Birgit Däwes

Molecular Mimicry, Realism, and the Collective Memory of Pandemics

Narrative Strategies of COVID-19 Fiction

From Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) to Jim Shepard's *Phase Six* (2021), contemporary pandemic fiction relies largely on narrative strategies of continuity and the familiar, including authenticity or "reality effects" (Roland Barthes), reliable narrators, focalizers with backgrounds in medicine or science, and a structural pattern of what Priscilla Wald has termed the "outbreak narrative." This paper reads conventional narrative patterns of pandemic fiction figuratively as a form of "molecular mimicry," akin to the biomedical strategy by which viruses override immune systems and gain access to the interior of cells. Like Trojan horses, I argue, frameworks of narrative reliability and authority tend to be more successful in wheeling in specific normative representations, which stabilize given hierarchies. By contrast, *The Decameron Project* (2020), a "collective narrative" of twenty-nine short stories written in response to the COVID-19 situation in 2020, exhibits a significant increase in narrative and cognitive uncertainty. My analysis of stories by David Mitchell, Liz Moore, Margaret Atwood, Charles Yu, and others traces various functions of unstable narration through multilayered realities, unreliability, intertextuality, and self-reflexiveness, ultimately uncovering what may be a literary analogy to mRNA vaccines. *The Decameron Project*, I argue, not only diagnoses a growing unease with discourses of tacit objectivity, but it marks an important contribution to the emerging cultural memory of the COVID-19 pandemic.

> "A body changed by illness demands new narrative modes."
>
> Emma McKenna (2021)

1. Introduction: Reading Outbreaks

In Jim Shepard's 2021 novel *Phase Six*, Algerian-American epidemiologist Jeannine Dziri and her colleague Danice Torrone are sent to Greenland by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to track down a novel pathogen in the wake of a rapid outbreak, which infects 14 million people within 35 days (Shepard 2021, 178). The disease – highly lethal, and accompanied by symptoms of fever, headaches, and severe respiratory symptoms – turns out to be spread by a bacterial agent, transmitted by airborne spores, which reprograms the hosts' DNA to cause apoptosis, a form of programmed cell death. As an "effective super-pathogen," the narrator summarizes, it commonly kills its host because "it just needs to have not burned its bridges before it has crossed them" (ibid., 231). The symptoms, the exponential global spread, the race to track and identify the pathogen, the administrative "chaos of no one in charge" (ibid., 146), and some

people's "refus[al] to social distance" (179), all sound familiar to readers in times of COVID-19 – one of the deadliest global health crises to date (see Ang 2021) – and this parallel is rendered explicit: When asked for advice, Danice "forwarded the standard recommended precautions that everyone remembered from COVID-19: wear a mask, practice social distancing, avoid touching your face, wash your hands with soap and water, sanitize surfaces, avoid sharing utensils and food, and so on" (Shepard 2021, 93).

Published in May 2021, at a time when the number of COVID-19-related deaths in the U.S. was approaching 600,000, the novel is set in a near future in which "that COVID thing" (ibid., 24) is described in hindsight: a historical pandemic which has been defeated. *Phase Six* is arguably the first novel referencing the coronavirus pandemic as a contained phenomenon of the past and thus a very suitable text to open an inquiry into literary responses to COVID-19.[1] I will therefore use this novel as a structural and thematic blueprint to introduce my argument about the narratology of pandemics. Following Rüdiger Kunow (2013, 266), who has emphasized the importance of "mobility on the microbiotic level" and its cultural translation into imagery – especially in the global north – for "the context of ethnic and social Otherness," I am interested in the interconnections between communicable diseases and the ways they are communicated in fiction, and especially in the contributions of narrative form to the larger cultural work of these fictional representations (see also Nünning / Nünning 2020). My argument rests on the hypothesis that in times of crisis, humans turn to familiar patterns represented by narrative strategies of realism, reliability, and authority. These narrative designs, however, also tend to conceal specific normative discourses, often perpetuating given power structures and hegemonic epistemologies. One other suitable example to introduce this pattern is Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* (2020)*, which also follows the medical quest of a CDC employee, and which had been submitted to the publisher shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak occurred. I will then juxtapose this pattern with *The Decameron Project* (2020), a collection of short stories that include a notable diversity of narrative strategies, many of which – as I demonstrate – disrupt realistic modes of processing pandemics and instead turn to more experimental formats. My comparative approach to *Phase Six*, *The End of October*, and *The Decameron Project*, I believe, will allow for an early heuristic narratological assessment of the emerging cultural memory of COVID-19.

Phase Six opens in the Inuit community of Ilimanaq, Greenland, where two boys, Aleq and Malik, are exposed to the reactivated pathogen while playing in a mining camp, where drills have "fractured crystals" (11) on a "giant pile of excavated permafrost" (ibid., 10). Unlike most other people to whom the disease then spreads, Aleq survives and, as "patient zero," becomes the objectified center of the scientists' attention. One of the CDC epidemiologists, Danice, stays in Greenland with a team of other doctors to continue research, while Jeannine, the only person whom Aleq trusts because she's "dark-skinned" (ibid., 71), accompanies him to an enhanced biosafety lab in Montana. Although the heterodiegetic narrator appears in combination with variable focalizers, including Aleq

and other doctors, the novel mostly follows the two scientists through their journey of epistemological discovery and ultimately breakthrough before ending on a slight note of hope for humanity. Danice and Jeannine are not only the central characters, whose professional training and proven expertise channels and 'authorizes' the scientific passages of *Phase Six*, but they also serve – both diegetically and transdiegetically – as prototypical "medical detectives" (ibid., 39). In this function, they emulate a scientific methodology that Michel Foucault and others have characterized as essentially based on reading: in medicine, Foucault writes in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1994 [1973]), the patient's "visible body" becomes "entirely legible for the clinicians' gaze: that is, recognizable by its signs, but also decipherable in the symptoms whose totality defined its essence without residue" (ibid., 159). Along similar lines, Kathryn M. Hunter (1991) argues that "[m]edicine is fundamentally narrative" (5) and compares doctors to literary critics, as both are "attentive close readers" (12) who recontextualize "the physical signs of the patient-as-text" within "their historical and cultural contexts" (11). Just as Jeannine tries to extract information from the orphaned Aleq through stories, readers will follow her quest by piecing together the narrative elements into a diagnosis.

2. Pandemic Fiction and the Narrative Pathogen of Authenticity

Besides its explicit historicization of the COVID-19 crisis, Shepard's *Phase Six* shares many other features that define the genre of contemporary pandemic fiction. This is not to say that all pandemic novels include these characteristics, nor that these features constitute an exhaustive list, but *Phase Six* uses common elements of framing medical crises in fiction and thus serves as a suitable diagnostic and structural backdrop to my analysis. First, the novel's structure classifies it as an "outbreak narrative," described by Priscilla Wald (2008, 2) as a ("scientific, journalistic, and fictional") discursive form which "follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks through which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment." More specifically, *Phase Six* follows a structural pattern of what I have elsewhere termed an "epidemiological whodunit" (Däwes 2021): a mysterious (often novel) pathogen causes an outbreak, triggering a scientific quest for the identification, diagnosis, and containment of the disease, which is usually challenged or slowed down by political or economic interests while numbers of casualties rise, often affecting sympathetic characters. In *Phase Six*, it is "political imbecility" in the U.S., paired with a public health system "having been stripped to the bare bones to maximize profit" (Shepard 2021, 144) as well as bureaucratic impediments that combine into a frustrating mix of antagonistic forces, and in spite of precautions, scientist Danice eventu-

ally falls sick and dies – not without dedicating her last energy to the race against the pathogen.

