

# Pandemic Protagonists (Re)Claiming Agency: An Introduction

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At the outset of the lockdown measures implemented to various degrees as of March 2020 in many Western countries, the reception and consumption of ‘pandemic fictions’ such as Albert Camus’s *La Peste* (1947) or Wolfgang Peterson’s disaster movie *Outbreak* (1995) rose drastically. The strongly emerging need to make sense of communicable diseases, quickly changing societal norms and governmentally decreed restrictions in everyday situations, stirred people towards fictional creations addressing similar experiences in the past. Simultaneously, on the artistic side, we saw a rapid – if not exponential – increase in literary and audiovisual creations responding to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting in the publication of stories, music videos, diaries, web series, films or novels. This new corpus of fictional productions processing the abrupt and mostly unparalleled pandemic life circumstances can be subsumed under the term ‘Corona Fictions’. They “pertain to a more generally assumed genre of pandemic narratives and further form part of a global crisis discourse” (Research Group *Pandemic Fictions* 2020, 322). Following the hermeneutic dynamic of a ‘pandemic circuit’ (fig. 1), these audiovisual and literary cultural productions “not only draw on everyday media and political discourse, but also on previous pandemic fiction, i.e., literary and cultural productions, which rely strongly on the representation and functionalization of pandemics” (ibid., 322f.).

With *Pandemic Protagonists – Viral (Re)Actions in Pandemic and Corona Fictions*, we aim at giving an overview of an array of protagonists from a literary, cultural and media studies perspective. The collection of articles unites analyses from a wide range of audiovisual and literary genres, from (web) series, film and drama to poetry, short fiction and novels. Thereby, the volume puts an emphasis on the rich and varied cultural responses to epidemics and pandemics that span

across media, time and space, filtered through diverse cultural perspectives. It offers an interdisciplinary insight into the representation of different types of protagonists acting in or reacting to an epidemic or pandemic outbreak in a fictional world. Simultaneously, on a meta-level, Corona Fictions represent viral reactions by individual producers and producer collectives to the Covid-19 pandemic and its sudden and unprecedented mitigation and containment measures. By reactivating characteristic meta-narratives – e.g., social isolation or anxiety – of pandemic fictions and their characters (cf. Hobisch et al. 2022, 198-204), the producers also function as creators of the new Corona Fictions cultural phenomenon.

In full awareness that the term ‘protagonist’ can be traced back to antique drama and designates a main character, but is more commonly used in media than in literary studies (cf. Eder et al. 2016, 20ff.),<sup>1</sup> we choose this term to foreground the aspect of agency inherent in its etymological root. The term ‘protagonist’ – similarly to ‘(re)act’ – has its origin in the proto-Indo-European root ‘*ag-*’ meaning “to drive, draw out or forth, move” (Harper 2021), which persisted, e.g., in Greek *agon*<sup>2</sup> or Latin *agere* as well as *actus*<sup>3</sup> and later developed into what we now know as *agency*. The Greek term *protos* indicates that a protagonist is the “leading character” (OED 2022) in Greek drama as distinguished from the second (*deuteragonist*) or third character (*tritagonist*). The plural use of the term protagonist, however, is very common today (cf. *ibid.*). Hence, ‘pandemic protagonists’ are those first or main characters, human or non-human, concrete or abstract that hold the agency to drive forward the main storyline in pandemic and/or Corona

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- 1 The term ‘character’ is more widespread today because “[i]n modern literary theory, the approach that reduced characters to mere functions in the action was put on a new foundation, especially in the plot theories of structuralism and in actant models” (Eder et al. 2016, 20f.). A comprehensive overview of the discussion on characters in fictional worlds across media is provided by Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider (2016, 3-64) in their eponymous volume or Henriette Heidbrink’s article (2016, 67-110) on fictional characters in literary and media studies in the same volume.
  - 2 *Agon* described “a struggle or debate” in the Greek theatre. “The *agon* of a Greek comedy was the intense exchange of views between two choruses or characters. Such a debate would sympathize with the ‘pro’ side, making this sympathetic character the *pro-agon*-ist, or protagonist. The less sympathetic side, those who obstructed the understandable goals of the protagonist, were ‘anti-*agon*-ists,’ or antagonists [*italics in orig.*]” (Paterson 2011, 10).
  - 3 The Latin verb *agere* and noun *actus* refer to the activity and the result of doing something. Latin *agere* “to set in motion, drive, drive forward,” hence “to do, perform”; *actus* “a doing; a driving, impulse, a setting in motion; a part in a play” (Harper 2021).

