Corona Fictions Agents: Cinematic Representations of Hopeful Pandemic Protagonists in Early Corona Fictions[1]

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Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic numerous early Corona Fictions (including films) emerged, creating a multitude of pandemic protagonists across media.

The aim of this article is to examine these protagonists of two European Corona Fictions comedies: *8 Rue de l'Humanité* (2021) and *¡Ni te me acerques!* (2020). Applying Stuart Hall's (1997) circuit of culture lens (encoding/decoding model), as well as various concepts of hope (e.g. Snyder 2002, Grodal 2006 and 2017, Van den Heuvel 2020), essential aspects of the comedy genre and film analysis (e.g. Eder 2008, Krützen 2006, Grodal 2005), the results of this study support the idea that reclaiming agency is an essential factor for fictional pandemic protagonists when coping with lockdowns and other pandemic restrictions.

Both films, thus, demonstrate that comedy is particularly appropriate for the portrayal of transformational processes of initially fearful or anxiety-driven protagonists becoming hopeful Corona Fictions agents in the end.

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INTRODUCTION

Early audiovisual Corona Fictions[2] embrace a great variety[3] of formats and genres to capture and express the essence of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the challenges of lockdowns and containment measures forced many individuals into an unknown physical isolation, many Europeans also experienced the strains of social isolation provoking anxiety, depression and loneliness (cf. Singer et al. 2021, 10, 58ff.), proving once more that virtual connection may be helpful but cannot replace the value physical presence or even touch holds for humans. Hinderk M. Emrich (2011, 2f.) hereby not only discusses the loneliness arising due to isolation of the individual but – more importantly – he points out loneliness due to lack of touch and the "virtualization of our relationship to the world through technical media".

Pandemic protagonists comprise both, fictional protagonists from pandemic fictions[4] as well as Corona Fictions. The following article hereby focuses on the format of Corona Fictions feature films, particularly on two comedies. The chosen audiovisual Romance language focused Corona Fictions corpus for this article – *8 Rue de l'Humanité*[5] and *¡Ni te me acerques!*[6] – constitutes primarily of initial scenes and endings. Michaela Krützen (cf. 2006, 89; cf. Branigan 1992, 4f.) and

2 "Corona Fictions […] emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic and negotiate the latter in their stories, continuing in parts the tradition of creating pandemic fiction. We argue that Corona Fictions reactivate certain structures and elements in the form of metanarratives. The pandemic produced collective experiences which can be understood as transnational and transcultural phenomena translating into the crisis while simultaneously tapping into existing pandemic narratives" (Obermayr/Völkl 2022b, 161). Early Corona Fictions emerged between 2020-2022.

3 Dennis Henkel (cf. 2022, 1622f.) believes to have detected a grand lack thereof. Contrary to his beliefs, the Corona Fictions research team friendly suggests a peek into the online Corona Fictions Database (cf. Hobisch et al. 2021-), offering comedies beyond the corpus of this article.

4 "Pandemic fiction[s] includ[e] works such as the antique description of the Athenian plague by Thucydides, the *Decameron* (1349-1353) by Boccaccio or *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) by Daniel Defoe. Also, more recent cultural productions such as the movie *Outbreak* (1995) or a Canadian series called *Épidémie* (2020 […]) and novels like, for example, *Los días de la peste* (2017) by Edmundo Paz Soldán all fall under the category of pandemic fiction[s] […]" (Obermayr/Völkl 2022b, 161).

5 English film title: *Stuck Together*. Throughout this article the abbreviation *8RH* is used.

6 English film title: *Stay Away!* Throughout this article the abbreviation *NTMA* is used.

Jens Eder (cf. 2008, 717) both argue that the transformational process of a theme closely connected to or even embodied by the protagonist and its surroundings may best be demonstrated by juxtaposing the initial state with the end state as they hold important information on its characterization. This theme may e.g. be an emotional message or morale embodied by the protagonist or narrative means of filmic storytelling (cf. Stutterheim/Kaiser 2011, 368). As Edward Branigan (1992, 4) suggests, "narrative can be seen as an organization of experience which draws together many aspects of our spatial, temporal, and causal perception". This seems of main interest regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, since the creation of Corona Fictions narratives, therefore, is an organization of pandemic experiences that will later on determine which stories enter (and remain in) the collective memory (cf. Halbwachs 1950 [1935]; Assmann/Hölscher 1988; Assmann 2005 [1992]). Furthermore, this also ties into Eder's (cf. 2008, 720) claim that the interface of action and characters is their motivation. In particular, whatever drives the protagonist also drives the overall storyline. Hence, a hopeful protagonist makes for a determined, goal-oriented, agency holding central character, as we will examine in the analysis part of this article.

While both, France and Spain, decided upon comedy as a suitable genre for telling their Corona Fictions, a 'pinch' of romance was added as well. In comparison to tragedy, comedy was often treated as "philosophically and artistically inferior" (Knight 2009, 536). Tragedy, seen not only as a genre but simultaneously as a world view and a way to live, claims moral questions for itself, while ignoring the important role of comedy. Deborah Knight (2009, 542) critiques this point of view by stating that "[i]t is simply false to suggest that the other master genres are silent on the question of how one should live. The master genre of comedy's answer is as follows: as a member of a welcoming community". When looking at different concepts of hope (also see the following theory part 'Encoding Hope') it becomes clear, however, that Knight's position on the function of comedy is right. Particularly in times of high anxiety levels, depression, and loneliness within 'pandemicized' societies, a genre provoking frequent moments of laughter while honoring the seriousness of the situation seems a relief and coping strategy for the spectators.