Second, the narration and world-building in pandemic novels are often (but not exclusively) realistic and familiar,[2] including broadly recognizable settings and institutions, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or the Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS), as well as technologies and companies, such as Netflix or Twitter, Amazon, or Google. In Shepard's *Phase Six* as well as Wright's *The End of October* the protagonists work for the CDC and navigate a highly recognizable geographical terrain, including, among others, Atlanta, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Russia (in Wright's text) and ranging from Greenlandic towns such as Ilimanaq and Nuuk to Rochester, NY, or Hamilton, MT (in Shepard's). These mimetic markers are similar to what James Buzard, Ian Duncan (2003), and others have called "authenticity effects" – "a variant of intelligible foreignness" (Buzard 2005, 82) – which render the diegetic world relatable, and which thus also domesticate it. According to Chanelle Warner (2013, 9), effects like these "are the outcomes of shared interpretive processes […] attributable to stylistic and narrative features" that enhance the texts' "testimonial power." In the context of pandemics, these references not only make the text (and its scientific information) more trustworthy, but they also establish a sense of comfort and familiarity, which may serve to narratively counterbalance the experience of human helplessness in the face of a "rapidly increasing number" of pathogenic microorganisms (Shepard 2021, 29).

The characters, thirdly, are just as reliable and recognizable as their settings: protagonists often have professional backgrounds in medicine and science, and the novels extensively tap into their knowledge of medicine in long factual and educational passages. These often include abundant analogies with historical physicians (Louis Pasteur and Edward Jenner in *The End of October*, or John Snow in *Phase Six*) as well as historical pathogens (such as smallpox, yellow fever, Marburg, or H5N1), on which readers learn almost as much as on the specific fictional manifestation that frames the respective plot. "Left to their own devices," the narrator exemplarily tells us in *Phase Six*,

> most [microbes] reside unnoticed in biological balance with their ecosystems. But what location on earth remains left to its own devices? In an estuary, *Vibrio cholerae* is a blandly productive member of its community, but scooped up into the body in a drink of water, it can empty a human being of thirty liters of fluid a day. (Shepard 2021, 19)

These analogies are more than mere window dressing: they provide factual backgrounds to the fictitious outbreaks and thus reinforce the "authenticity effects" of the fictional texts. In Michael Crichton's *Andromeda Strain* (1969), to use an early example of what Stephen Dougherty (2011, 4) calls the "killer virus novel,"[3] the race of a biomedical team to categorize and contain an (alien) pathogen is formally validated by the inclusion of the scientists' transcripts and memos, reprinted CT scans, lists of binary code, drawings, and facsimiles of classified documents to heighten the sense of realism and suspense. Even if the novel's bottom line is the multiple failure of technology, governmental and military structures to protect humanity against microbes, its formal inclusion of these

materials throughout the text upholds the simulation of authenticity and institutional control.[4]

This effect, as a fourth and final marker, is usually framed by a high degree of narrative stability and authority, or "testimonial power" (Warner 2013, 9), either through homodiegetic or autodiegetic narration, which foregrounds the individual, first-hand experience through empathy and relatability (as, for instance, in Helen Marshall's *The Migration* [2019] or Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* [2020]), or, even more frequently, through a setup of highly reliable heterodiegetic narration, filtered through variable focalizers, which suggests objective detachment (as in Michael Crichton's text, but also in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* [2014], John Ironmonger's *Not Forgetting the Whale* [2015], Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* [2020], Salim Güler's *Pandemie: Der Beginn* [2020] or John von Düffel's *Die Wütenden und die Schuldigen* [2021]).

This narrative stance can be considered an extension of Foucault's medical gaze, a "structure, at once perceptual and epistemological […] of *invisible visibility*" (1994 [1973], 165; italics original). The diagnostic reliance on "the visible surfaces" ultimately conceals an underlying, invisible structure: "an absolute, absolutely integrating gaze that dominates and founds all perceptual experiences" (ibid.). In their narrative translations, however, the factual and historical surfaces against which events are mirrored are never neutral. As Priscilla Wald, Nancy Tomes, and Lisa Lynch (2002, 618) remind us, "neither anxieties about the transmission of disease nor the experience of it can be separated from the nexus of meanings that constitute its perception, contraction, and treatment." These meanings involve political and social interests, of course – often within frameworks of national, ethnic, or religious communities. From the antisemitic blaming of the Jewish population for the bubonic plague in the middle ages (see Michael 2008, 72; Einbinder 2018, 82) and the stigmatization of immigrants in American epidemics (Kraut 2010, 123), to the connections between pandemic spaces and state surveillance in the context of COVID-19 (see Zurawski 2020, 77), "risk, security, and pandemics are bound together in a powerful nexus," as Mark Harrison puts it (2017, 146). Narrative thus plays a crucial role in mediating epidemic threats, and pandemic fiction often echoes what Ingrid Gessner (2016) has diagnosed for representations of yellow fever: the narrative framing of a disease simultaneously "generate[s] a spectatorial self-consciousness of observing the other" (234), often enhancing "a more stable nationhood and the formation of a national identity" (233) as well as "an imperial power of interpretation" (236).

The fact that many pandemic novels rely on strategies of detachment and apparent objectivity through covert narrators and the relation of factual or historical knowledge diverts attention from the underlying ideological context. Like Roland Barthes's famous "effet de réel" (1986 [1968], 148),[5] which constitutes the very reality it purports to merely describe, the narrative strategies behind such an apparent neutrality thus work like vessels to transport tacit additional meanings: like Trojan horses, these frameworks of narrative reliability tend to wheel in specific normative representations, which stabilize given epistemologies

and ensure the continued "opacity of the social structure," to borrow Louis Althusser's phrase (2012 [1965], 29). *Phase Six* is thus, like many other contemporary pandemic novels, quite literally, a textbook example of a set of strategies that I would call, for heuristic purposes, "molecular mimicry": these texts function – figuratively speaking, of course – like the biomedical mechanism by which viruses override immune systems and gain access to the interior of cells. More specifically, "[m]olecular mimicry is the phenomenon whereby a foreign protein with an amino acid sequence homology or similar structural configuration to that of a self-antigen elicits cross-reactive immunity" (Avni / Koren 2018, 576), and according to immunologist Manuel Rojas (2018, 120), it "is one of the leading mechanisms by which infectious or chemical agents may induce autoimmunity"– that kind of disorder by which the immune system fails to differentiate between Self and Other and attacks its own host body (see Pollard 2006, 4; and Rubin 2006, 64). Incidentally, this is one of the characteristic phenomena ascribed to the SARS-CoV-2 agent (see Angileri 2020; Kanduc / Shoenfeld 2020; and Obando-Pereda 2021).

