public statements by Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher whose doubts about the severity of the pandemic had been widely criticized in the European public sphere in 2020:

> The virus Sars-CoV-2, like all viruses, has four robust characteristics. It can cut, stick, mutate, and replicate. It has learned to disguise itself in a very short period of time (it only recently encountered human lung cells, after all). Just as the cunning Odysseus tells the giant Polyphemus, "My name is Nobody." (He mumbles his name Odysseus, which sounds like 'oudeis,' which means 'nobody' in Greek. As a result, the giant perceives him as harmless.) Or, like the flour-dusted paw of the wolf in the fairy tale "The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats," which causes the young goats to mistake him for their mother and allow him to enter the house. (Kluge 2020)

In addition, several opinion pieces use references at the beginning of their texts to frame or foreshadow the underlying argument. A piece of science journalism published in *The Guardian* on March 6, 2020, arguing for a worst-case scenario approach to preventing future pandemics, refers to science fiction, in which "we sometimes

encounter the idea of a pandemic so severe that it could cause the end of civilisation, or even of humanity itself" (Ord 2020). This genre reference is the starting point for a review of past and possible future pandemics that could pose an existential risk to society. Similarly, a remark on the implausibility of an imaginary fictional film "about a US president mismanaging the response to a dangerous pandemic would never depict its lead character anywhere near as selfish and bumbling as Donald Trump in the age of Covid-19" (Gaffney 2020) is used in an opinion piece criticizing the political response of the first Trump administration during the onset of the first wave of the pandemic in the United States.

Jochen-Martin Gutsch (2021), a columnist and a writer, referred to *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Tykwer, 2003), a movie about the East German experience of the German reunification, to frame the uncertainty and various changes in his social life caused by SARS-CoV-2. He suggested that a movie could be made about the pandemic, similar to the plot structure of the film, in which the main protagonist, Gutsch himself, falls into a coma in January 2020, shortly before the first outbreak in Germany, only to be overwhelmed by the total shock of the changes brought by the pandemic when he awakens in the winter of 2021. We suggest that such uses of references to fiction demonstrate an engagement with fiction through recognition and as knowledge and serve a more substantive rhetorical function in these texts than those used primarily to recognize similarities and highlight comparative elements.

Features/Social and Cultural Criticism

This and the next section examine an even more significant use of references to fiction in social, cultural, and literary criticism, written primarily by public intellectuals and cultural critics. As noted above, this may reflect the journalistic, structural, and rhetorical differences in the German print media, whose feuilleton culture transcends the thematic focus on literature and art criticism found primarily in the arts and culture sections of the British and US quality press. Another salient observation concerns the authors of such pieces, many of whom can be considered public intellectuals with backgrounds in the social sciences, the humanities, cultural and literary criticism, the arts, or as writers. Lothar Müller, for example, is a German cultural critic, literary scholar, and feature editor. Eva Illouz, a French-Israeli sociologist, and Rudolf Stichweh, a German sociologist, are internationally renowned scholars who regularly participate in public debates; Illouz in the public discourses of the wider Western world and Stichweh particularly in the German public sphere.

In his opinion piece on the economic and social future of cities after the pandemic, Paul Krugman, an American Nobel Prize-winning economist and regular contributor to *The New York Times*, known in the United States for his wide-ranging public commentaries on current events, uses *The Naked Sun*, a science fiction novel

by Isaac Asimov (1957), as a source of knowledge to introduce and frame the entire argument of his text:

> In 1957 Isaac Asimov published *The Naked Sun*, a science-fiction novel about a society in which people live on isolated estates, their needs provided by robots and they inter-act only by video. The plot hinges on the way this lack of face-to-face contact stunts and warps their personalities.
> After a year in which those of us who could worked from home–albeit served by less fortunate humans rather than robots–that sounds about right. But how will we live once the pandemic subsides?
> Of course, nobody really knows. But maybe our speculation can be informed by some historical parallels and models. (Krugman 2021)