Thus, the proposed hypothesis and research question arising are the following:

a) The genre of comedy regarding Corona Fictions feature films is particularly appropriate for the portrayal of the transformational process of a fearful or anxiety-driven pandemic protagonist becoming a hopeful one and the representation of hope as a theme throughout the movies investigated in general.
b) How do Corona Fictions create and encode this message of hope?

In the following, we will take a closer look at the concept of hope from an interdisciplinary cultural studies perspective and what role agency plays for both, hope and the protagonist who drives the story forward, before investigating the chosen Corona Fictions corpus.

ENCODING HOPE

Using Stuart Hall's (cf. 1997, 1) circuit of culture (encoding/decoding model) lens considering numerous aspects of cultural analysis interacting (identity, production, consumption, regulation, and representation), this article examines the concept of hope encoded as a theme (a linking element; cf. Stutterheim/Kaiser 2011, 368) and hope represented via pandemic protagonists in the chosen Corona Fictions corpus mentioned above.

Fear, in contrast to hope, is an involuntary autonomic response, an emotion,[7] as "[t]he first experience, common in elements of comedy, melodrama, and horror, is an involuntary autonomic response such as laughing, crying, or fear" (Grodal 2006, 6f.). Although Rick Snyder (cf. 2002, 254) does not consider hope to be solely an emotion, emotions do play an important role regarding his concept of hope as a whole (see below).

Jens Eder (cf. 2008, 509) demonstrates how characters in film may provoke certain emotions in the viewers and describes the protagonist as a character holding significance for something positive. This includes a process of goal-oriented pursuit defined as hope, as mentioned below. The audience tends to adopt the protagonist's perspective when identification[8] takes place since their portrayal commonly evokes positive emotions or is positively associated with a set of own socio-culturally relevant values. The Spanish dictionary Real Academia Española

7 Thomas Schick (cf. 2018, 36) elaborates on the difference between emotions and moods. Emotions, e.g. fear, require an object to fear, to be afraid of. Moods, on the other hand, have a lower intensity than emotions but are of longer duration and do not necessarily have to be related to a concrete object. "[T]he proposed definition of emotion, namely, as *any mental experience with high intensity and high hedonic content* (pleasure/displeasure) [italics in orig.]" (Cabanac 2002, 80). For a more in-depth analysis of emotions and film, see Schick (2018, 31-109).

8 This process of identification may also be interpreted as an invisible contract between film/filmmakers and audiences. Upholding a basic emotional tension, the so-called 'human factor' (cf. Zag 2010[2], 14), keeps the viewers engaged and may mainly be created by taking artistic/filmic measures to consciously provoke it.

(2022), furthermore, briefly defines the 'protagonista' as a "personaje principcal de la acción" but also as "[p]ersona o cosa que en un suceso cualquiera desempeña la parte principal".[9] The protagonist in film commonly holds the main agency,[10] hence, drives the storyline forward. To represent their endeavour on-screen, they receive the most screen-time and are created in an empathy stirring as a way to engage the audience and ease the process of identification. Although the protagonist does not necessarily have to be the (only) main character,[11] this character is broadly considered as such in the filmic landscape.

The protagonist, visible or invisible as a character (but visible through a certain theme throughout the movie), dominates the storyline, receives more on-screen time than secondary characters and holds essential agency. When invisible, the protagonist comes to life through the filmic storytelling itself and may be what Eder (cf. 2008, 507) calls a 'Thementräger' in German, meaning the one carrying a consistent theme (e.g. hope) including the matching symbolism to represent it. Encoded in objects, spaces, actions, etc. the protagonist comes to life even when invisible as a character. Thus, the virus itself, invisible on-screen may be decoded while observing the chain of contagion. The spreading, or an outbreak of a certain illness connected to this virus, may show itself e.g. in colour choices and music used to distinguish between clean and hygienic surroundings (e.g. in medical settings in *Épidémie* (Qub 2020, a TV-series from Québec) versus contaminated areas or infected people by depicting e.g. red objects, clothes or changing the camera filter/colour coding for entire scenes dedicated to the invisible danger of the virus. Animals may also function as carriers of the virus, as seen in *Épidémie* (Qub 2020). Their movements as carriers indicate the possible spread and outbreak. In this case, the virus itself holds agency as we, the viewers, follow its chain of contagion.

In the analyzed corpus *8 Rue de l'Humanité* (2021) and *Ni te me acerques* (2020), however, the virus rather functions as a generator for the Covid-19 pandemic framework and its visual protagonists. Invisible, or rather not exclusively

9 "the main character of action" … "[p]erson or thing that in any event plays the main part" (author's translation).

10 "A model of agency typically implies that a body is pervaded by an agency that possesses the ability to perceive, to be conscious, to have thoughts and emotions, to have specific traits, and to have the ability to intend and to act. It is therefore not surprising that a major mode of explaining film focuses on agency" (Grodal 2005, 15).

11 Due to the scope of this article, however, we will not pursue further the possibilities of multi-protagonist films (cf. Del Mar Azcona 2010) and antagonists (cf. Eder 2008, 493, 509) as a main character option.

personified via main characters but simultaneously represented through a theme, is the concept of hope. Before analyzing the audiovisual Corona Fictions mentioned, we therefore briefly have to consider this complex matter of hope from an interdisciplinary perspective, as it holds essential agency throughout both of the movies.