My borrowing of the medical terminology does not, of course, imply any claims to advanced knowledge in immunology: I am using "molecular mimicry" merely as a trope to describe the cultural work of pandemic fiction, and more specifically of the ways in which literary approaches to epidemic situations operate by narrative concealment and simulation, privileging particular systems of power over others, usually stabilizing given social and economic structures and often unsettling, in consequence, established binaries of Self and Other. This broad tendency toward narrative stability, however, is not without exceptions. In fact, as I argue here, a first glance at COVID-19 fiction also suggests variations to this conventional pattern, which may eventually require a deeper diagnosis, and a different set of terminological approaches.

3. Social and Narratological Distancing in "Rapid Response Fiction": *The Decameron Project* (2020)

From within the temporal framework of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when infection numbers are still soaring around the world and many countries have not had much of a chance to vaccinate populations, it is difficult for any scholar to assess the literary fallout of the phenomenon. At an early stage of this period, mostly in the first half of 2020, writers and publishers were accordingly hesitant to predict cultural responses. For the Australian context, Melanie Kembrey (2020, n. pag.) cites a publisher estimating that COVID-19 novels are "probably three to five years away" because "writers will require time and space to process the pandemic and the best fiction to emerge will explore the experience in a surprising and subtle way." Similarly, in an analogy to 9/11, American writer Chris Bohjalian (2020, n. pag.) reminds us that it usually "takes novelists a little more time to shape […] nightmare into a story" because "[n]one of us

can really make sense of history as history is occurring." This timeframe not-withstanding, an evolving cultural memory of the consequences of COVID-19 can clearly be diagnosed (see Erll 2020, Gessner 2022), and in 2022, the number of novels explicitly processing this particular crisis has notably increased (see, for instance, Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence* [2021], Anne Tyler's *French Braid* [2022], or Weike Wang's *Joan is Okay* [2022]).

Considering the time of early 2020, however, and its backdrop of an unprec-edented outbreak, it is not surprising that – again similar to the 9/11 terrorist attacks – many responses have been framed by either personal experience or by (literary) historical analogy. Much of early COVID-19 fiction, like Martin Meyer's *Corona* (2020), is designed around quarantine situations: Juli Zeh's *Über Menschen* (published in March 2021 and dubbed the "first real coronavirus novel" by reviewer Jörg Magenau [2021][6]) picks up the social tensions between skeptics and advocates of governmental stay-at-home orders; Daniela Krien's *Der Brand* (2021) frames its family diagnosis in a setting of isolation and microcosmically references the virus's social consequences of distancing and fear of contagion through the protagonist; and René Freund's *Das Vierzehn-Tage-Date* (of May 2021) explores the comic elements of an encounter between two strangers who are forced to spend two weeks together under quarantine.[7] Other recent novels address similar historical crises: Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* turns to the 1918 influenza pandemic in a Dublin hospital, Steffen Kopetzky's *Monschau* (2021) revisits the smallpox outbreak of 1962, and Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk writes about the 1901 plague in *Veba Geceleri* ("Nights of Plague," 2021). In a non-fictional response, Pamuk (2020) looks to Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1664), Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* (1827), and Albert Ca-mus's *The Plague* (1947) to identify commonalities and patterns: "Throughout human and literary history, what makes pandemics alike is not mere commonal-ity of germs and viruses but that our initial responses were always the same" (Pamuk 2020, n. pag.).[8]

The mode of analogy was also the impulse behind *The Decameron Project*, a collection of twenty-nine short stories reflecting on the coronavirus in 2020, la-beled "rapid response fiction" by Irish novelist Kevin Power (2020, n. pag.). According to *The New York Times Magazine* editor Caitlin Roper, novelist Rivka Galchen originally proposed to write a recommendation of Giovanni Boccac-cio's *Decameron* "to help readers understand the present moment" (Roper 2020, vii), which then developed into a collective project: "our own *Decameron*, filled with new fiction written during quarantine" (ibid.). *The New York Times Magazine* collected stories by writers from a variety of nations and cultural backgrounds, including Mexico, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Israel, as well as Europe and North America.[9] As in Boccaccio's text, in which ten citizens of Florence escape from the bubonic plague for ten days, telling each other ten stories every day, the collection takes up the idea of using stories "in difficult times" as "a way to understand those times, and also a way to persevere through them" (Galchen 2020, xvi). This "way" is shaped by a remarkable diversity, and it also notably diverts from common genre conventions of pandemic fiction.

None of the stories employ horror, dystopia, or apocalypse, they do not follow the structure of outbreak narratives, and there are no zombies, no mass eruptions of violence, or other projections of contagion anxiety. This may be owed to their temporal proximity to a historical situation that was still gradually unfolding, or to their loyalty to the guiding model, Boccaccio's original *Decameron*. Furthermore, the genre of short fiction obviously provides writers with a different set of possibilities or restraints of developing plots and characters than those available to novelists. Nevertheless, as one of the earliest fictional responses to COVID-19, and especially because of the range of its contributors' national and cultural backgrounds, *The Decameron Project* allows for a solid first assessment of the evolving cultural memory of 2020 as the "plague year" (Wright 2021).

The Decameron Project simultaneously operates on principles of similarity and difference: on the one hand, it unites writers and readers by highlighting familiar, universal aspects of the COVID-19 crisis, from the estrangement of not wearing a mask in public in Mona Awad's "A Blue Sky Like This" to the binge-watching of TV series in Alejandro Zambra's "Screen Time." On the other hand, the variety of topics, moods, and styles in *The Decameron Project* is remarkable: while a few of the stories, like Andrew O'Hagan's "Keepsakes" or Edwidge Danticat's "One Thing," employ modes of tragedy to center on the loss of a family member to the disease, others explore the comic effects of mistaking a masked health official for a criminal (Mia Cuoto's "An Obliging Robber"), or the business model of renting out one's dogs to enable people to legally leave their apartments (John Wray, "Barcelona: Open City"). Similar to the 9/11 novel, some manifestations of which used the historical event and its imagery as a diagnostic or symbolic setting to investigate larger political or domestic contexts (cf. Däwes 2011, 197–240, 285–342), a few stories in *The Decameron Project* use the experience of the lockdown as literal and figurative backgrounds to explore tensions within relationships and families (e.g. Colm Toibín's "Tales of the L.A. River," Matthew Baker's "Origin Story," or Paolo Giordano's "The Perfect Travel Buddy"), issues of race and class (Victor LaValle's "Recognition" or Uzodinma Iweala's "Sleep"), international mobility, immigration, and national belonging (Dinaw Mengestu's "How We Used to Play," Dina Nayeri's "The Cellar," or Laila Lalami's "That Time at my Brother's Wedding"), or the social consequences of distancing (Tommy Orange's "The Team" or Etgar Keret's "Outside").