Instead of science fiction, Ilouz, Stichweh, and Müller refer to the historical canon of German literature and European arthouse cinema in their feuilletons. Stichweh's text (2020) refers to Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* as a rhetorical device to elaborate on the contrast between the nineteenth century, when infectious diseases were a regular cause of death in Western Europe, and the public health approach during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using literature primarily as a form of knowledge and an artifact of recognition, Müller (2020b) juxtaposes references to sociological concepts and historical dictionaries with classic German literature, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96) and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), to discuss the idea and the manifestations of a pandemic society. He uses references to the individual experiences of Werther, the protagonist of the latter novel, as he encounters constraining social structures in his quest for self-realization, to complement and critique macrosociological notions of society that he believes were too prevalent in the public discussion during the pandemic, citing Werther's diary: "I've made all kinds of acquaintances, but I have not yet found real companionship" (Goethe 1774, 13).

In an extended argument for a new social contract that emphasizes the role of state institutions in strengthening global, public, and environmental health, Ilouz refers to Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), an apocalyptic film about the strained relationship of two sisters just before a mysterious planet collides with Earth, acknowledging how the particular scene she refers to informed her daily experience and thought process:

> As we are lost in a global event whose magnitude we have yet to fully comprehend, the final scene of Lars von Trier's movie came to my mind. In the second week of January, I first read about a strange virus in the American press, and I was all ears because my son was about to travel to China. The virus was still far away, like the distant disk of a dangerous planet. My son canceled his trip, but the disk continued its relentless course. Now we are all watching, para

lyzed, the progress of the pandemic after the world as we knew it has been shut down. (Illouz 2020)

Illouz uses this reference to understand the inevitability and magnitude of events that require the interplay of all subfields of world society. In this sense, she does not compare the rogue planet in *Melancholia* to COVID-19 but rather to potentially even more severe events such as human-induced climate change. Like Müller's and Krugman's texts, her essay is a quintessentially political and social critique, grounded in a social science perspective that uses the fictional imagination to inform its scientific, or in this case sociological, imagination.

Literary Essays

A particular form of literary criticism further engages with the fictional imagination as a form of recognition and knowledge, using a variety of historical and contemporary pandemic fiction to describe and explain COVID-19. Although numerically insignificant compared to the many documents that use references to fiction, the exploration of the pandemic in these texts is explicitly based on fiction. Our corpus shows that such texts were published primarily during the first wave of the pandemic in March, April, and May 2020. This finding is consistent with our observation that this period shows the most frequent use of such references, indicating a profound need for orientation in a situation where little knowledge about the nature of the virus coincided with new and disruptive collective experiences such as lockdown policies. They also appear in every daily and weekly publication of our corpus (e.g., Assheuer 2020; Müller 2020a; Greiner 2020; Roberts 2020; Botting 2020). These texts also highlight how past outbreaks of infectious diseases have inspired art, music, and fiction ("How Pandemics Have Inspired Art, Music and Literature" 2020).

Adam Roberts (2020) argues that novelists have long been fascinated by pandemics. In his text, he reviews fiction from Greek antiquity, beginning with Homer's *Iliad* (800 BCE), and nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century English literature to contemporary films. His engagement with fiction provides the backdrop for his critique of the public understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and epidemics in general: "We still tend to see agency in our pandemics. [...] With Covid-19, experts insist, your two best bets are: wash your hands often, touch your face never. But people do not warm to the existential arbitrariness of this. [...] This attribution of agency is clearest in the many imaginary plagues science-fiction writers have inflicted on humanity. In place of gods we have aliens, like those in Alice Sheldon's chilling and brilliant short story 'The Screwfly Solution' (1977)" (Roberts 2020).

Thomas Asshauer's text (2020) points out that plagues have always infected the cultural imagination, and that the latter has often suspected that civilization did

not deserve it any other way. This fascination has found expression in a variety of narratives, ranging from medieval cultural myths, with their mechanisms of guilt, punishment, and atonement, to contemporary popular films such as Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995), in which killer viruses avenge the destruction of the African wilderness, and the aforementioned *Contagion*, in which the virus is synonymous with the disrupted balance between humans and animals: "The cultural narrative is almost always identical. Like a hostile agent, the virus creeps into everyday life and infects people drifting mindlessly through the stream of life with disease and death. The viruses are uncanny, even uncannily conservative. They remind ordinary people of the transience of their existence and mercilessly make them realize that it is a miracle that a society as incomprehensibly complex as modern society functions at all" (Asshauer 2020).