Hope: The Protagonist's Pursuit of Goals and Agency

i am trusting the uncertainty
and believing i will
end up somewhere
right and good
Rupi Kaur in Home Body

Rupi Kaur's (2020, 27) poem above sums up essential aspects of hope, particularly the aspect of trust in the human good and a good outcome or positive future in general. While there exist vast concepts of hope across time (as can bee seen e.g. in Steven C. Van den Heuvel's edited volume *Historical and Multidiciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, 2020), according to G. Scott Gravelee (2020, 21) in ancient Greek philosophy it was already considered as something sustaining and motivating, "serving as a foundation for human agency". In early Christian thinking, where hope is "a *theological* virtue alongside faith and love [italics in orig.]" (Milona 2020, 113), a reflection towards a more communal focus of hope was taking place (cf. Webber/Kok 2020, 42). In the Middle Ages hope was mostly accepted as a "supernatural virtue of desire for the happiness of heaven" (Pinsent 2020, 58). During the Enlightenment and in the context of theories of affect, "hope consists of a desire and a belief in the possibility, but not the certainty, of the desired outcome" (Blöser 2020, 75). Ronald T. Michener (2020, 92) sums up the postmodern definition of hope under a Christian lens, suggesting a hope "that provides consolation for the past, motivation for the present, and joyful expectancy for the future". As this motivational value for present and future, "[h]ope can [furthermore] have instrumental value because hoping for something can make it more likely that it will happen […]. The instrumental value of hope here is rooted in its motivational power" (Milona 2020, 110). In short, hope fuels our agency. However, this is not a new idea, since the US-American psychologist (Charles Richard) Rick Snyder (2002, 249), known for his pioneering work in the field of positive psychology and the theory of hope, defines hope as "*the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways* [italics in orig.]". As his own views about hope theory evolved over

time, Snyder identified further details for his own definition, e.g. that "the only appropriate goals are those that fill a profound void in a person's life" (Snyder 2002, 250). In his elaborated hope model (cf. fig. 1) he further explains how pathways and agency thinking originate in what we learn throughout our childhood and beyond (cf. ibid., 253). Hence, the hopeful thinking we have learned in the past "is accompanied by trait-like emotional sets or moods" (ibid.), influencing the motivational process of pursuing the set goal.

We then analyze the importance of the goal pursuit in the pre-event phase or at the latest by starting our pursuit process. Hereby, "the pathways and agency thoughts are activated" (Snyder 2002, 254) and emotional reactions may occur. In this context, "[e]motions […] are not task avoidant and harmful; rather, they contribute to, and are a natural part of, an active, productive, goal-directed type of thought" (ibid.). However, hope itself is not (just) an emotion but "was primarily a way of thinking, with feelings playing an important, albeit contributory role" (ibid., 249). As can be seen in Snyder's model (cf. fig. 1), the hopeful pursuing of one's goals can be disturbed by stressors impactful enough to jeopardize the process. Ultimately, the goal (non-)attainment reinforms pathways and agency, depending on the outcome that has been achieved.

Recalling Snyder's aforementioned goal-oriented definition of hope, his theory is supported by memory research, as Krützen (cf. 2006, 94) points out: a goal stated at the beginning of a narrative is easier to follow. This is a well-known strategy in e.g. classical Hollywood cinema which has been used until today when driving forward a plot by a character trying to achieve their goal. This goal, however, may often be redefined or even discarded (cf. Krützen 2006, 93f.). Interestingly, the location of cinema culture hereby plays an important role as well (ibid.): Hollywood cinema[12] focuses on the wants, needs and desires of the main characters, whereas European cinema protagonists often do not know if they want something or what they want exactly, which is harder to follow for the audience.

What protagonists desire or how their emotions and/or hopeful states affect the audience's perception when watching a film, may illustrate the following model by Torben Grodal, a Danish film and media studies professor emeritus. He worked intensely on film experience and film aesthetics. His central model surrounding perception, emotion, cognition, and motor action – referred to in short as PECMA flow[13] –

12 Classical Hollywood cinema narrates how a protagonist reaches their goal in a spiral (not a circle) (cf. Krützen 2006, 96).

13 "The basic assumption of semiotic film theory – and even the implicit assumption in some strands of cognitive and philosophical film theory – is that viewers are looking at

> described the flow from perception, through emotional activation and cognitive processing, to motor action. […] An additional feature of the PECMA flow model is the evaluation of reality status, based on combining a radical constructivism with evolutionary realism. (Grodal 2006, 1)

He further claims that "[t]he model also helps film historians in the sense that it provides a better understanding of what aspects of films should be described historically and what aspects should be described psychologically" (ibid., 3). To elaborate on his interdisciplinary approach, Grodal (cf. 2006, 3f.) mentions the importance of understanding the design of the brain, as sensory organs such as eyes and/or ears receive an input and transform this information, sending it to specific parts of the brain where associations take place before acting out bodily internal states via e.g. laughing or crying, while simultaneously the limbic system interacts with PECMA, the above-mentioned mental processes. Hence, "film not only provides propositional meanings but also a range of perceptual, cognitive, and emotional experiences cued by the playful activation of our embodied brains" (Grodal 2006, 5). This view on experiencing a film is particularly essential when it comes to e.g. fear affecting the bodies of spectators watching a certain fear inducing sequence.

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moving film images, and that those images are seen initially as representations and then matched to a referent (a pro-filmic event, a meaning, etc.). In contrast, the PECMA flow model takes what I sometimes call a 'direct drive' approach. PECMA flow starts when light information enters the eyes. Whether this information is derived from the real world or from moving images does not make a fundamental difference for most of the brain systems connected to film viewing, although part of the brain is very much occupied with assessing the reality-status of what we see. When watching a film, we do not primarily see representations of people and landscapes; we simply see people and landscapes, although we know that this seeing is induced by artificial means. Our knowledge that our seeing is artificially induced creates a conscious feeling that the objects are not real. This feeling can vary in strength depending on the film and the viewer. When speaking of films and other aspects of reality, it is easy to forget that although the world outside our heads has an objective existence, we only have access to films or reality through our brains. Therefore, our experience of film exists side by side with our experience of real events; the film experience runs on the same brain circuits as those used for real world experience, and only mental 'reality-status markers' indicate the difference between visual fiction and online fact" (Grodal 2006, 3).

