MESSENGERS FROM THE STARS

ON SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

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Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy

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EDITORIAL

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In the wake of a global pandemic that so drastically impacted the lives of all human beings today, the subject matter of dystopian and apocalyptic visions was suddenly flung into the realm of the uncertain present. The trope of the contagion in literature and the arts, however, is far-reaching and with a well-established tradition that is closely related to that of historical plagues. Whether by placing its characters in lockdown following the Black Death as in Boccaccio's *Decameron* or speculating on the impending threat of a SARS outbreak in a globalized world as in Soderbergh's *Contagion*, the concept of a globally-impacting health threat is as present in fiction as any other human experience. What has perhaps shifted, however, has been our personal involvement with the actual circumstances of such an event. Speculative fiction, it seems, can now be taken in as a mode of comparison to our present concerns more so than some fancy of the imagination.

The pandemic has also changed our perception of time itself. Among its less noticed consequences has been a shift in how we experience both the present and the future. The master-narratives of the last century, whether utopian or dystopian, had already collapsed before the pandemic struck. But the tedium of lockdowns, coupled with the crippling uncertainty about the ending of COVID (has it really ended? When? How?), has contributed to our collective inability to imagine a genuinely new and different future. What has been called "presentism" - the sense of being stuck in the endless "now" - is a disease of the historical imagination that follows in the footsteps of the actual disease that impacted countries and communities around the world. Looking back at pandemic narratives of the past enables us to recover some of the lost sense of history. In light of this, it is only natural to revisit some of these narratives and consider how they measure up not only with a post-pandemic world, but with our own concepts of what a pandemic actually entails.

Such is Kristine Larsen's proposal in "Arda Re-made: Finding Meaning in a Pandemic Through the Works of Tolkien, Sapkowski, and Straczynski" by comparatively analyzing the American TV series *Babylon 5*, the *Witcher* Saga and *The Lord of the Rings* to effectively connect their respective use of the pandemic trope and reflect on how some of the emergent topics in the COVID-19 pandemic had already been addressed by these works.

In a parallel vein to this discussion, in "Social Stratification in Comics: Represenations of Status and Class to the Growth of Genre" Stephen Poon explores how comics consistently tap into perceived cultural values that are aligned with elements of social stratification. The author proposes that the present uniquity of the comic book morality play not only reflects our own general sensibilities, but it may also be seen as an active means of helping audiences define class, justice and other wide-ranging values.

Likewise, Midia Mohammadi's essay "Ecocritical Approach toward Ustopias: Divergent Attitudes towards Scientific Advancement in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* and Emily Mandel's *Station Eleven*" borrows Margaret Atwood's term to ecocritically compare these two novels and offer that the anxieties pertaining to the collapse of civilization also carry an element of hope in them, which are intrinsically linked with each other.

Still, it becomes eerily timely to consider Jarrel De Matas' analysis of Katie M. Flynn's *The Companions* (2020) in his essay "Companion Possibilities and Problems: Techno-Viral Reconfigurations of the Post/Human and Society in *The Companions*". Here, the author points out that Flynn's work is a thoroughly grounded piece that explores posthumanism and the all too real consequences of a pandemic, some of which actually ended up happening as the novel was being published.

Finally, Sonia Malik's "It's not Just the Virus: Unfurling Layers of Identity, Power and Emotion Beneath/Beyond the Plot in the Movie *Containment* (2015)" revisits the British film to discuss what isn't there - the gaps and silences representing the unknown in a pandemic situation. It also raises thoughtful questions pertaining to the role of government in such an event, the power dynamics between it and its citizens and, ultimately, the lines often drawn between "us" and "them".

In the Review section, Ambika Raja proposes a project titled *The Pandemic: Stories of COVID-19* (2020), a graphic novel developed by the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative and BOOM Charlotte, an art-led initiative in Charlotte, USA. In an attempt to cater to the immediate needs of Charlotte residents during the Coronavirus pandemic, the graphic novel collects seven short stories on how the COVID-19 has affected everyone in different ways.

As a creative contribution to this issue, the short film written by Vítor Carvalho and directed by Francisco Mota, Maria Penedo, Vítor Carvalho titled *A Arca* (2020) offers a compelling speculation on what a dystopian future following the COVID-19 pandemic could be. The short film is linked below and will be made available online.