Fictions.<sup>4</sup> This aspect of agency – or the lack thereof – is even more important in light of the development of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which many people felt deprived of their ability to act. As we have seen at the beginning of the first lockdowns, which were installed almost simultaneously by national governments worldwide at the beginning of 2020,<sup>5</sup> billions of people – particularly in the Western world – turned to fictional narratives to receive guidance, find meaning in the pandemic crisis and lastly regain their agency.

The contributions to this volume study a large variety of pandemic and Corona Fictions from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, since the Covid-19 pandemic inspired cultural production worldwide. In its entirety, the volume thus offers a transcultural, transnational and multilingual insight into fictional narratives on epidemics and pandemics in human history. Moreover, the contributions examine pandemic and Corona Fictions created in and disseminated across different media – from textual to audiovisual as well as from analog to digital media.<sup>6</sup> Due to their capacity to convey their “knowledge to [their audiences] as experiential knowledge which can be reconstructed step by step, or even more, can be acquired by reliving it” (Ette 2016, 5), pandemic and Corona Fictions provide the public with a first hand account of (previously) experienced or imagined health crises and numerous possibilities of individual and collective (re)actions, represented by a variety of main characters. Given the diverse media influence humans are exposed to today and the fact that the human brain does not process (audio)visual images and words equally (cf. Branigan 1992), the broad selection of contributions to this volume is essential for our interdisciplinary and transmedia focus in the Corona Fictions project (cf. Völkl 2021-2023) as a whole. We intentionally invited diverse theoretical and methodological approaches as well as media-specific understandings of key concepts such as the protagonist – the common thread of this volume.

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- 4 Characters can also “be presented without any action, as is the case in portraits, descriptions or sculptures” (Eder et al. 2016, 23).
  - 5 In about 100 countries around the world, partial and full lockdowns were implemented to contain the spread of the coronavirus (cf. Dunford et al. 2020; Mathieu et al. 2020-). They essentially consisted of requiring a country’s so-called ‘non-essential’ workers to stay at home (e.g. artists, restaurant staff or flight personnel) and ‘essential’ workers (e.g. employees of supermarkets, healthcare workers or teachers) to continue attending their workplaces or to work from their hastily established and often poorly equipped home offices.
  - 6 To gain an insight into the broad variety of media formats and genres within the Corona Fictions corpus, have a look at the Corona Fictions Database (cf. Hobisch et al. 2021-).

The pandemic protagonists are the focus of this volume as the driving forces for the plot. Taken into consideration collectively, they offer an insight into how communities at large act in and react to epidemics and pandemics. For the public, these cultural representations may facilitate a better understanding of epidemics and pandemics than scientific descriptions of communicable diseases:

Si nous examinons les compositions littéraires[,] nous observons que souvent leurs recensions d'histoires épidémiques transformées en matériau romanesque sont, par certains côtés, disons au moins le côté du vécu, celui du réalisme de la description, plus authentiques, plus détaillées que les textes d'historiens avérés. Cela peut s'expliquer par le fait que le langage scientifique possède des limites, des bornes posées par les préconçus des auteurs.<sup>7</sup> (Gualde 2016, 9)

Pandemic and Corona Fictions are thus narratively creating epidemic or pandemic fictional worlds, which these audiences can experience in the context of their own pandemic experiences, broadening their perspectives and enriching their previous epidemic or pandemic knowledge. Precisely as depicted in the figure of the 'pandemic circuit' (fig. 1), this prior knowledge considerably influences the audiences' perception of the Covid-19 pandemic itself as well as their (re)reception and consumption of pandemic protagonists in pandemic and Corona Fictions.