From Fear to Hope

Emotions change how we view the world, how our body feels, how we interact with each other, thus, also how our social fabric functions. During the Covid-19 pandemic and its first lockdowns and containment measures, fear dominated public discourse (daily TV news, newspapers, speeches held by politicians) in the Western world. When we talk about fear, we understand that apart from fear as an emotional dimension, there also exist "political, social, and cultural dimensions of fear" (Linke/Smith 2009, 4).

Almost simultaneously, however in contrast to the dominating mass media discourse, many artistic expressions focused on elevating the spirits of their audiences, e.g. through uplifting music (cf. Obermayr/Hobisch 2023) or the production of films within the comedy genre to strengthen resilience and support social cohesion (cf. Obermayr/Völkl 2022a).

Fear has not suddenly emerged during the pandemic but has been a constantly reactivated emotion through certain impactful events such as 9/11 in the US, and moreover repeated in media and political discourse and socio-cultural practices. Since then, it again is accompanying Western cultures to a higher degree, also steering the diverse societies of Europe towards concepts such as 'security', 'safety', 'protection' or 'defense' mentioned by Uli Linke and Danielle Taana Smith (2009, 3):

> These are among the terms circulated as part of a global public discourse of fear which encourages proactive military action, legitimates war as a surgical intervention, and authorizes faraway acts of violence as a means of national border fortification. The securocratic language of the contemporary western state is war talk: it not only empowers a state's military reach across national borders, but diminishes civil society, abandons human rights, diplomacy, and visions of peace. (ibid.)

This war talk' indeed reappears at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic as, for example, the French president Emmanuel Macron (cf. Schmelzer 2020)[14]

14 "Dagmar Schmelzer (2020) draws a discursive performance comparison between German, French, and Spanish speeches addressed to each nation at the very beginning of the pandemic in Europe. [Their] rhetoric had the same goal: to foster social cohesion in a time of crises to obtain a behavioral shift within the population in order to contain the spreading virus. Constructing the virus as the collective enemy, declaring war, and building on a collective 'we,' as Marcon did, aims to (re)establish a sense of social

mentions the virus as an enemy and declares the French nation at war against it. Thus, when watching a fear inducing movie sequence, the audience may experience a reactivation of 'cultures of fear',[15] which may be useful as a 'modus of population management' (cf. Linke/Smith 2009, 4f.). However, the population does have the ability to regulate and influence their emotional state by avoiding or enforcing certain habits of exposure to cultures of fear or of cultivating hope, as Matthew Price and colleagues (cf. 2022) elaborate on in their article "Doomscrolling During COVID-19: The Negative Association Between Daily Social and Traditional Media Consumption and Mental Health Symptoms During the COVID-19 Pandemic". Doomscrolling, therefore, destroys hope and optimism as their study has shown:

> [R]egular social media exposure, or doomscrolling, is associated with an increase in depression and PTSD, even when accounting for prepandemic mental health. This effect was magnified for those with histories of maltreatment. This result highlights a major challenge imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic – remaining informed is associated with a mental cost. Strategies to limit doomscrolling and engage in positive activities may offset the detrimental effect of engaging in these behaviors. (Price et al. 2022, 1345)

To sum up, not only the mood spread by media discourse but also a Corona Fictions' protagonists' mood and emotions are highly contagious, even through the screen. Carl Plantinga (cf. 2009a, 91) asks about the degree of identical emotions shown by both the spectators and the protagonists, underlining the fact that Torben Gordal's (also see PECMA model) view on this matter is that the audience and the protagonists have largely identical emotions (cf. Plantinga 2009a, 91; Grodal 2006). "Emotional response is typically rooted in the spectator's appraisal of the narrative in conjunction with character goals and desires" (Plantinga 2009a, 91).

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cohesion necessary to introduce harsh containment measures such as a lockdown […]" (Obermayr/Völkl 2022a, 135).

15 "Cultures of fear have a political grounding: negative emotions like fear or terror are produced and sustained to govern populations within the carceral spaces of militarized societies. In this sense, an emergent cultural system of fear cannot be understood solely as a byproduct of violence or as an inevitable symptom of war. Forms of terror are artifacts of history, society, and global politics. Cultures of fear and states of terror are affective tools of government that come into being as a modus of population management deployed by military, political, and administrative actors […]" (Linke/Smith 2009, 4f.).

Hence, a hopeful protagonist is likely to inspire, at the very least, a hopeful mood in spectators.

It must be taken into account that models of identification and empathy of the spectator/reader do not apply to the multiple structural levels (Ger. 'Mehrebenenstruktur') of narratives (cf. Hiergeist 2014, 65). As Teresa Hiergeist (cf. 2014, 62) suggests, the reader – or in the case of audiovisual formats the spectator – develops own ideas and wishes on how a protagonist should act within the storyline narratives. Similarly, Roland Zag (cf. 2010[2], 65) argues that the so-called 'human factor' in a contract between audience and filmmaker/film plays an essential role in a protagonist's potential to offer aspects of identification for an audience. In this sense, conventional character constellations[16] ease the identification process for the audience, particularly with a protagonist's rich inner life and emotional state, whereas more non-conventional character creations with higher levels of 'difference qualities' (Ger. 'Differenzqualitäten') are harder to affectively experience (cf. Schick 2018, 99).