MONOGRAPH SECTION

Photo: João Paulo Serafim

Arda Re-made: Finding Meaning in a Pandemic Through the Works of Tolkien, Sapkowski, and Straczynski

Kristine Larsen

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Abstract | This essay examines the author's three favorite Secondary Worlds of science fiction/fantasy: J. Michael Straczynski's American tv series *Babylon 5* (1993-98) and various spinoffs, the *Witcher* Saga of novels and short stories by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski (English trans. 2007-18), and Brit J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) and other tales set in his fictional Middle-earth. The author reflects on her

revisiting of these beloved works as a source of comfort during the time of COVID-19 and draws connections between human (and extraterrestrial) responses to pandemics described in these fictional worlds and numerous missteps and complications witnessed in the global response to our current pandemic. The essay argues that many of our hard-won lessons from COVID-19 were previously reflected in these fictional worlds, lessons we forget only at our own peril in our return to the so-called "New Normal".

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1.   The Fellowship of the Pandemic

In the uncertainty of the emerging pandemic we turned to comfort foods, familiar hobbies, and favorite mass media. Binge-watching TV series and rereading beloved novels became the norm as we safely hunkered down at home. Among the popular works that many people turned to for strength and solace was J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (Chua n.pg; Cooper n.pg; Zama n.pg). Not only did its central message of hope against seemingly unsurmountable odds resonate with many people, but its author's experiences with disease provided a sense of comradery. Although Tolkien apparently avoided contracting the 1918 H1N1 "Spanish" flu, he fell ill with trench fever while serving in World War I. As Zama (n.pg) notes, "He certainly knew what it meant to look ahead and see only desperation and death. He certainly knew what it felt to be trapped in a dangerous place". Frodo's plaintive refrain "I wish it need not have happened in my time" became an internet mantra, along with Gandalf's sage reply: "so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 60). Sakar reflects that "literature in its multifarious forms – print, film, graphic/ text, audio, visual – provides several resources that help us cope with and comprehend these dark times: a bedrock of past histories of pandemics that we can turn to for learning and for reassurance that this, too, shall pass" (11-2).

Similarly, scholars turned their pens toward re-analyzing plague media in light of the current pandemic. Examples range from Daniel Dafoe's 1722 novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Danesi), Jack London's 1912 novel *The Scarlet Plague* (Riva et al.), Sinclair Lewis' 1925 novel *Arrowsmith* (Eisenmann), and Albert Camus' 1947 *The*

Plague (Romero), to the films *Contagion* (Crewe, 2011) and *I Am Legend* (Elidrissi, 2007). Comparisons have been made between COVID-19, *Contagion* and *The Andromeda Strain* (O'Brolcháin and Brereton, 1971) or COVID-19, *Contagion*, and *Blindness* (2008) and *The Painted Veil* (2006) (Han and Curtis "Suspicious"). Although I am continuously rereading portions of Tolkien's works as part of my scholarly activity, I took advantage of COVID-era projects to binge watch one of my favorite tv series, *Babylon 5* (1993-98), and reread the six novels and two short story collections that comprise Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* saga (English trans. 2007-18). As was the case of the scholars previously mentioned, I discovered that, in many ways, fiction presaged fact, not only in the circumstances surrounding the imagined pandemics in these works, but the societal responses to them (for good or ill). My comfort-seeking recreation thus provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on important lessons of the pandemic.

It also gave me cause to investigate little-explored plagues mentioned mostly as asides in Middle-earth. In the First Age of Middle-earth, more than a thousand years before the One Ring was forged by the evil lord Sauron, a "pestilence… borne on an evil wind out of Angband" killed an unknown number of humans (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 198). The reference to Angband, the stronghold of the malevolent Melkor, Sauron's mentor and the chief villain of Middle-earth, directly connects the plague with evil, and perhaps even an intentional origin, reminiscent of conspiracy theories concerning the origin of COVID-19. Nearly 1400 years before the destruction of the One Ring, in the Year 1636 of the Third Age, a so-called "Great Plague" spread across much of Middle-earth, like COVID-19 showing no respect for political or geographical boundaries as humans and hobbits alike suffered "great loss" (Tolkien, *Return* 367). Devastating plagues can be found throughout Sapkowski's saga, including smallpox outbreaks. In one vignette in the novel *Baptism of Fire*, smallpox kills all but a single immune member of a family. The Witcher and his company protect the survivor from a band of marauders, taking care to not infect themselves in the process (Sapkowski, *Baptism* 95 and 101). The need to protect oneself while aiding others was certainly central to the public health response to COVID-19, especially among the heroic health professionals working in the trenches.