Orhan Pamuk's essay, published in *The New York Times* (2020a) and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (2020b), can be seen as a blueprint for literary criticism of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pamuk, a Turkish novelist and Nobel laureate in literature, discusses similarities between the coronavirus pandemic and several past pandemics, such as the historical outbreaks of plague and cholera. His essay focuses on aspects of social epidemiology, particularly the social factors that structure the course of infectious diseases and the patterns of collective responses. He does so primarily through the use of historical pandemic fiction, such as Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* (1827):

> In the early pages of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the single most illuminating work of literature ever written on contagion and human behavior, Daniel Defoe reports that in 1664, local authorities in some neighborhoods of London tried to make the number of plague deaths appear lower than it was by registering other, invented diseases as the recorded cause of death.
>
> In the 1827 novel *The Betrothed*, perhaps the most realist novel ever written about an outbreak of plague, the Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni describes and supports the local population's anger at the official response to the 1630 plague in Milan. In spite of the evidence, the governor of Milan ignores the threat posed by the disease and will not even cancel a local prince's birthday celebrations. Manzoni showed that the plague spread rapidly because the restrictions introduced were insufficient, their enforcement was lax and his fellow citizens didn't heed them. (Pamuk 2020a)

Pamuk's use of Defoe's and Manzoni's novels highlights social processes that have been common in many countries, especially in the Global North except East Asia, during the ongoing pandemic: an initial public and political impulse to deny the epidemiological severity, followed by a late response and subsequent distortion of the facts to deny the existence of an outbreak and to acknowledge that earlier action might have been possible and, above all, more effective. Pamuk argues that another

typical response to initial outbreaks was creating and disseminating false informa-
tion. This has often led to additional forms of suffering and outrage against actors
allegedly and actually responsible for the spread of infectious diseases: "The history
and literature of plagues shows us that the intensity of the suffering, of the fear of
death, of the metaphysical dread, and of the sense of the uncanny experienced by
the stricken populace will also determine the depth of their anger and political dis-
content. As with those old plague pandemics, unfounded rumors and accusations
based on nationalist, religious, ethnic and regionalist identity have had a signifi-
cant effect on how events have unfolded during the coronavirus outbreak. The so-
cial media's and right-wing populist media's penchant for amplifying lies has also
played a part" (Pamuk 2020a). Beyond these similarities, he emphasizes that the dis-
information epidemic was fed not only by rumor but also by a plethora of accurate
and ever-changing information, which, due to the uncertain and evolving nature
of COVID-19, was difficult for non-experts to comprehend. These paragraphs illus-
trate how Pamuk's essay, exemplary of the pieces of literary criticism we found in our
corpus, substantially builds on and engages with the social knowledge embodied in
pandemic fiction. In particular, such forms of journalistic writing do not use refer-
ences to fiction for purely rhetorical reasons. Instead, they structurally incorporate
the fictional imagination as a primary tool to make sense of the physical, social, and
cultural experience of COVID-19. In terms of textual engagement, this often involves
using fiction as knowledge and as objects of recognition.

However, Pamuk's text and similar articles, which are very few in our corpus,
also display a distinct mode of double enchantment. On the one hand, we perceive
in the text a negative enchantment of the pandemic found in many articles in the
corpus. As an overarching situational background in which the articles were pro-
duced, this enchantment framed any reception and use of the fiction. On the other
hand, such texts also seem to be products of enchantment with fiction; that is, we
read them as artifacts of an intense involvement with fiction that shaped the au-
thor's individual experience of the pandemic. In a sense, such texts are readings of
the pandemic through the lens of fiction.