Applying this logic to Corona Fictions, particularly the two chosen examples, the artistic agency of relatable characters may foresee a certain potential for provoked reactions from their audiences. Hence, the choice of the comedy genre allows for the thematizing of e.g. Covid-19 deaths or negative effects of lockdown restrictions by adding enough comic relief for spectators to be able to laugh about the hardships and challenges rather than to cry in sadness and despair. The moral reminder thus, does not finally have to be how serious an illness can be but how much value your life and well-being have despite the pandemic chaos. Corona Fictions are able to enter the dystopian pandemic world of their audiences by creating a certain familiarity/possibility of identification with the characters, before transforming and at best dissolving potential fears to offer a hopeful future. In any case, "[h]ope and fear both depend on our sense that the future is open […]" (Gravlee 2020, 19).

In the next chapter we will examine the process of the pandemic protagonists to reclaim their agency and as a consequence to go through a transformational process towards a more hopeful character.

16 Character constellations on the level of 'histoire' hereby refer to the relations amongst the characters, not the character configuration (how often they interact in a scene) on the level of 'discours' (cf. Gräf et al. 2011, 174, 173).

CORONA FICTIONS AGENTS AND COMEDY: ENCODING HOPE AND THE POWER OF AGENCY

The focus of this article lies not primarily on affective effects of feature films on their audiences but more so on artistic productions and representation of Covid-19 pandemic related aspects in audiovisual media – namely Corona Fictions and the role of their protagonists. Although the selected franco- and hispanophone corpus – the two comedies *8 Rue de l'Humanité* (2021) and *¡Ni te me acerques!* (2020) situated during the pandemic in Europe – are not by any means representative for the diversity of all early audiovisual Corona Fictions, they do demonstrate a clear pattern of how pandemic protagonists may operate, particularly within the comedy genre. This narrative pattern deviates from the pandemic fictions' related norm – rather than the Corona Fictions' related norm – of outbreak narratives[17] which mainly concentrate on the spread and/or containment of a virus or other contagious illnesses.

This selective corpus, as with many other Corona Fictions (cf. Obermayr/Völkl 2022a/b; Obermayr/Hobisch 2023), enters the audiences'[18] minds by references to the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. the empty streets of Paris in *8 Rue de l'Humanité* while hearing Macron's speech "Nous sommes en guerre", cf. *8RH* [00:00:25 min.]; or the lonely drive of a 'madrileño' called Juan in a Spanish natural scenery, cf. *NTMA* [00:00:27 min.], before entering a local bar in a small village as the only one with mask and gloves on in *¡Ni te me acerques!*, cf. *NTMA* [00:04:14-00:04:28 min.]). These scenes paint the initial image of both the current state of the situation and the film protagonists as rather negative, fearing others or at least feeling anxious and experiencing the first acute lockdown shock effect (cf. Singer et al. 2021). Juan's editor also mentions the extremely worried Spanish president on the phone ("El presidente está preocupadísimo", *NTMA* [00:15:38 min.]).[19] Interestingly, the mental state of the audiences in general, often coincide with those of the numerous protagonists, as certain actions, objects, ideas, emotions etc. may provoke affective reactions (cf. Eder 2005, 115f.). Remarkably, the Corona Fictions investigated result in the transforming of a hopeless and disoriented state of their protagonists and/or their surroundings by introducing a hope

17 For more details on outbreak narratives/pandemic films see Priscilla Wald (2008) and Denis Newiak (2020).

18 "Film spectatorship […] is the experience of viewing and hearing fictional feature films, together with the psychological and social contexts in which such viewing/hearing occurs" (Plantinga 2009b, 249).

19 "The president is very preoccupied" (author's translation).

narrative inscribed in both the theme and the protagonists. Unlike most Zombie movies, where hopelessness constitutes a central element (cf. Jones 2020/2022), in Corona Fictions creating hope either for the protagonist and their world or their audiences is essential. This not only applies to the corpus chosen for this article but also e.g. in regards to uplifting music videos (cf. Obermayr/Hobisch 2023).

Pandemic Protagonists and Agency

As has been discussed previously, the concept of hope applied to a filmic protagonist uses the character's agency to determine a pathway to their set goal. "Agency is enabled by narrative understanding when we are able to put our current situation into a larger narrative context, whereby some possible actions, but not others, make sense" (Hardt 2018, 535). In the case of Corona Fictions, this larger context points towards reactivated narratives originating in pandemic fictions such as isolation ('aislamiento social') or anxiety ('la ansiedad') (cf. Hobisch et al. 2022, 200f.).

These reactivated themes, however, merely function as a starting point for the initial scenes of the corpus, introducing the audiences to the pandemic, its challenges (e.g. containment measures etc.) and ultimately the anxious feeling at the beginning of a lockdown. The directors' – Norberto Ramos del Val's (*NTMA*) and Dany Boon's (*8RH*) – artistic choices in regard to comedy may also be interpreted through the lens of 'artistic agency'.[20] In this sense, agency not only plays an essential role in the realm of hope but also in the creation and production of cultural artefacts. Thus, artistic agency

> provides us with an understanding of how a biological entity, an auteur, processes a range of different biological and cultural determinants and causalities into art by a process that is located in a specific time, place, and agency, thus producing a specific work of art and a specific *oeuvre* [italics in orig.]. (Tybjerg 2005, 28)

The Covid-19 pandemic functions as a very specific timeframe for anchoring films which is essential to categorizing them as Corona Fictions. The chosen movies are moreover located in Paris (*8RH*) and a Spanish village called Ariño (*NTMA*). Both mainly take place in one edifice. While in France the audience follows protagonist

20 "Agency is an empirical fact and it is the cornerstone of social life. The production of artefacts and meaning is performed by biological entities, and the makeup of each individual agency influences the product. […] The individual agent is a unique configuration of an infinite number of general forces and influences" (Tybjerg 2005, 27).