The arrangement of the articles leads from the representation of individual types of human protagonists, to the representation of protagonists as a collective. The examples examined range from scientists, readers, hysterical men and single mothers to Dallovesque, senior and immune protagonists; and then extend to the depiction of crowds and animals as protagonists. Furthermore, some address more abstract forms of protagonists, such as germs/viruses invisible to the human eye, or explore agency (in combination with narrative identity) and hope (embracing agency as a goal-oriented driving force).

As both, pandemic and Corona Fictions, form part of the general genre of pandemic narratives, the arrangement of the articles alternates between studies investigating fictional narratives before and after the outbreak of the Covid-19

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7 "If we examine literary compositions, we observe that often their accounts of epidemic stories transformed into novelistic material are, in some ways, let's say at least in the aspect of experience, that of the realism of the description, more authentic, more detailed than the texts of established historians. This can be explained by the fact that scientific language has limitations, bounds set by the authors' preconceptions" (authors' translation).

pandemic, foregrounding the fact that epidemic outbreaks have always existed throughout human history and inspired human imagination. This fact also comes to the fore in the articles studying Corona Fictions published during but imagined (long) before the Covid-19 pandemic, as in the case of the dystopian streaming series *La Valla* and *La Révolution*, Pablo García Casado's novel *La madre del futbolista* or Camille Brunel's novel *Les Métamorphoses*. Studies on cultural productions from the English and Romance-speaking world alternate, thereby underlining the fact that viruses do not respect borders and affect humans and non-humans everywhere.

The *Pandemic Protagonists* volume caters to scholars, students and anyone interested in understanding how fictional epidemic and pandemic oeuvres narrate their worlds and their agents in textual and audiovisual cultural productions. Predominantly written in English, the articles of this volume offer especially non-English storyworlds to an English-speaking academic and non-academic readership.<sup>8</sup>

The volume opens with **Anna Isabell Wörsdörfer's** "Bloody Investigations. Scientists as Ambiguous Pandemic Protagonists in the Dystopian Streaming Series *La Valla* and *La Révolution*", in which she introduces the virus experts Alma López-Durán and Joseph Guillotin as pandemic protagonists testing and even crossing ethical boundaries in their search for a vaccine against viral contagion and disease. In both dystopian series, blood plays an essential and twofold role: as a source of infection and as an agent for a possible cure. Wörsdörfer conducts her comparative analysis in three steps: a) examining the overarching narratives and motivic analogies of the series' plot structures; b) discussing the culturally influenced semantics of blood, as well as, investigating the blood *leitmotif's* significance for the serial-narrative discourse structure; and c) concluding by a structuralist-semiotically oriented interpretation (along the definition of heroes according to Hans Wulff) of the two before-mentioned main pandemic protagonists. At the same time, she considers Jurij Lotman's spatial semiotics while also focussing on the virus expert's interaction with zombie-like 'blue blood' beings in *La Révolution* and immune children used as guinea pigs in *La Valla*.

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8 All articles regardless of their original body text (English, French, Spanish or Italian) feature an abstract in English. Furthermore, to ensure the readability of each article while simultaneously acknowledging the diverse academic and cultural backgrounds of our contributors, all foreign-language quotes were translated into the main language of each individual article and inserted either directly into the body text or provided as a footnote.

Subsequent to this **Martina Stemberger** scrutinizes different reader types in “Corona Palimpsests: Pandemic Protagonists as Readers”. In her comparative study, she looks at the occurrence of readers in pandemic and Corona Fictions and on the basis of an extensive multilingual corpus shows that since antiquity palimpsestuality, but also the ability of literature to serve at the same time as a coping or evasion strategy, are main features of epidemic and pandemic writing. Looking at a great variety of reader types appearing in this corpus – from diary writers or professional readers, to naive ones, from hallucinating protagonists to doctors or children as readers –, she demonstrates how many pre-pandemic aesthetic patterns, such as metaleptic and eclectic writings or inter- and metatextuality, have been adapted in recent Corona Fictions and superimpose each other in the manner of a palimpsest in different genres and media. Moreover, she points out that not only the omnipresent readers and readings inside the texts, but also the readers outside the text, play their part in this creatively challenging ‘corona literature’. Although she refrains from prematurely drawing definite conclusions about this genre, Stemberger steers our attention towards the innovative potential of the numerous playful, traditional or subversive readings of boundaries concerning genre, media and fiction.