In the *Babylon 5* episode "Confessions and Lamentations" the deaths of all 203 souls aboard a transport ship forces Markab physician Dr. Lazarenn to reluctantly admit

to his old friend, station medical officer Dr. Stephen Franklin, that it is the Drafa plague, "100% terminal and 100% contagious" ("Confessions and Lamentations"). Over the course of the episode characters make numerous mistakes in fighting the disease, paralleling the uneven real-world response to COVID-19. Indeed, *Reddit* user PerryProjects terms his first viewing of this episode in 2020 "Very uncomfortable". The 1999 TV movie *Babylon 5: A Call to Arms* forms a bridge between *Babylon 5* and the unsuccessful spinoff, *Crusade* (1999). Set a few years after the main events in the original series, the Drakh attack Earth using advanced Planet Killer technology inherited from their former allies, the Shadows. Former *Babylon 5* station Captain John Sheridan (now President of the Interstellar Alliance) thwarts their attack, so the Drakh instead infect our atmosphere with a bio-engineered Shadow nano-virus. The genetic editing mechanism of the disease will adapt to terrestrial biology and kill all humans within five years. Sheridan immediately quarantines Earth in order to protect humans on other worlds, and believing that since advanced extraterrestrial technology was used to make the disease, it can be used to cure it, sends the research ship *Excalibur* across the galaxy in search of a cure (the basic premise of *Crusade*). As in our real world, humanity likewise put its trust in scientific exploration to save them from a deadly invisible enemy, a central theme to what Priscilla Wald terms the "outbreak narrative" (3).

Babylon 5* is undoubtedly science fiction; therefore, a connection to Tolkien's and Sapkowski's fantasy worlds might seem little more than a vagary of personal taste. However, Sapkowski has explained that his "vision of Fantasy is almost real. You have to believe that which occurs in the stories… you have to feel it, to believe all. It is not the typical fairy tale" (Lsrry "Part I"). This process of detailed mythmaking was more poetically termed *sub-creation* by J.R.R. Tolkien in his classic essay "On Fairy-stories" (Flieger and Anderson 11). As Tolkien explains, a true Secondary World is one "which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he [the author] relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (Flieger and Anderson 52). While J.R.R. Tolkien's classic sub-creation, Middle-earth, is often held up as the example par excellence of a Secondary World, Sapkowski's *Witcher* series is also a Secondary World, in the Tolkienian sense (Larsen "A Mythology" 389), as is Straczynski's *Babylon 5* universe. In addition, both Tolkien's world and Sapkowski's heavily utilize science in their worldbuilding (e.g., Gee; Larsen

"Mutant"). Indeed, Sapkowski's world, with its use of magic as applied science, genetic engineering, and space-time travel, qualifies as a "science-fantasy world" (Malmgren, 261).

It is true that these three works span two types of media (novels and television) and the better part of the 20th century. As previously noted, Tolkien's experiences in World War I (contemporaneous with the 1918 Flu Pandemic) would have shaped his thoughts on pandemics, and historical events such as the Black Death would have been a part of his education as a medieval scholar. While many *B5* fans and critics have read the 1995 episode "Confessions and Lamentations" as a metaphor for HIV/AIDS, especially the stigmatization of those infected (e.g., Oshiro n.pg; Rosner n.pg), Straczynski himself draws a closer connection with the Black Death ("Guide" n.pg). Sapkowski's Catriona Plague is described as a "viral haemorrhagic fever" (Sapkowski, *Lady* 336), similar to the fictional Motaba virus of the 1995 film *Outbreak* and perhaps pays homage to the 1995 Ebola outbreak in Zaire as well as the Black Death in its spreading through fleas. It should also be noted that the titular space station *Babylon 5* is a "highly multicultural environment, making it a relatable setting to present-day pluralistic societies" (Pruski 267), as is Middle-earth and the Continent of Sapkowski's novels.

Three storylines given birth in the fertile imaginations of three men from different countries resonate in curious synchronicity with our experiences during this global plague. Here I reflect upon the myriad ways in which I have discovered this to be true, as well as point out valuable lessons from these fictional worlds that I sincerely hope we have learned in preparation for the inevitable next pandemic.

2.   Ill Winds and Quarantines

Freelance writer Gael Cooper (n.pg) admits of the early days of the pandemic "Every time I step outside my home in Seattle, … I think of a line from *The Fellowship of the Ring*: 'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out [of] your door'". Indeed, in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic scientists and public health specialists were wisely focused on understanding the mode of transmission and trying to slow the spread of the disease. In the First Age of Middle-earth it is noted that the "Evil Breath" came on an "ill wind from the North under leaden skies", the airborne nature clear, even in its name (Tolkien, *Unfinished* 58).