Most notably, the collection is characterized by a broad diversity of narrative strategies and styles. At first glance, the majority of the stories is framed, like most pandemic fiction, rather conventionally, using either first-person or figural points of view, in Franz K. Stanzel's classic terminology. According to Gérard Genette's model, nearly half of the twenty-nine stories (fourteen) feature autodiegetic narrators and thus narratologically echo the isolation of the individual quarantine experience. At a closer look, however, this surface of largely conventional frameworks is punctured by a broad engagement of playfulness with regard to narrative mood, voice, and focalization, as well as by various instances of narrative and cognitive uncertainty. In fact, I argue here that many of the

stories centrally operate on what Stefan Schubert (2019) terms "narrative instability," an often programmatic "tendency to destabilize the process of constructing a storyworld" (22), which includes elements such as "internal focalizations without denoting them as such; unreliable or otherwise compromised narrators (both homo- and heterodiegetic); multiple different accounts of the same event […]; instances of metalepsis […]; or […] a refusal to provide details about crucial aspects of the text's narration (such as its narrator)" (30). I would add to this list the unusual mode of "second-person fiction," "a patently absurd situation under normal circumstances," according to Monika Fludernik (1993, 221), which usually entails a strong "distancing effect" (ibid., 227), and which also constitutes a high level of narrative instability. In *The Decameron Project*, four of the stories (nearly one in seven) use this mode, engaging a variety of points on the "open scales between peripheral and central involvement of narrators and addressees in the stories in which they participate" (ibid., 224), and featuring "homo-communicative," "heterocommunicative" or "homoconative" variants of second-person narration (225). Especially in the case of a "homoconative" mode, in which "the addressee but not the narrator participate[s] in the story" (ibid., 224) (as exemplified by Cheyenne / Arapaho writer Tommy Orange's "The Team"), readers find themselves radically distanced from the unique experience of the addressee. The "you" at first appears to invite empathy and identification, but in fact establishes a situation of witnessing someone else being addressed; a technique which calls attention to itself as a visible strategy of fictionalization and distancing.[10]

Furthermore, several of the narrators prove untrustworthy or unreliable, that is, in the basic original definition by Wayne C. Booth (1991, 158), they do not "spea[k] for or ac[t] in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms)."[11] In David Mitchell's "If Wishes Was Horses," Luke Wilcox, the autodiegetic narrator, relates the story of his quarantine in prison, confined to a cell with Zam, an "Arab, Indian, Asian, something" (Mitchell 2020, 161). He develops symptoms typical of COVID-19 and talks to Zam about his crime ("drugs and manslaughter" [ibid., 168]), his daughter, and politics ("President Very Stable Genius say[ing] 'Drink bleach!'" [ibid., 164]) before he (and the reader) realize(s) at the very end of the story that Zam does not exist: Luke has been in an isolated cell all along. According to Ansgar Nünning (2008, 41), unreliability depends on "the distance that separates the narrator's view of the world from the reader's or critic's world-model and standards of normalcy, which are themselves, of course, open to challenge." In Mitchell's story, this transdiegetic distance is doubled on the diegetic level by the isolation of the inmate from other humans, and the doubly fictitious cellmate cannot, ultimately, compensate for either. Unreliability can thus be read as a double distancing technique in COVID-19 fiction: it hygienically detaches readers from characters and echoes practices of physical isolation, but it also metafictionally reflects on the phenomena of fake news, virtual echo chambers, and conspiracy theories, which have become particularly prominent during the COVID-19 crisis.

4. From "Clinical Notes" to Metafictional Parody: Denaturalizing COVID-19

Strategies of distancing are also at the heart of Liz Moore's "Clinical Notes," in which a ten-month-old baby develops a fever on March 12, 2020, the day after the World Health Organization classified the coronavirus crisis as a pandemic. The parents, deeply worried and unable to reach a pediatrician, try to assess the risk of taking "this baby into a medical setting" – and thus potentially exposing him to the virus – as opposed to "monitor[ing] him at home," out of reach of professional medical care (Moore 2020, 46). The profound sense of uncertainty and the lack of control over the baby's vital functions are sharply contrasted by the story's narrative technique and structure: it is subdivided into forty-seven miniature chapters, with (partially repeated) titles such as "fact" (ibid., 43, 44), "evidence" (43, 44), "methodology" (44), "observation" (47, 49), "deduction" (49), "question" (44, 48) or "research process" (44), all of which suggest scientific objectivity. In addition to this semantic framing of clinical discourse, the volatile situation is juxtaposed with a radically detached narrative situation. The narrator is extradiegetic, and the story begins by external focalization, referring to "the baby" (ibid., 43), "the mother" (44), "the father" (46), and "the doctor" (46) in merely generic terms, without names or personal pronouns, at least until the "interlude," roughly in the middle of the story, in which internal focalization appears – both on the part of the father who "remembers the baby's first days" (46) and of the mother who subsequently "thinks" that "maybe […] it will all be –" (47). In the end, the fever breaks, and a doctor does call back to advise the parents to wait, but the notion of uncertainty prevails. The final paragraph, the only one not marked by an empirical title, intensifies the internal focalization and uses a number of repetitions:

> For now, the mother will lay him down in his crib, in his pink housecoat, will watch as he sleeps, will lean down and place one hand to his forehead, testing again and again. Warm but not hot, she tells herself – though without the thermometer she cannot be certain. She lies down on the floor, next to the baby. Watches the baby. The baby is breathing. The baby is breathing. […] Warm but not hot. Warm but not hot, she thinks – a chant, a prayer – though she cannot be certain. (Ibid., 50)

Just as most people around the globe were still missing reliable information on the novel virus in March 2020, and thus lacked the basis for proper risk-assessment, the baby's life seems threatened by symptoms unknown to the parents: the "worrisome readings" of the thermometers are labeled "evidence" (ibid., 43) in order to compensate, at least rhetorically, for an unbearable absence of control. This family's situation of helplessness in light of simply *not knowing* not only synecdochally echoes early reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the larger "nexus of disease and panic" (Gessner 2016, 19) that usually accompanies outbreak narratives, but it also demonstrates the need for objective, epistemological certainty. However, while Moore's "Clinical Notes" shares with pandemic novels such as Wright's *The End of October* or Shepard's *Phase Six* the realistic, recognizable setting and the comforting presence of a physician (at least in

the end, via phone), it does not work by molecular mimicry. On the contrary: because the story so obviously showcases the gap between the chapter headings' clinical method and the impossibility of objective assessment underneath, its distancing techniques ultimately subvert any potential effect of authenticity. Even if the labels on these tiny chapter units suggest a fact-based, scientific orientation, the final sentence confirms: "she cannot be certain" (Moore 2020, 50).