**Elisabeth Hobisch** dedicates her article “Hysterical Men and Reasoning Women? On Gender Roles and Agency in Corona Fictions” to astereotypical gender representations in Corona Fictions through the lens of hysteria, considered a ‘female disease’ throughout centuries. She demonstrates how – in Corona Fictions – hysteria often becomes an attribute of male protagonists when dealing with their anxiety in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, while female protagonists take on a more reasonable attitude towards the spread of the coronavirus and the implemented mitigation and containment measures at the beginning of the outbreak. By presenting three examples of hysterical men from a French feature film, a Spanish mystery novel and a Spanish short narrative, Hobisch examines how these anxious male protagonists regain their agency in an unprecedented and frightening first lockdown. She also offers answers to the question on how these cultural representations of hysterical men reactivate and/or challenge contemporary social norms of masculinity.

In her article “La novela de la pandemia como una modalidad de la novela de la crisis. El caso de *La madre del futbolista* de Pablo García Casado” **Justyna Ziarkowska** relates García Casado’s first novel, which was written during the first lockdown, on the one hand, with the dominant topics in the author’s former poetic oeuvre (i.e. the social phenomenon of pornography and the power of money) and, on the other hand, with the crisis novel, as described by Jochen Mecke and David Becerra Mayor. The author reconstructs García Casado’s literary strategies and

the details he used to contextualize his story about the protagonist and single mother Sonia in the contemporary difficulties the Spanish population is facing due to the financial crisis. Ziarkowska then sheds light onto the literary mechanisms used by García Casado to indirectly evoke the additional challenges the Covid-19 pandemic brings about for the protagonist. As a result, the female protagonist serves as a representative of a whole generation of Spaniards for whom, after their optimistic youth in the 1980s, the pandemic and its social and economical consequences are but another crisis on their way into a grim future.

In “Mediated Vulnerabilities: Transforming Virginia Woolf’s Characters in Corona Fictions” **Paulina Pajak** explores two Corona Fictions which both point towards Virginia Woolf’s works. By transforming their Woolfian protagonists, relocating them in current pandemic times and focusing on their presently relevant vulnerabilities, these transtextual and transmedia protagonists face a different set of challenges. While the ‘fictional documentary’ *The Waves in Quarantine* (2021) touches upon isolation and gender inequality, the short fiction “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the rapid COVID test herself” (2022) ridicules the insufficient containment measures taken by governments and healthcare systems. Despite these differences, however, Pajak concludes that what these Corona Fictions have in common is (re)using/reinventing Woolfian characters in pandemic contexts. By doing so, recent pandemic vulnerabilities cognitively and emotionally become more tangible for diverse audiences due to Woolf’s culturally widely known iconic works.

**Luana Bermúdez** contributes with the article “‘¿Te importa?’ Entre soledad y olvido: la representación de los ancianos en el teatro español durante la pandemia de COVID-19” to this volume. After a brief overview of the developments in the literary landscape during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in Spain, she specifies the difficulties theatre productions had to face due to the social and physical distancing measures. She then selects three Corona Fictions plays by Sebastián Moreno, Jerónimo López Mozo and Raúl Hernández Garrido featuring older adults as protagonists and analyzes the different claustrophobic spaces these stories are set in, as well as, the representation of the characters’ interaction or lack of communication in the plays. Moreover, she draws the attention to the authors’ strategies for implicitly criticizing the treatment of seniors by the majority discourse during this pandemic.

