

Conference Report

Pandemic Protagonists. Viral (Re)Actions in Pandemic and Corona Fictions¹

(June 1-3, 2023, Graz, Austria)

The interdisciplinary conference entitled *Pandemic Protagonists. Viral (Re)Actions in Pandemic and Corona Fictions* was held as part of the *Corona Fictions* project² from June 1st to June 3rd, 2023, at Graz University of Technology. It marked the culmination of a year of joint work on the recently published volume of the same title³, which stood at the center of the conference. Within this framework, the organising committee⁴ invited all scholars whose contributions had appeared in the volume.



Image: Conference participants with *Pandemic Protagonists* volume; photo © L. Irouschek.

¹ How to cite this report: Irouschek, Laura; Hobisch, Elisabeth; Obermayr, Julia; Völkl, Yvonne (2023) “Pandemic Protagonists. Viral (Re)Actions in Pandemic and Corona Fictions. Conference Report”, in: *Zenodo*. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.8028582.

² The research project *Corona Fictions. On Viral Narratives in Times of Pandemics* is funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF (P 34571-G). The project team is collecting, categorising, and analysing fictional cultural creations that relate to the COVID-19 pandemic era, while acknowledging that these creations are also part of a broader crisis narrative. As cultural productions not only record life as it is but also shape and influence human’s worldview, the project aims to document Corona Fictions, which are considered an integral aspect of people’s experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and a significant cultural heritage for the future. For a detailed project description and overview on the science-to-science and science-to-public project outcome, see the project’s homepage: www.tugraz.at/projekte/cofi.

³ Völkl, Yvonne; Obermayr, Julia; Hobisch, Elisabeth (eds.) (2023) *Pandemic Protagonists. Viral (Re)Actions in Pandemic and Corona Fictions*. Bielefeld: transcript.

⁴ The conference organising committee is composed of Yvonne Völkl, Julia Obermayr, Elisabeth Hobisch, Daniel Milkovits, and Tommaso Meozzi.

As has been observed at the beginning of the first lockdowns – proclaimed almost simultaneously around the world in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic of the early 2020s – billions of people referred to fictional narratives for guidance during the pandemic crisis, both in the form of reception and production. In this context, pandemic and Corona Fictions are supposed to offer the public a tangible account of (previously) experienced or envisioned health crises and multiple possibilities of (re)actions to these crises, represented by a multitude of protagonists⁵ in those works. The aim of this edited volume and conference, therefore, was to explore this domain further by offering an overview on the variety of pandemic protagonists from the perspectives of literary, cultural, and media studies.

The conference – officially starting Friday morning after a conference warming the day before – was opened by principal investigator YVONNE VÖLKL and followed by the eloquent welcome words of MAX ZIRNGAST, representative of the City of Graz town council. Subsequently, Yvonne Völkl outlined the path and milestones of the project from the initial idea to the present conference, followed by ELISABETH HOBISCH'S introduction to the *Corona Fictions Database*⁶ and JULIA OBERMAYR'S presentation of the *Pandemic Protagonists* volume.

The conference's lecture program was then opened by MAŁGORZATA SUGIERA (Kraków) with her talk on "Human-Viral Hybrids as Challenge to the Outbreak

Narrative and Neo-Liberal Biopolitics". Her presentation was concerned with the occurrence of human-viral hybrids in pandemic and Corona Fictions and the resulting effect of questioning the binaries of normality/pathology and life/non-life, which were argued to constitute bases of bio-politics and neo-liberal capitalism.

Next, JULIA OBERMAYR (Graz) presented her findings on the examination of the protagonists in one French and one Spanish audiovisual Corona Fictions comedy from the perspective of the concept of 'hope'. In this sense, her talk on "Corona Fictions Agents: Cinematic Representations of Hopeful Pandemic Protagonists in Early Corona Fictions" addressed the protagonists' transformational stories from fear to

⁵ 'Pandemic protagonists' are called the first or main characters, whether human or non-human, concrete or abstract, who are able to drive forward the main plot in pandemic and/or Corona Fictions (cf. Völkl/Obermayr/Hobisch 2023, 10f.).

⁶ Hobisch, Elisabeth; Völkl, Yvonne; Obermayr, Julia (2021-) "Corona Fictions Database", in: *Zotero Group Library*. URL: https://www.zotero.org/groups/4814225/corona_fictions_database/library, 2022-11-15.

hope as well as the audiences' emotional engagement with the protagonists.

In the presentation on "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 (Wrocław) then compared Casado's Corona Fictions novel with his pre-pandemic works, as well as with the concept of the crisis novel advanced by Jochen Mecke and David Becerra Mayor. With regard to Casado's literary mechanisms, Ziarkowska explained the role of the novel's female protagonist to serve as a representative of a whole Spanish generation who is said to experience crisis after crisis after having lived an optimistic youth in the 1980s.

ANA CAROLINA TORQUATO (São Paulo/Cologne) and AUREO LUSTOSA GUERIOS (São Paulo) then proposed another perspective of analysis by drawing on the interdisciplinary field of Animal Studies. In their comparative study entitled "The Role of Animals in Pandemic Narratives: Forewarning Disaster, Causing Outbreaks, Conferring Immunity" they examined several works from film, literature and visual arts on their portrayal and symbolism of non-human animals.