Taking up the principle of analogy, both Rachel Kushner's "The Girl with the Big Red Suitcase" and Margaret Atwood's "Impatient Griselda" honor the title and mission of the *Decameron Project* by structurally or thematically echoing Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In Kushner's story, which also explicitly references Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), the autodiegetic narrator is quarantined at a writers' retreat where, as in Boccaccio's original, the privileged escapees from "the virus" (Kushner 2020, 101) tell each other stories to pass the time and to "provide for our relaxation," as Boccaccio's narrator had it (1972, 795). "The Girl with the Big Red Suitcase" features a story within the story with an unexpected twist at the end, and, also much as in Boccaccio's original cycle of tales, the isolation experience is mostly a contrastive backdrop to the "refrigerated trucks idl[ing] outside the municipal morgue" (Kushner 2020, 101).

In a very different way of engaging the original *Decameron*, Margaret Atwood's "Impatient Griselda" takes up the final tale of Boccaccio's cycle, by which one of the three men, Dioneo, concludes the retreat in Florence. In Boccaccio's embedded narrative, a capricious aristocrat, Gualtieri, the Marquis of Saluzzo, makes his wife Griselda ("the daughter of a peasant" [Boccaccio 1972, 783]) undergo a long series of sadistic cruelties to test her loyalty and patience, all of which she patiently endures. The tale ends on their reunion (which also signifies the return of the poor female to an upper-class life), and Gualtieri "lived long and contentedly with Griselda, never failing to honour her to the best of his ability" (ibid., 794). In Margaret Atwood's version, this core story is related quite differently, and it is refracted through even more layers of narrative distancing, constituting a formidable case of what Linda Hutcheon (1988) has famously defined as postmodernist parody: "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (ibid., 26). As in Boccaccio, the frame situation is one of quarantine and entertainment, and the story within the story involves a cruel "Duke" (Atwood 2020, 71), a woman "of low status" (ibid., 71), and a series of humiliations manifesting male power and female subservience. The elements of similarity, however, also undergo substantial variation. "Griselda" is recoded into a surname and doubled into a set of twin sisters, allegorically named (and nick-named) Patient ("Pat") and Impatient ("Imp"). Whereas Pat (like the original Griselda) is successfully intimidated into obedience, Imp designs a plan of deceit and revenge, using the twins' likeness to lure the Duke into an ambush.

In contrast to the original story, in which excessive patriarchal power is perpetuated and additionally rewarded by Griselda's gratefulness for her marriage and ensuing social security, Atwood's Griselda sisters not only cut the perpetrator's throat to end his transgressions, but they also "ate the Duke all up – bones,

brocaded robes, and all" (ibid., 75). Diametrically opposed to its literary model, "Impatient Griselda" thus ends on a militant feminist message of self-empowerment: the decapitation of the abusive male is maximized into his complete annihilation by anthropophagy. The sisters' triumph is not even just restricted to defeating one individual: "A few suspicious relatives of the Duke came sniffing around, but the sisters ate them too" (ibid., 76). One particularly representative specimen of toxic masculinity is thus sustainably eradicated together with possible followers, expanding the women's self-liberation into a symbolic victory over an entire sociopolitical system. This feminist rewriting of Boccaccio's final tale firmly places Atwood's contribution in the tradition of postmodernist parody as "one of the major ways in which women […] both use and abuse, set up and then challenge male traditions in art" (Hutcheon 1988, 134). Yet Atwood goes beyond this effect by adding at least three more layers of distancing: a parodic reimagination of the frame tale into a contemporary pandemic context, a series of doublings and (diegetic) disassociations within this frame tale, and two interrelated transdiegetic effects of disconnection between text and reader through second-person fiction, and of what Jan Alber, Brian Richardson, and Henrik Skov Nielsen (2013, 1) call "unnatural narrative."

To begin with, the frame tale also envisions a quarantine situation of intratextual storytelling, but the homodiegetic narrator, "a mere entertainer" (Atwood 2020, 70), is not human. Reminiscent of Arthur C. Clarke's witty and ultrashort story "Reunion" (2001 [1963]), in which a radio message issued by aliens returning to earth marks ethnic whiteness as "a strange and repulsive disease" (ibid., 881), Atwood's fictional arrangement is one of an octopus-like extraterrestrial life form "sent here as part of an intergalactical-crises aid package" (Atwood 2020, 70) to help humans "pass the time" (76) in a secluded space. The radical difference between two unrelated life forms precludes any anthropocentrism and serves as a fictional setup of defamiliarization in order to provide fresh perspectives on habitual human structures.

It is not only the language barrier that detaches the alien narrator from the fictional audience, but also a set of highly conspicuous biological and cultural differences ("Now I'll just ooze out underneath the door. It is so useful not to have a skeleton" [ibid., 76]). This leads to additional effects of (quite literal) alienation, for instance, when the narrator consistently uses the term "snack" to describe animals (ibid., 72), "facial antennae" for eyebrows (74), or "pseudopods" for children (73). The humorous effect produced by these misunderstandings arises from the doubling of communicational layers, of course, and thus – in a textbook application of parody – "paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (Hutcheon 1988, 11). The distancing device thus strategically reinforces the feminist message of the (altered) Griselda tale: "we do not have such limited arrangements [as gender] on our planet" [Atwood 2020, 69]); and, from an alien perspective, it is also noteworthy that the English language features so many abusive terms for females (ibid., 74). The ideological critique is further underlined by a metafictional comment on the part of the nar-

rator: "storytelling does help us understand one another across our social and historical and evolutionary chasms, don't you think?" (Ibid., 76)

On another level, however, this "understand[ing]" process is far from linear. Using first- and second-person pronouns while addressing the narratees, the narrator frequently interrupts his rendering of the Griselda story by reactions to intradiegetic audience responses, comments on the story, or complaints about the deficient "simultaneous translation device" (ibid., 70). In addition to the duplication of communicative acts through translation, the doubling, in the interior story system, of the original Griselda into twin sisters is echoed by another act of replication on the frame level between the aliens and the quarantined listeners. Just as the Duke insists on the exertion of discursive power by forbidding Patient Griselda to "say boo. Or boohoo. Or anything" (ibid., 71), the extraterrestrial storyteller reacts to an apparent objection from its audience by claiming full authorial control over the protagonist: "Excuse me, Sir-Madam? […] No, there was not only one. There were two. Who is telling this story? I am. So there were two" (ibid., 71).

Furthermore, the diegetic reception process is structurally doubled (as in Shakespeare's famous plays within the play, or as in Boccaccio's frametale) by the additional audience: we, as readers of *The Decameron Project*, "pass the [pandemic] time" by processing a story of an alien telling a story to an (implicit) audience of quarantined humans. In more specific narratological terms, the embedded story in "Impatient Griselda" is a "heterocommunicative narrative" in Fludernik's (1993, 225) sense of second-person fiction, in which the "narrational level [is] existentially divorced from [the] story level," which is, in turn, layered into a "homocommunicative narrative," in which "both narrator and addressee share realms of existence with [the] story world," and which is again refracted by the doubling of the reception under lockdown. Like Russian nesting dolls, the communicative systems are serially encapsulated and thus call attention to their own strategies of distancing.