Another protagonist type comes under scrutiny in **Louis Mühlethaler**’s “Immunity and Community: The Role of Immune Protagonists in Saramago’s *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (1995) and Roth’s *Nemesis* (2010)”, in which he seeks to understand how the two fictional immune protagonists in these novels achieve to maintain social cohesion in times of sudden epidemic outbreaks. On the basis of the

Portuguese and US-American case studies, he therefore investigates the relation between immune protagonists and their community affected respectively by blindness and polio. Mühlethaler argues that both immune protagonists are not merely defined by their natural immunity, but rather by their will to resist and to fight for the community for whose survival they deem responsible. He then discusses four main dilemmas the protagonists face concerning resistance, avoiding violence, the conflict between individual and collective well-being, and guilt. Finally, he resumes that in *Nemesis* the philosophical self-blindness is a reaction to symbolic violence by the immune protagonist, who after all his struggles to protect his community turns out to be a carrier of the disease; whereas the afflicted community in *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* survives thanks to the effort of the female immune protagonist who guides the group towards self-organization and collective resistance against violence.

In “The Crowd as a Pandemic Character: Determinism, Entertainment and Transgression in Literature” **Aureo Lustosa Guerios** examines the literary representation of crowds in the course of cholera outbreaks. Drawing on Italian, French and German examples of cholera literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he shows how – despite their collective nature – crowds are generally portrayed as a single entity or even as a protagonist. After a short outline of the reasons for and peculiar characteristics of historical cholera riots, the case studies chosen point towards the fact that in literary pandemic fictions cholera is predominantly portrayed as a ‘disease of the social body’ – an easily communicable disease within a society affecting the community as a whole – in contrast to tuberculosis or cancer, which are generally considered as ‘diseases of the individual’. Guerios stresses how across several decades, languages and literary genres, the crowd appears as a topos embodying the responsibility for or source of the outbreak due to its violent or hedonistic transgressions. As crowds seem inevitably connected to epidemic outbreaks, the crowd functions as a visible representation of (during centuries) invisible diseases and, in the end, of an epidemic itself. The persistence of this topos in fictional and non-fictional texts, despite the medical discourse providing evermore enhanced knowledge about communicable diseases, indicates societal tendencies to long for coherent narratives and, thus, to “interpret diseases within moral, cultural or spiritual frames” (p. 174).

Drawing on the interdisciplinary field of Animal Studies, the subsequent two articles look into the subject of human and non-human animals in pandemic and Corona Fictions. In “‘C’était quelqu’un de toute façon’: les personnages humains et non humains dans le roman animaliste *Les Métamorphoses* de Camille Brunel” **Fleur Hopkins-Loféron** explores the concept of anti-specialism as developed by French author Camille Brunel in his novel *Les Métamorphoses* (2020) from the

perspectives of Animal Studies. Written already in the summer of 2019 and finished during the first pandemic lockdown in 2020, the plot of this novel emanates from a global pandemic which transforms all humans into animals. Hopkins-Loféron contextualizes Brunel's literary work within the current debates on ecological consciousness, the animal condition, animalism and ecofeminism. Relating *Les Métamorphoses* with other novels by Brunel, she illustrates how the novelist develops a new perspective on the cohabitation of human animals with non-human animals on earth, radically questioning human dominance and pointing towards ecosophy as a possible solution.

**Ana Carolina Torquato** and **Aureo Lustosa Guerios** shed light on the functions of animals as protagonists in pandemic fictions in their comparative study entitled "The Role of Animals in Pandemic Narratives: Forewarning Disaster, Causing Outbreaks, Conferring Immunity". Drawing on a wide range of examples from literature, film and other visual arts from Western cultures, they analyze how animals appear simultaneously with pestilence as harbingers of disaster, outbreak triggers and immunity vectors from antiquity to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The authors demonstrate that for most of Western history, non-human animals were perceived as foreshadowing disasters and portrayed as victims and co-sufferers alongside human animals. It was not until scientific discoveries and developments in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that this cultural perception of animals changed into an epidemiological threat. Finally, Torquato and Guerios do not fail to point out the occasionally emerging fictional examples that show a positive link between animals and the development of immunity in humans.