Martin and a group of characters living in the same building, the Spanish protagonist Juan arrives in the countryside to live in an empty hotel (the real Hotel Balneario de Ariño). The character agency does not solely fall on each of the protagonists, but some agency is rather socially distributed among these groups of secondary characters. The Parisian tenants introduced bond during lockdown, as they each find themselves (couple/family/single) confined to their apartments, the building's stairways (cf. *8RH* [00:22:00 min.]) and courtyard (cf. *8RH* [00:23:11 min.]). The 'ariñeros' in Spain, on the other hand, are initially shown as even further separated from Madrid's protagonist Juan, as they inhabit the village whereas Juan watches over the hotel referred to, which is located on a hill away from the village centre, where he plans on writing his novel. During lockdown, however, the Spanish characters (Alicia, Evaristo and Antonio) also start to build a relationship with him in a manner similar to the Parisian tenants – the only difference being that their challenges result from being confined to the same building and not because of loneliness in a secluded hotel. Another parallel can be drawn regarding a similar timeframe: both films start at or around the beginning of the obligatory lockdown and end simultaneously by the end of it. While in Paris, the tenants form a close-knit group with lots of emotional closeness and physical proximity (cf. Obermayr/Völkl 2022a) in the end, the Spanish characters also demonstrate a development towards both factors (more details see in Obermayr/Völkl 2022b) before Juan leaves the village to return to Madrid. Hence, the evolution from isolation towards an ultimate strong social cohesion plays an important role in both feature films as their characters – despite all kinds of pandemic restrictions – focus on the collective. The outlook at the end of both films is full of hope as the creators both opted for an open ending. Social cohesion and hope seem strangely connected, enhancing the feeling of a) community and b) change towards more agency:

a) Hope encoded in community (social cohesion):

All the Parisian tenants, for example, support Diego who lost his wife due to Covid-19 (cf. *8RH* [01:55:49 min.]), while Juan receives a big piece of regional 'jamón' (Engl. 'ham') from Evaristo and a long hug before leaving the village (cf. *NTMA* [01:31:56 min.]). Both films hereby demonstrate a development towards a stronger social cohesion.

b) Hope encoded in change towards individual agency:

Martin, the hypochondriac constantly disinfecting everything, almost completely loses all his agency when the scientist of the building experiments on him to find a vaccine against Covid-19. Justice prevails in the end as the police take the mad scientist away (cf. *8RH* [01:50:58 min.]) and Martin leaves forced quarantine, regaining his individual agency. Shortly thereafter he participates in a courtyard party with the other tenants, seen standing close to different people, touching them, laughing and enjoying himself (cf. *8RH* [01:53:18-01:53:48 min.]). In the end, he stops panicking and succeeds in abandoning his role of the hysterical man.[21]

The Spanish protagonist Juan breaks the rules of physical distancing by sharing a joint with Evaristo in the hotel pool indoors (cf. *NTMA* [01:05:07 min.]) and later on making out with Alicia (cf. *NTMA* [01:21:20-01:24:00 min.]). Furthermore, he finally starts writing his novel back in Madrid, using the same sentence as we see him write in the beginning, thus, functioning as a framework for the movie. (cf. *NTMA* [01:33:27 min.]). This goal allowed him to experience the lockdown from a writer's perspective, observing (and later on documenting) certain aspects in a testimonial manner (see the countdown of seemingly random days in *NTMA* [01:08:15 min.]). Even though Juan is portrayed both without and far away from the 'ariñeros' at the end of the film, he seems more connected and grounded as he finally starts writing his novel, bringing the transformational power of the lockdown experience with him to Madrid.

Social cohesion functions in a sense as a goal within the hope model for the pandemic protagonists, especially when contrasting it with isolation and loneliness in the initial scenes at the beginning of the lockdown. The filmmakers hereby created characters aspiring to human connection and positive change after a time of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, personal turmoil and the lack of physical touch.

Mixing film genres – as shown in *¡Ni te me acerques!* by integrating dreamlike sequences and fantastic elements (cf. *NTMA* [00:16:27 min.]) – has an affective effect and consciously applies mood-cues, evoking expectations regarding certain emotional, narrative and stylistic patterns (cf. Schick 2018, 156). To portray hope, agency, as discussed earlier, is an essential factor for (pandemic) protagonists. At the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdowns, in both films, the protagonists Juan and Martin are both heavily restricted in their agency in terms of moving freely or

21 For an analysis of the hysterical man as a typical protagonist within Corona Fictions, see the contribution of Elisabeth Hobisch in this volume.

having to practice physical (and to some extent also social) distancing and are represented as rather cautious (or in the case of Martin even hysterical and hypervigilant) characters. Agency, however, is essential to life satisfaction as "[it] reflects efficacy expectations, and a perception of satisfaction-promoting control, even if external conditions do not permit the activation of problem-solving skills (e.g., as in chronic illness)" (Bailey et al. 2007, 173). As the Covid-19 pandemic progresses, both pandemic protagonists, thus, reclaim their agency and transform into agents of Corona Fictions.