This effect is further reinforced by the absurdity or impossibility of the narrative situation: a spineless extraterrestrial comforts isolated humans by storytelling – through technologically enhanced mediation via a simultaneous translation device. This is evidently a case of "unnatural narrative" in Brian Richardson's sense: "a narrative that contains a number of significant anti-mimetic events […] that are clearly and strikingly impossible in the real world" (Alber et al. 2013, 102) and thus adds to the various effects of detachment a crucial device of narratological distancing.

5. Viral Communication and the Collective Memory of "Systems"

Finally, an "unnatural" narrative situation is maximized in Charles Yu's story "Systems," in which the narrator is not only nonhuman but also non-embodied

and collective. In an essay for *The Atlantic* in April 2020, Yu highlights the need for imagination in the current pandemic crisis:

> What we really mean when we say that this pandemic feels 'unimaginable' is that we had not imagined it. Just as imagination can mislead us, though, it will be imagination – scientific, civic, moral – that helps us find new ways of doing things, helps remind us of how far we have to go as a species. How little we still understand about our place in this world – terrifying and awful at the moment – but also how much we still get to discover. (Yu 2020a, n. pag.)

According to Yu, it is a typically anthropocentric belief that the virus or the crisis were new; in fact, he argues, "SARS-CoV-2 has been around in some form for thousands of years or more. It is novel only to us, *Homo sapiens*, the one species that imagines its survival, its success, as the central narrative of the story of this planet" (ibid.). It seems logical, in light of this argument, that his contribution to *The Decameron Project* does not take a human perspective: in fact, the narrative voice is entirely impersonal. In the foreword to the collection, Caitlin Roper (2020, viii) reports that Yu's idea was "a story told from two points of view: the virus and the Google search algorithm." In turn, Kevin Power (2020), who reviewed the book for the Irish *Independent*, evidently leans his rejection of the story on this background information: "Charles Yu's 'Systems' […] is no better than its dud premise: it is narrated, in alternate paragraphs, by Google and Covid-19, and it is exactly as bad as it sounds" (ibid., n. pag.). While Power's concluding judgment on the story's quality is debatable, the foundation on which it is based is inaccurate, as I will show in the following.

"Systems" is composed of 41 paragraphs, 32 of which begin with the personal pronouns "they" or "their," as in the following example: "Their movements seem random at first but study their movements, and it becomes clear that the systems have patterns" (Yu 2020b, 174). "Their" refers to humans, as objects of scientific inquiry, including us as readers – and as the story seems to present the first results of this "study," the narrative situation raises particular curiosity as to who is conducting it. In addition to the imperative mood used here ("study their movements"), the narrative voice becomes overt in five other instances through first-person-pronouns, always in the plural. The first of these occurs in the third paragraph and provides an indication of who (or what) is narrating: "They move around in the world. Everywhere in the world. Like us" (ibid., 173). All of the other first-person pronouns are accumulated in the penultimate paragraph:

> Others of them study *us*.
> They know what *we* are. Not quite alive. Invisible. Information.
> They have invisible signals. […]
> They are like *us*. They have codes. Codes of symbolic sequences. They encode information and spread it. […] They know *we* will never be apart. (Yu 2020b, 180–181 [emphasis added])

Based on these hints, "Systems" indeed seems to be narrated by a virus: a collective entity imperceptible to the human eye, not considered "alive" and reproducing itself through codes and information. Like Atwood's "Impatient Griselda," "Systems" is thus built on the principle of "unnatural narrative": a situation "impossible according to the known laws governing the physical world, accepted principles of logic […], or standard human limitations of knowledge or ability" (Alber et al. 2013, 102). Whereas Power claims that Google and COVID-

19 narrate the story, however, the case is much more complex: for one, there is no indication that the narrating agent is even limited to one specific virus, such as SARS-CoV-2. For another, while the information about humans is evidently collected through a monitoring of internet searches, the phrases "They search for things" (used seven times in Yu 2020b: 173, 175, 176, 179, 181), "They search for" (used three times: 176, 178), and "They search" (used once: 176) do not point to a separate narrating entity, let alone to "Google" as a specific engine. On the contrary, the consistent style, repetitive syntax, and the leitmotifs of "patterns" (ibid., 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 182) and "systems" (174, 179, 180, 182), recurrent from the second to the last page, indicate a continuous narrative voice throughout the story. In the revelatory longer paragraph toward the end, the narrator also notes the following:

> They know:
> Approximately 8 percent of the human genome is viral DNA.
> They know we will never be apart. […] There is no us and them. (Ibid., 181)

Whereas a search algorithm is also "invisible" and based on codes that "move around the world," a close narratological look at the connection between human and viral DNA, together with the dismantling of the boundary between "us" and "them," identifies the collective viral agent as the sole narrative voice: "We," i.e., humans and viruses, "will never be apart" because, on a cellular level, our genetic codes often merge (for the scientific background, see Zimmer 2017).

As in Atwood's "Impatient Griselda," distance is provided on several levels. First of all, the unnatural narrative situation reinforces the repeatedly emphasized difference between "us" and "them" throughout the text. "They" is the story's central word, and one of the most frequently repeated ones: the third-person plural pronoun is used over 100 times and thus twice as often as the common conjunction "and," which occurs fifty times. This frequency (plus another 41 times of "them" or "themselves") underlines the importance, for the narrator, of designating an Other as different from the subjective position: it quantitatively privileges separation and difference over any commonality (through "and"). Furthermore, the fact that "they" is repeated precisely 101 times alludes to a commonly used numerical phrase, originating in the academic American system of numbering university courses according to their targeted year of study, generic or specific topic, and lesson in a sequence. "Systems" thus also implies the blank slate of a beginners' approach, a "101" study program of humans, turned "novel" by the experience of the coronavirus crisis. From a viral point of view, this knowledge is essential: a firm understanding of human "patterns" will help viruses to distribute their codes.

Second, in addition to separating the object of study from the speaking voice, the principle of distance also controls the communicational relationship between the sender and the recipient. Unlike Atwood's alien, who addresses the quarantined humans in order to provide comfort and entertainment, Yu's viral collective entirely objectifies them, which indicates that humans are not even the implied audience. Humans are exclusively framed in the third person; and the only trace of an addressee – the imperative mood in "study their movements" (Yu

2020b, 174) – suggests that the recipient of the collected information (or study results) is, in fact, other viruses. This leads us back to Yu's insight, in *The Atlantic*, that "[t]he pre-pandemic universe was the fiction": "The COVID-19 outbreak is a reminder: The world isn't for us; we are part of it. We're not the protagonists of this movie; there is no movie" (Yu 2020a, n. pag.). If Yu's essay argues explicitly for human humility and the acknowledgement that "[l]ife, for us and the virus, is about genes propagating themselves" (ibid.), "Systems" is the literary implementation of that insight. It radically disrupts any anthropocentric exceptionalism and quite literally adopts the point of view of the virus: narratologically speaking, in its radical reorganization of signifiers and information, the story itself even becomes viral code, not only thematically arguing for, but formally being complicit in, relativizing the relevance of the human species.