While literary descriptions of pathogenic organisms and their representations are very rare in pandemic literature (cf. Gualde 2016, 139), filmic representations of epidemics or pandemics repeatedly focus on microscopic organisms as spreaders of disease (cf. Ostherr 2005). This difference can, on the one hand, be attributed to the fact that the discovery of bacteria as a cause for infectious diseases dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – as explained in more detail in Torquato and Guerios' article – and consequently new theories of contagion emerged thereafter (e.g. diseases spread by objects such as books, stamps or telephones). Moreover, "the discovery of healthy human carriers and the epidemics they generated – beginning with Typhoid Mary – made those figures increasingly the focus of the danger" (Wald 2008, 75). As an archetype of the carrier, 'Typhoid Mary' and the 'carrier narrative' are used "from the scientific, sociological, and journalistic literature [...] into the present" (ibid., 79). Her story has also often been combined with the narrative of the fallen woman (cf. ibid., 85-94) or the femme fatale (cf. Bronfen 2020, 60-70), both representing independent women as a health threat to society. On the other hand, the difference of microbes as protagonists in literary

and filmic representations can be attributed to the heterogeneity of written and audiovisual media. The newly emerging technical possibilities of early cinema turned to germs and viruses as protagonists transmitting a disease. The possibility of “[...] manipulation of the film’s speed (producing fast and slow motion) and [...] of the lens (producing enlargements and reductions of the image)” (Ostherr 2005, 54), enabled filmmakers to ‘show’ organisms invisible to the naked eye. Moreover, “[t]he ability to produce optical ‘tricks’ through editing was another widely heralded feature of the new[ly developed] medium, as was stop-motion animation” (ibid.).

Such cinematic strategies of narration to make the invisible visible are at the heart of **Claire Demoulin**’s contribution on “Germs as Social Protagonists: (In)visible Enemies and the Fear of Epidemic Invasion in Classical Hollywood Cinema”. As the latter is known for its strict censorship policies designed to ensure the portrayal of a morally ‘appropriate’ society for their audiences, filmmakers developed certain codes to include their content (deemed as inappropriate) such as venereal disease. While examining the biographical film *Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet* (1940) by William Dieterle, the author identifies two key aspects in portraying a germ invasion in the example of syphilis: silence and invisibility. Both cinematic strategies encode their message for the audience within the supposed void due to the audiences’ previous knowledge. The invisible germs turn into a visible protagonist, as Demoulin points out the imagery depicting, e.g., the multiplication of bacteria on-screen. Cinematographic representation hereby offers an essential way to additionally capture and/or demonstrate their movement, transforming them into social agents. Finally, she explores how the use of war metaphors in the common ‘battle’ against epidemiological enemies, used in science and popular culture as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, continued to be used in subsequent decades against political and ideological enemies.

In literature, viruses take on the role of protagonists (i.e. gain agency) only when forming a symbiosis with humans, such as the human-viral hybrids in Chuck Hogan’s *The Blood Artists* (1998). As explained by Priscilla Wald regarding the hybridization phenomenon in this novel: “a virus has no social instinct, but when combined with a human being, it develops conscious agency and becomes a sociopath [...] and a bioterrorist” (Wald 2008, 258). In other words, the human body functions as a host, thereby personifying the virus. Such a personification is also

common in visual representations of viruses in comics, in which they equally receive a physical appearance and/or human attributes.<sup>9</sup>

In “Human-Viral Hybrids as Challenge to the Outbreak Narrative and Neo-Liberal Biopolitics” **Malgorzata Sugiera** explores the appearance of human-viral hybrids as protagonists in pandemic and Corona Fictions. She starts off by demonstrating that Priscilla Wald’s classic ‘outbreak narrative’ functions differently in Corona Fictions, as the latter tend to replace the mostly heroic protagonists of pandemic fictions (i.e. scientists and physicians) by traumatized or overwhelmed, hence, helpless ones. Sugiera then turns to two science-fictional pandemic fictions, originating at the turn of the century, to show that a transformation of the classic outbreak narrative protagonists already began at an earlier stage. On the basis of the US-American novel *The Blood Artists* (1998) by Chuck Hogan, and the Canadian *Rifters* trilogy (1999-2005) by Peter Watts, Sugiera depicts the hybridization of two types of protagonists: the epidemiologist-detective and the Patient Zero, who in these novels both turn into ‘human-viral hybrids’, therefore challenging/questioning the binarities of normality/pathology and life/nonlife in which biopolitics and the neo-liberal capitalism are based.