Corona Fictions Comedies

The functioning of genres seems to depend on 'historically developed psychological dispositions of the spectator' (cf. Wuss 2020, 331). In their multidimensionality, genres represent cultural constructions (cf. Grodal 2017, 7) and "a central group of genres is based on their ability to cue basic emotions: [r]omance, [c]omedy, [t]ragedy/sad melodrama, thrillers and horror films" (ibid.). Comedy, for example, develops when deviating from common behavioural patterns or ritualized actions while simultaneously questioning what we take as given or what we know (cf. Stutterheim/Kaiser 2011, 298). Thus, it is a suitable genre in Covid-19 related times when social behaviour has been more regulated and heavily restricted by containment measures. Simultaneously, we constantly question otherwise common behavioural patterns from pre-pandemic times. From this perspective, allusions to war rhetoric also make sense when breaking patterns of a peaceful societal state. Additionally, the task of comedy as a film genre is to question the moral values of society as it reflects the collective unconscious/subconscious, bringing to light society's suppressed but (re)surfacing emotions (cf. ibid., 300). When social conflicts arise, as observed in both of the films investigated, comedy reacts by offering the audiences a good laugh[22] where otherwise it would not be allowed to express e.g. anger (cf. ibid., 297). The protagonist's desires in a comedy embody a certain conflict in their community or society as a whole (cf. ibid., 304).

In *8 Rue de l'Humanité* Martin initially embodies the conflict between obedience and autonomous adjustments regarding the lockdown rules. In *¡Ni te me acerques!* Juan adjusts these rules more quickly, seemingly due to his complete isolation without friends or family members. Family, however, is the central focus of every story's human factor (cf. Zag 2010[2], 65). This is how you gain empathy for the main characters, particularly the protagonist. As Juan pretends to lose the

22 Laughing helps to counteract those in power (state and church) and functions as a mechanism against fear (cf. Stutterheim/Kaiser 2011, 297).

cell phone signal in the countryside while talking on the phone to his mother (cf. *NTMA* [00:11:48-00:12:12 min.]), he is not initially portrayed as the most likeable of characters. Similarly, he seems very annoyed by an audio message from his partner a little earlier, calling her back but keeping the call short (cf. *NTMA* [00:11:00 min.]).

Martin embodies the hysterical man, an exaggerated version of a hypochondriac, constantly disinfecting himself and his family – even when just returning from clapping for healthcare workers on the balcony of his apartment with masks on (cf. *8RH* [00:02:59 min.]). His anxiety levels are initially high, negatively affecting not only his wife and daughter but also stressing the rest of the tenants throughout the movie. Martin is painted as a purposefully exaggerated pandemic protagonist. The first scenes in particular introduce him as a pessimistic and fearful character following the new pandemic rules beyond reasonable measure. He constantly imposes his extreme behaviour on everyone who approaches him in some way as following examples illustrate: In conversation with his worried daughter, he explains how the virus enters the lungs and paints horrible scenarios of difficulties in breathing etc. until his wife stops him and hands him a paper bag to calm his own hyperventilating breath, reassuring him that they all respect all the health measures (cf. *8RH* [00:04:28-00:4:56 min.]). Moreover, when the concierge's husband Diego brings him the mail, Martin pulls back his wife as he learns that Diego's wife is in the hospital with Covid-19. The hypochondriac instantly measures everyone's temperature while his wife focuses on being friendly, compassionate and supportive towards Diego (cf. *8RH* [00:4:56-00:07:00 min.]).

Towards the end of the movie, however, when Martin appears in one of the last scenes (cf. *8RH* [01:55:14 min.]), he participates in group hugging of Diego with all the other tenants in the courtyard after learning that his wife Paola has passed away due to Covid-19. As a comedic protagonist, his function is to provoke laughter in the audience and not to laugh at himself.[23] In all of this seriousness, the last scene brings all the Parisian tenants including the hysterical protagonist Martin, one after another out onto the balcony (cf. *8RH* [01:55:56 min.]). Each character brings on signs of encouragement for Diego after the death of his wife. The collective as well as its function and importance of social cohesion are once again demonstrated, as Diego reads the collectively spelled sentence as he looks up from the courtyard towards the balconies while holding an urn with his deceased beloved wife Paola. It only makes sense as long as each tenant participates with the separate signs or e.g. by playing a (piano) keyboard as a contribution to the

23 According to Stutterheim and Kaiser (cf. 2011, 304) characters in comedies hardly ever laugh about themselves.

collective ritual as Martin's wife does: "Merci Paola. On vous [sic] oubliera pas. On prendra bien soin de Diego" (*8RH* [01:55:43 min.]).[24] When addressing death, this French comedy focuses on the tenants' social bonds formed during lockdown, lifting up Diego's spirit by caring and showing compassion, honoring his wife. This artistic choice coincides with the following findings on death and optimism in films:

> The results of this study ['How Movies Can Ease the Fear of Death'] support the idea that meaningful films shape our response to death-related thoughts, but only when they contain elements of life, hope, positivity, and optimism. This study therefore clarifies that it is not meaningful films per se that help people to deal with death-related thoughts but only those films that emphasize life instead of death. (Rieger/Hofer 2017, 726)

By emphasizing Diego's life in supporting him and by integrating a tenant's pregnancy in the movie, allowing for her baby to be born and then later to be held also in the arms of non-related tenants in one of the last collective scenes (cf. *8RH* [01:53:18 min.]), the audience may in the end – despite the sadness – feel positivity and hope where unity and a strong social cohesion prevail.