Third and finally, the principle of distancing is realized in Yu's story, as in Atwood's and Moore's, through Brechtian alienation effects. Our way of looking at the world does not make sense to pathogens, or, as Yu phrases it in his essay:

> Even our language, our concepts, are inapt tools, artifacts of our previous reality. *Unprecedented*, *historic*, we proclaim, with each new, grim milestone. As if precedent and history have bearing on a virus that seeks only to maximize copies of itself. (Yu 2020a, n. pag.)

Consequentially, therefore, the story adapts language to include this broader perspective. Structurally and syntactically, this is expressed by the monotony of repeated words, sentences, and parallelisms. On a semantic level, just as Atwood's alien describes eyebrows in terms of "facial antennae," and thus as something more meaningful from an alien point of view, the viruses' systematic approach to human life relies on metaphors and metonymies to describe what seems strange or foreign. As many viruses are airborne, it is not surprising that air plays a dominant role in what they consider noteworthy: human breathing and speech are described as "push[ing] the air around" (Yu 2020b, 173, 174, 181, 182), human rooms and houses are smaller or larger "boxes" (173, 174) or "boxes in boxes in boxes," respectively (181); and the specimen "break off in groups, then re-form new groups" and "move together in streams" (175). This information is highly relevant to the virus, of course: when "Governor" and "Lockdown" become prominent themes, the narrators notice effects on their own movements: "the airborne migration is gone" (ibid., 176). Their relationship to the observed, however, remains entirely neutral. "Many of them die," they note objectively (ibid., 179): "When they die, they stop pushing air" (ibid.). In addition to identifying patterns of categorization with a focus on differences, the observers notice similarities, too: "[t]hey are also capable of airborne travel" (ibid., 175) and "they are temperature-sensitive" (178).

For human readers, a temporal structure also emerges from the observations on what "they" search for: "Harry and meghan [sic]" (ibid., 173) can be linked to the earliest date in the story, the so-called 'Megxit' on January 8, 2020, when Prince Harry and his wife announced their resignation from royal duties in the United Kingdom. The "NCF playoff picture" (ibid., 173), "State of the Union" (174) and "Super Bowl odds" (174) trace the time through January, and "Wuhan" as well as "Lombardy Italy" (175) indicate one of the early European clus-

ters of COVID-19 cases in February. "Fauci facepalm" (ibid., 175) is an allusion to an incident in a presidential press conference in March 2020, in which medical advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci reacted to a comment by then President Donald J. Trump. In reaction to the closing of schools, questions about videoconferencing and algebra for homeschooling were on the rise (ibid., 176–177), and after the protests against police violence in the United States in May and June, searches for "martial law" (179, also misspelled as "Marshall law") surge. The final searches within the story are about protests and community, and circle back to the beginning in the last sentences: "Harry and Meghan what now. Harry and Meghan what next" (ibid., 182).

These distancing effects disrupt habitual cognitive patterns and thus cast new light on human behavior in general, as well as particular situations, which gives readers fresh perspectives as well as pause. Much like in "Impatient Griselda," the effect can be humorous, for instance, when cause and effect relationships are implied where the narrators only note linear sequences: "They ask themselves: how to cut hair. How to fix kid's haircut. Hats for kids" (ibid., 177). Also as in Atwood's story, however, these apparently light observations are also increasingly charged with additional political meaning toward the end of the story, especially through the historical backgrounds. "Some of them can't breathe" (ibid., 180) in the context of May 2020 clearly evokes the killing of George Floyd by police officers and has become a slogan in the Black Lives Matter movement. Racism is not mentioned but evidently implied in what the viruses observe: "They have subgroups. The subgroups are virtually indistinguishable. Genetically. They have invisible signals that help members of one subgroup identify fellow members. They divide themselves. They say: Some of us are us, and some of us are them" (ibid.). Similarly, the last summer of the Trump administration, the implementation of fake news into political discourse, and the increasing threat to American democracy (which culminated in the insurgence attempt at the Capitol in January 2021, after the publication of the story) are hinted at when the observers note that "[s]ome of them send signals with incorrect information about the environment. Misinformation spreads quickly through the population" (ibid.).

Like the feminist message in Atwood's story, which is refracted through multiple layers of irony and parody, Yu's story is thus deeply political in its implied criticism of racism and of the U.S. president's failure to manage the various crises of his final year in office. "Systems" radically translates Yu's call for a less limited, non-anthropocentric perspective on the pandemic into fiction, turning on end the logic and hierarchy of who is studying whom. Given the contextual embedding of the story – in a collection modeled after Boccaccio's *Decameron* to provide reflections on "what it meant to quarantine" (Roper 2020, vii) – its clever narrative strategies may well make it the most radically inclusive text on COVID-19 so far, as it is the only one imagining what the quarantine means for the virus. In its imitation of Google search patterns, "Systems" functions like parody: holding up a mirror to our collective processing of COVID-19, but also making a significant, original contribution to the process of collective memory at large.

As Hutcheon reminds us: "[l]ike Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, parody works to distance and, at the same time, to involve both artist and audience in a participatory hermeneutic activity" (1988, 35). Ironically, thus, it is precisely the narrative forms of distancing that prove most effective here, since they make new forms of community imaginable without losing force to sentimentalist gesture or utopian cliché.

6. Beyond COVID-19 Fiction

In times of crisis, people turn to analogy and familiar patterns for explanation, especially when faced with unprecedented situational change. In the spring of 2020, the sold-out copies of Albert Camus's *The Plague* testify to this move, and early literary responses to COVID-19 also reflect this tendency by autobiographical, or "pathographical" (Hawkins 1999 [1993], 17), modes:[12] Fred D'Aguiar's *Year of Plagues: A Memoir of 2020* (2021), Carolin Emcke's *Journal* (2021), and Cecily Strong's *This Will All Be Over Soon* (2021) all testify to this trend. Similarly, Jennifer Haupt's *Alone Together: Love, Grief, and Comfort in the Time of Covid-19* (2020) brings together interviews, essays, and personal texts by more than 90 writers in a fundraising collection for independent booksellers.

Pandemic fiction more generally also offers patterns of stability: it often stages a collective medical crisis in the stable confines of genre conventions as well as realistic modes of narration. Like the science-based quests for origins and containability in Crichton's *Andromeda Strain*, Wright's *The End of October*, or Shepard's *Phase Six*, many of these fictional responses provide guidance through sympathetic and knowledgeable characters, such as doctors or scientists, and through reliable narrative situations of either homodiegetic empathy or heterodiegetic objectivity. In the safe space of fiction, coping mechanisms are applied to uncontrollable scenarios in which all kinds of larger cultural anxieties find expression. At the same time, pandemics also expose and sometimes deepen preexisting fissures in societies, and from the profound rifts of class difference in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" to the tensions between the Italian and Jewish communities of New Jersey in Philip Roth's *Nemesis* (2010), pandemic fiction often picks up on these larger conflicts – but it frequently does so in conventional literary formats. These strategies, as I have argued, operate in ways comparable to molecular mimicry, using as little discernible deviation as possible from social norms (or peptide structures) in order not to unsettle the larger system, or, in medical terminology, "to avoid the host immune response" (Rojas et al. 2018, 27). This does not mean that these texts do not feature social or political criticism (they do), but their narrative designs do not necessarily unsettle established structures and thus, at least epistemologically, cause little, if any, systemic turmoil. Ultimately, in their cultural effect, these texts often merely "assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures" and thus easily "domesticat[e]" the crisis, as Richard Gray phrased it in his diagnosis of post-9/11 literature (2009, 134).