The first talk after lunch, during which the participants could enjoy beautiful views over Graz from the TU Rooftop Mensa, was on "The Crowd as a Pandemic Character: Determinism, Entertainment and Transgression in Literature", in which AUREO LUSTOSA GUERIOS (São Paulo) moved away from the field of Animal Studies to concentrate on the literary portrayal of crowds in connection to cholera outbreaks. He explained that crowds were frequently represented as a single identity or even as a protagonist in his investigated examples of Italian, French and German 19th century cholera literature. In this context, he also drew attention to his observations of the crowd as a topos incarnating the source of or responsibility for the cholera outbreak.

Afterwards, LOUIS MÜHLETHALER (Paris) focused on a completely different type of pandemic protagonist, namely the fictional immune protagonist. His talk on "Immunity and Community: The Role of Immune Protagonists in Saramago's *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* (1995) and Roth's *Nemesis* (2010)" shed light on how the two novels' fictional immune protagonists succeed in maintaining social cohesion in the event of sudden epidemic outbreaks. In this regard, Mühlethaler also discussed four main dilemmas faced by the protagonists: resistance, avoidance of violence, the con-

flict between individual and collective well-being, and guilt.

Subsequently, LUANA BERMÚDEZ (Genève) examined the elderly protagonists and the claustrophobic spaces in three Spanish Corona Fictions plays in her presentation on “‘¿Te importa?’ Entre soledad y olvido: la representación de los ancianos en el teatro español durante la pandemia de COVID-19”. Against this background, she also highlighted the playwrights’ strategies of exercising implicit criticism on the treatment of the elderly by the majority discourse during the pandemic.

MARTINA STEMBERGER (Vienna) then presented different intra- and extratextual readers and readings in her talk on “Corona Palimpsests: Pandemic Protagonists as Readers”. She explained that palimpsestuality, as well as literature’s function as coping and evasion strategy, had been main features of epidemic and pandemic literature since antiquity. With her talk, Stemberger managed to show the innovative potential of multiple different readings concerning boundaries of genre, media and fiction.

Eventually, TOMMASO MEOZZI (Graz) presented the last talk of the conference’s second day; a talk entitled “Protagonisti in cerca di una nuova *agency*: la pandemia di

Covid-19 nella letteratura italiana”, in which he explored Corona Fictions through the lens of agency. In his comparative study on three Italian Lockdown Corona Fictions, he showed how the protagonists (re)act to the new experience of confinement and how they build a coherent narrative in times of constrained autonomy.

The lecture-rich day ended with a visit to a wine tavern (*Buschenschank*), where discussions were eagerly continued in a convivial atmosphere.

The third and final day of the conference was opened by ANNA ISABELL WÖRSDÖRFER (Münster). She presented two fictional virus experts as pandemic protagonists of two filmic series in her talk on “Bloody Investigations. Scientists as Ambiguous Pandemic Protagonists in the Dystopian Streaming Series *La Valla* and *La Révolution*”. Her main focus laid on the explanation of the significance of blood as *leitmotif* and the analysis of the two pandemic protagonists, for instance regarding their interaction with other characters in the series.

In her talk on “Hysterical Men and Reasoning Women? On Gender Roles and Agency in Corona Fictions”, ELISABETH HOBISCH (Graz) then shed light on ‘atypical’ gender representations in the three Corona Fictions of a French feature film, a Spanish

mystery novel and a Spanish short narrative. In this regard, she presented the three hysterical men featured in those works, the way they regain agency in the course of the first lockdown, and how contemporary social norms of masculinity are reactivated and/or challenged.

Afterwards, PAULINA PAJAŁ (Wrocław) outlined her findings on two Corona Fictions which both incorporate elements of Virginia Woolf's oeuvre by adapting Woolfian protagonists to pandemic contexts. In her talk "Mediated Vulnerabilities: Transforming Virginia Woolf's Characters in Corona Fictions", Pajał argued that the two works showing adapted protagonists of Woolf's culturally widely known creation managed to render pandemic vulnerabilities more

accessible on a cognitive and emotional level to a broad audience.

As a last scholar to present, CLAIRE DEMOULIN (New Haven) closed the lecture program of the conference with her talk on "Germs as Social Protagonists: (In)visible Enemies and the Fear of Epidemic Invasion in Classical Hollywood Cinema". Here, she explained strategies of film to render the invisible visible, thus turning germs and microbes into 'social agents'. Behind this background, she mentioned the importance of the audience's pre-knowledge to turn invisible germs into visible protagonists due to censorship regulations regarding socially 'appropriate' contents.

In conclusion, the conference clearly underlined the diversity of pandemic protagonists in a multimodal corpus of pandemic and Corona Fictions explored through a wide range of interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches. Amidst this diversity, however, the conference showed the common force of the pandemic protagonists that lies in reclaiming and consequently regaining their agency; in other words, the protagonists are moving from viral reactions to viral actions. Given the fact that the phenomenon of Corona Fictions constitutes a highly contemporary, ongoing, and unexplored field, the *Corona Fictions* project at Graz University of Technology continues its work on pandemic and Corona Fictions in an attempt to document and study this compelling corpus as an essential cultural heritage for the future.

Laura Irouschek, Elisabeth Hobisch, Julia Obermayr & Yvonne Völkl