The last two contributions in this volume use the concepts of agency and hope to explore literary and filmic Corona Fictions. In “Protagonisti in cerca di una nuova *agency*: la pandemia di Covid-19 nella letteratura italiana” **Tommaso Meozzi** scrutinizes three Italian Lockdown Corona Fictions. For his comparative study of the novel *Come il mare in un bicchiere* (2020) by Chiara Gamberale, the anthology *Andrà tutto bene* (2020) – also used as a popular pandemic-related hashtag on social media at the time – and the lockdown diary *Nel contagio* (2020) by Paolo Giordano, he follows Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische’s sociological concept of agency, which foregrounds the importance of narrative identity. Meozzi’s main concern is to identify the different strategies of the protagonists in (re)acting to the new experience of confinement. In particular, he is interested in understanding how the main characters maintain a coherent narrative in times of limited self-determination, when a repetitive lockdown routine particularly complicates this endeavour. His study, among others, reveals the common need to create comprehensible temporal structures in terms of content and form, as well as a predilection for the autobiographical genre and references to dystopia in the context of the Lockdown Corona Fictions.

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9 See, for example, the project ‘World of Viruses Covid-19’, which aims at creating “engaging, scientifically accurate, and high quality [sic] comic stories” for educational purposes (<https://worldofviruses.unl.edu/>).

Finally, in “Corona Fictions Agents: Cinematic Representations of Hopeful Pandemic Protagonists in Early Corona Fictions” **Julia Obermayr** examines the concept of hope as a goal-oriented process – following Rick Snyder’s ‘model of hope’ – in the two early audiovisual Corona Fictions comedies from France and Spain *8 Rue de L’Humanité* (2021) and *¡Ni te me acerques!* (2020). In both films regaining agency plays an essential role for the protagonists, as it functions as a driving force for their transformational stories from fear/anxiety to hope, as well as, for the hopeful overall theme cinematically narrated throughout the films investigated. Focusing on the mechanisms of evoking the audiences’ emotional engagement with filmic protagonists and the advantages of the comedy genre to uplift the mood in socially challenging times, Obermayr further analyzes the cinematic representations of two exemplary pandemic protagonists on their journey towards hope, and therefore transforming into Corona Fictions agents.

The 14 articles of this book underline the diversity of pandemic protagonists, from ‘bloody investigations’ to ‘hope’, not solely due to falling in either the category of pandemic fictions or Corona Fictions but more so due to a diverse range of interdisciplinary theoretical approaches by our contributors and a consciously very multimodal corpus including written, visual, audiovisual and performance fiction. Regardless of national, cultural or linguistic borders – and in this sense mimicking the nature of pandemics – pandemic protagonists range from representations as humans, animals, depictions of disease to more philosophical concepts needed in times of crises. What they all have in common, however, is their unwavering representation of the Other inspired by unfamiliar social conditions in a (story)world constantly (re)creating itself. The pandemic protagonists’ power lies in reclaiming and consequently regaining their agency, in shifting from viral reactions towards viral actions. Pandemic and Corona Fictions both demonstrate how narratives shape our perception of the world and, thus, may provoke a figurative kind of contagion by spreading ideas such as hope to take on the challenges of epidemics and pandemics in the future.

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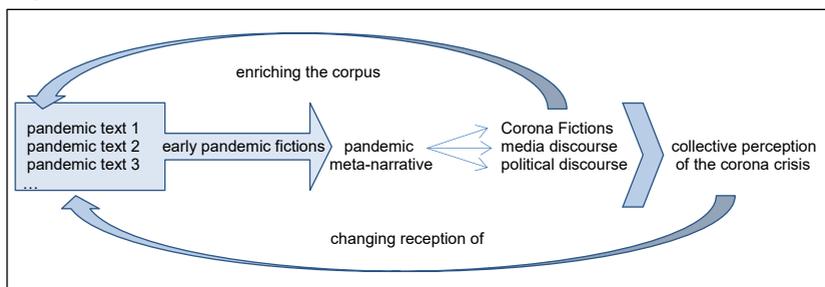
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## FIGURES

Figure 1: 'Pandemic Circuit'



Source: Research Group *Pandemic Fictions* 2020, 324.