Both Corona Fictions comedies send a message of hope to their audiences in the end. In *8 Rue de l'Humanité* Paola's picture hangs in the corner of the courtyard, with flowers around her portrait and Diego sets Paola's birds free (cf. *8RH* [01:57:23 min.]). The film ends with a dedication to all those who have suffered and who stand in solidarity with humanity ("À celles et ceux qui ont souffert. À l'humanité solidaire", *8RH* [01:57:28 min.]).[25] Similarly, in the Spanish *¡Ni te me acerques!* Juan in the end (after the credits) is shown in the countryside again, clapping outside alone, screaming "¡Viva la sanidad pública!" (*NTMA* [01:35:41-01:36:10 min.]).[26] Additionally, during the credits a song with the title 'Deberías (hacer algo con tu vida)'[27] by Luis Prado is played at the end, singing about taking charge of your life (cf. *NTMA* [01:33:29-01:35:41 min.]). In this sense, this Spanish Corona Fictions film invites the viewers to reclaim their own agency in their lives.

24 "Thank you, Paola. We won't forget you. We will take good care of Diego" (author's translation).

25 "To those who have suffered. To human solidarity" (author's translation).

26 "Long live public healthcare!" (author's translation).

27 "'You should (do something with your life)'" (author's translation).

CONCLUSION

The applied interdisciplinary cultural studies approach of Stuart Hall's (cf. 1997, 1) encoding/decoding model 'circuit of culture' – in combination with theories of hope (mainly as suggested by the psychologist Rick Snyder, 2020), cinematic storytelling (according to Jens Eder 2005 and 2008) and examining mainly the initial and end scenes as encouraged by Michaela Krützen (cf. 2006, 89) – all allowed for the posed research question to be answered as follows:

The investigated franco- and hispanophone Corona Fictions films – the two comedies *8 Rue de l'Humanité* (2021) and *¡Ni te me acerques!* (2020) – each create and encode a twofold message of hope:

a) In the overall theme of both Corona Fictions films investigated due to e.g. the choice of genre (comedy and its mood-cues, e.g. to make the audiences laugh) as well as open endings. Both Corona Fictions films thereby confirm the proposed hypothesis that comedy was particularly appropriate for the portrayal of transformational processes of a fearful or anxiety-driven pandemic protagonist becoming a hopeful one. Reclaiming agency furthermore dissolves this anxiety.
b) In their pandemic protagonists – mainly in the protagonists' (individual) agency and community building. The characters are heavily restricted in their agency of movement and social interactions due to lockdowns imposed on them by the authorities. Juan starts out as an isolated writer in a secluded hotel in the Spanish countryside, while Martin embodies the hysterical man living in Paris with his wife and daughter. As the films progress, however, the Spanish protagonists Juan in *¡Ni te me acerques!* (2020) and the French protagonist Martin in *8 Rue de l'Humanité* (2021) both reclaim their agency. They both disobey various lockdown rules, physically coming close to other characters, strengthening social cohesion and to some extent normalizing common human behaviour regarding spacial proximity while becoming emotionally closer to others. Social cohesion hereby functions as a goal for the pandemic protagonists, especially when contrasting it with isolation and loneliness in the initial scenes at the beginning of the lockdown.

Let me conclude by quoting Snyder (2002, 268):

> People rhetorically ask, "Surely you would much prefer to have a nonrisk-taking pessimist flying your plane rather than a risk-taking optimist?" Ignoring the questionable assumption that the optimist is necessarily a risk taker, I would ask the

> readers to think about this question when it is posed differently: Do we really want the pessimistic pilot – filled with anxiety, tension, worry, sadness, rejection, anger, self-criticalness, and profound uncertainty – to be at the controls when our jet is landing during a thunderstorm? Not me. I want a high-hope pilot in that cockpit.

When transferring this thought to the Covid-19 pandemic, we must ask ourselves what kind of pilots we want to become in the cockpits of our lives: the ones doom-scrolling (cf. Price et al. 2022) the apocalyptic news daily or the ones relaxing as they watch a hopeful comedy?

Ultimately, hope begins with setting a goal and reclaiming, and thus regaining your own agency as a pandemic protagonist (on and off screen), and thus also becoming a Corona Fictions agent – or in the words of Becky Piatt Davidson: "I'm no longer a hostage but an agent, with choices about how to proceed when fear sets in" (Piatt Davidson 2021/2022).

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FIGURES

Figure 1: Snyder's (2002) Model of Hope

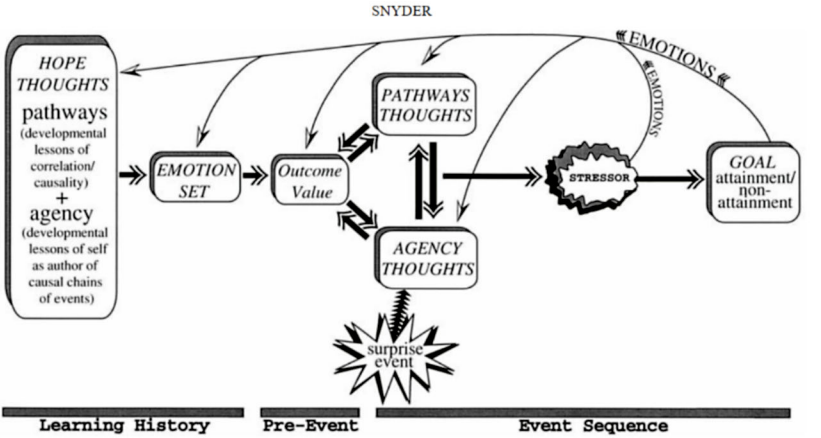

Figure 1. *Schematic of feed-forward and feedback functions involving agency and pathway goal-directed thoughts in hope theory.*

Source: Snyder 2002, 254.