Conclusion

Due to its ambiguity, fiction invites interpretation. And because readers bring their
own unique experiences, their interpretations differ from one another. Accordingly,
engaging with fiction can refine and enlarge "our empathic sensitivities to morally
charged situations, exposing us to exemplars–imaginary ones–of demanding, com-
plex situations beyond those we are likely to encounter in daily life, expanding the
circle of those we care about and our ability to help them" (Currie 2020, 199). But the
use of fiction also "can spread ignorance, prejudice, and insensitivity as effectively

as it provides knowledge and openness" (Currie 2020, 204). During the first months of COVID-19, "many critics, historians, and others isolating in their homes turned to fiction as a cultural archive" (Catlin 2021, 1447), highlighting the role of fiction as part of the cultural memory that shaped significant aspects of the public discourse on the pandemic. Our exploratory corpus shows how, during times of crisis, when scientists and experts struggled to communicate their often preliminary findings to the public, parts of public discourse in the quality press turned to fiction to provide meaning to society.

Despite the methodological limitations of our corpus approach, the text data suggest a continuous presence of references to fiction in pandemic-related articles in the sampled publications from the German, British, and US quality press in 2020 and 2021. German print media showed a higher frequency of such references than British and US media. At the same time, there were substantial frequency differences between the different publications in each country. The corpus includes references to fiction in different journalistic genres and article types, such as news articles, interviews, and opinion pieces. The most frequently referenced form of fiction in the corpus was by far prose fiction, followed by movies and TV series. While the use of works of pandemic fiction is widespread in the articles, the corpus does not reveal a dominant genre. The variety of fiction used in the texts is remarkable, including historical works, canonical classics, and a considerable amount of popular and contemporary fiction.

Of particular note is the peak in the frequency of articles with references to fiction in March and April 2020. It then declines and stabilizes at a low rate for the remainder of 2020 and 2021. The time series corresponds to the local stages of the pandemic, as the first lockdowns in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States occurred in April, March, and May 2020. We experienced the unfolding events at that time as a period of considerable societal uncertainty and uncontrollability. From this perspective, the data support the notion of fiction as a critical component in the toolkit for making sense of and coping with the pandemic. Our corpus supports this idea—at least in print media and journalism, although especially during the initial lockdowns, various forms of fiction, especially those dealing with infectious diseases, received increased attention in various social spheres, as indicated by, among other things, reading trends, increased sales of literary fiction, and an upswing in streaming service subscriptions and viewership.

With respect to the rhetorical and argumentative uses of referring to fiction in the articles of the corpus, their function within and importance to the purpose of the text varies considerably. Moreover, the argumentative use of such references seems to be more substantial in the social, cultural, and literary criticism we identified. Especially in the literary essays, fiction tends to be central to the overall argument. With regard to the four modes of engagement with fiction identified by Felski, two aspects need to be emphasized. First, the most common modes are knowledge and

recognition. Shock is present in only a few articles published during the early stages of the pandemic. In addition, a few references to fiction indicate enchantment as a mode of engagement with fiction–which leads to the second important aspect.

We assume two patterns in the direction and movement of engaging with fiction in the corpus. Notwithstanding the particular rhetorical and argumentative purpose of the reference to fiction in the respective text, the standard pattern uses fiction as a point of reference that corresponds to the particular aspect of the pandemic that is the thematic focus of the respective text passage or entire text. In other words, first comes the experience of the pandemic and then the reception or, more precisely, the re-reception of fiction. This reception is, in negative terms, enchanted with the pandemic experience. The involvement with the pandemic guides the engagement with fiction. Osang's text on his movement through the public places of Tel Aviv, which resembles the behavior of bomb disposal specialists depicted in a movie, is a paradigmatic example of this negative enchantment. An argument can be made that negative enchantment features in almost any text in the corpus, especially those published in early 2020. In turn, Pamuk's text is one of the very few articles in the corpus that display a form of double enchantment, a circular notion between understanding the pandemic through fiction and revising understandings of fiction through experiencing the pandemic.

In terms of enchantment, COVID-19 entirely caught up society, and the warranted social response imperiously dictated the terms of its reception, especially in 2020 and 2021. In this sense, the use of fiction observed throughout the corpus helped to frame, contextualize, and comprehend the pandemic experience–and by doing so contributed to the disenchantment and normalization of the pandemic crisis.

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