In contrast, while providing a loose framework of historical analogy through its reference to Boccaccio's renaissance collection, the 2020 *Decameron Project* features notable exceptions to this trend. As I have argued, strategies such as narrative unreliability, second-person narration, unnatural narrative situations, intertextuality, self-reflexive humor, and alienation effects all serve as distancing devices which not only mirror and underline the social isolation that was widely common around the globe in 2020, but which also provide larger perspectives by detaching readers from the diegetic space. The effects of having an alien tell a roughly familiar story to quarantined humans or of viruses collecting information about humans for other viruses multilaterally refract the experience of reading fiction in a context of social distancing and lockdown and complicate or prevent any easy withdrawal into domestic certainty. On the contrary: unlike the more tacit strategies of molecular mimicry, these elements prominently call attention to themselves and thus potentially also disrupt established structures of information processing.

To remain within microbiological imagery (and I am explicitly detaching this gesture of figurative analogy from any simplistic biologism), we could even describe these strategies of narrative instability through the trope of mRNA vaccines: in this image, mRNA fiction can be imagined as inserting messengers of its own constructedness into larger discourses of established knowledge, thus allowing those discourses to replicate and ultimately recognize and contain the microelements of more restrictively normative pathogens. If molecular mimicry thus uses narratological vehicles of verisimilitude to insert stability and certainty into extant systems, these stories' double function of mRNA narration is in their self-exposure as narrative constructs: they provide us with helpful blueprints of the many facets of risk and threat and invite us to rethink our cultural responses to pandemics at large. By alerting us to the easy temptations of populism, social media abbreviations of knowledge, and blatant fake news, some of these texts may eventually help in maintaining a level of social health, or at least functionality. Just as our individual immune system does not require our cognitive abilities to understand how it functions to maintain vitality, ideologies operate and reproduce themselves without individuals' awareness of their mechanisms. Especially at a time when "[m]isinformation spreads quickly through the population," as Yu's viruses put it (180), when conspiracy theories are on the rise and both new culture wars (see Lerer 2020, Stanton 2021) and an actual war on European territory in 2022 are seriously threatening Western democracies, this potential of fiction – in both form and content – to elicit responses of reasonable doubt, to unsettle apparent certainties, and to raise questions may be more relevant than is evident upon first contact.

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Prof. Dr. Birgit Däwes

Europa-Universität Flensburg

Auf dem Campus 1

24943 Flensburg

E-mail: Birgit.daewes@uni-flensburg.de

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[1] It may well be too early to make that claim, since an identification of the "first" novel that comprehensively addressed the coronavirus crisis of 2020 would require a longer-term global survey of the market of pandemic fiction. According to Alex Preston (2020), "the first serious coronavirus novel" is Ali Smith's *Summer* (2020; see also Spinney 2020), but to the best of my knowledge, Jim Shepard is the first to explicitly set up COVID-19 as a closed chapter of the past. Furthermore, whereas Lawrence Wright's novel *The End of October* – about a highly lethal hemorrhagic fever that tumbles the world into apocalyptic disorder – was published in April 2020 and had been completed before the COVID-19 outbreak, it is probably the novel that most eerily captures the sense of pandemic outbreak at the time it was happening.

[2] One recent exception is, for example, Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (2018), a cyberpunk thriller with a fictitious urban setting in a barely recognizable future.

[3] The "killer virus novel," according to Dougherty, "displays an obsessional focus on body parts and the body image" and focuses on "the loathsome disintegration of the organic body beset by infection" (2001, 4).

[4] Furthermore, the fact that the fictional "President doesn't trust scientists" in the novel (Crichton 1969, 214) strikes an uncanny chord against a background of Donald J. Trump reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic by recommending injections of bleach.

[5] According to Barthes (1986 [1968], 148), the invisibility of the "real," or the "very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becom[e] the very signifier of realism." The signifier of the authentic thus has a constitutive rather than a descriptive function; in other words: "eliminated from the realist speech-act as a signified of denotation, the 'real' returns to it as a signified of connotation; for just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do – without saying so – is *signify* it" (ibid., 148; italics original).

[6] Magenau (2021, n. pag.) finds the novel particularly notable: "weil es sich um den ersten echten Coronaroman handelt, der während des ersten Lockdown im Frühling 2020 spielt."

[7] Because of the marginal role the pandemic itself plays in these texts, they are more aptly described as lockdown fiction. Similarly, many novels of 2020, such as Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* or Laura Jean Kay's *The Animals in That Country,* have picked up general anxieties and themes of the pandemic experience without necessarily referring to COVID-19.

[8] Defoe and Camus are, next to Boccaccio's *Decameron,* the most frequently cited examples of literary precedents for the COVID-19 pandemic. For further examples, see also Haith (2020, n. pag.), who emphasizes that "stories about pandemics have […] offered much in the way of catharsis, ways of processing strong emotion, and political commentary on how human beings respond to public health crises," and Riva et al. (2014, 1754), who mention Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) as examples of a larger "literary topos of plague."

[9] Ingrid Gessner (2022, forthcoming) rightfully notes, however, that "writers of the Global North are overrepresented, while Africans, Asians, or Pacific Islanders are conspicuously absent, except for Mozambican biologist and writer Mia Cuoto."

[10] In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century American Fiction* (2021), Joshua L. Miller notes that recent fiction – e.g., by Ted Chiang, Jennifer Egan, Claudia Rankine,

and others – not only increasingly employs "temporal nonlinearity to signal reconsiderations of historical causality" (6) but also "pursue[s] what has been historically a rare narrative trick: emplotting second-person narrative perspective" (7). It is too early to tell, but *The Decameron Project* might well just be considered representative of a larger trend.

11 Much has been written about the problematics of the "implied author," and Booth's definition has been substantially revised and expanded by Ansgar Nünning, Greta Olson, Dan Shen, and others. It is, of course, important to distinguish between unreliable and untrustworthy narrators, and to ask, as Nünning has done, "unreliable, compared to what?" (1998, 20; see also Olson 2003). For pragmatic reasons, I am acknowledging the complex cognitive and rhetorical phenomena surrounding unreliable narration while also relying on Dan Shen's (2019, §1) umbrella definition of unreliability as "a feature of narratorial discourse" in which "a narrator misreports, -interprets, or -evaluates or […] underreports, -interprets, or evaluates."

12 Hawkins (1999 [1993], 1) defines "pathography" as "a form of autobiography or biography that describes personal experiences of illness, treatment, and sometimes death."