COVID-19 was not as obvious. Which posed the greatest threat, touching grocery bags or being in the company of someone coughing? A seminal moment in the *Babylon 5* episode "Confessions and Lamentations" occurs when Dr. Franklin discovers that the Drafa plague is airborne and therefore threatens the station's ventilation system. The Catriona plague of the *Witcher* saga and related computer games is brought to the unnamed Continent when the space-time traveling Ciri passes through a plague-invested world on her trip through the multiverse and a plague-carrying flea hitches a ride in her clothes. Once on her world, the flea infects a rat, and then a cat, and finally a human (Sapkowski, *Lady* 276-78; 446-47). The resulting pandemic subsequently spreads around the Continent as there is little natural human immunity (reasonable for a novel disease, such as COVID-19).

Throughout our pandemic scientists searched for the specific origin near Wuhan, China, hoping to understand the virus and its modes of transmission, and ultimately lead us to be much better prepared for the next pandemic (Bloom et al. 694). Although animal vectors, especially bats, are the leading suspects, food and food packaging as well as a potential "laboratory incident" (either accidental or intentional) are also considered (Mallapaty 26; "WHO-convened Global Study" 112). The multiple suggested modes bring to mind the fictional meningoencephalitis virus one (MEV-1) of *Contagion*, which originated in bats but could also be transmitted though touching infected surfaces (Burns and Bhella 164).

A major turning point in the Drafa plague is the discovery that it can infect multiple species. Similarly, the Great Plague of Middle-earth takes the lives of "more than half of the folk of Rhovanion… and of their horses, too" (Tolkien, *Unfinished* 289). While transmission from animals to humans soon became the leading hypothesis for the origin of COVID-19, the discovery that the virus can be transferred from humans to animals – including pets, zoo animals, and farm species – is concerning, because such animals could pass the disease back to humans at some point in the future, perhaps in a mutated form that might elude extant vaccines. The ability of infected farmed mink to transmit the virus back to humans led to the mass destruction of mink colonies (Mallapaty 26-7).

Over the course of March 2020, the borders of our world began to close around us, international travel becoming much more difficult and often involving testing and mandatory quarantines. American states began refusing admission to other American

citizens based on their state or even county of origin. Some locales instituted draconian home lockdowns, but even in these cases there were exceptions (for example to acquire groceries or medicine). Aboard the *Babylon 5* station a more air-tight quarantine was issued by Captain Sheridan in the face of the Drafa plague even before its mode of transmission was discovered. But as in the case of our own world, the damage had already been done, the disease spreading from planet to planet through the 23rd century equivalent of air travel, spaceships.

In Spring 2020, even those not on official lockdown were told to remain home and practice "social distancing", a seeming oxymoron. However, this tool in our arsenal against the disease was not equally available to everyone, especially those in congregate living situations. Looking back to the initial spread of the pandemic, Wong and Yi (1) found that "population density is an effective predictor of cumulative infection cases in the U.S. at the county level". Likewise, the severe winter spike in COVID cases in the U.S. was largely driven by human behavior, including the need to gather inside during cold weather. Plague media frequently make note of this connection between infection rates and population density, including Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Camus' *The Plague* (Danesi 2-3; Camus 152), as well as Tolkien himself. In the Great Plague the Dundlendings suffered "less than most, since they dwelt apart and had few dealings with other men" (Tolkien, *Unfinished* 370). In contrast, the death toll was high in Gondor, "especially among those who dwelt in cities. It was greater in Rhovanion, for though its people lived mostly in the open and had no great cities, the Plague came with a cold winter when horses and men were driven into shelter" (Tolkien, *Unfinished* 288-89). A similar lack of "social distancing" helped to spread the Drafa plague on *Babylon 5*. The station medical staff unwisely required all Markab to submit to blood tests in Med Lab, which brought them into contact with others of their kind. But worst of all, 4/5 of the station's Markab population packed together in a voluntary isolation zone, hoping that their moral purity would protect them from the infection.

It did not.

3.   **Science to the Rescue**

In the world of *Babylon 5,* as in our own, science rises to the challenge in times of pandemic, in ways few outside of the scientific establishment can truly appreciate. Prior to COVID-19 the shortest time between isolating a virus and the approval of an

effective vaccine was four years (Ball n.pg). When Chinese scientists published the genetic sequence for the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in January 2020 scientists around the world raced to developed effective vaccines, many relying on cutting-edge biological delivery systems. Less than a year later, on December 2, 2020, the Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA vaccine was authorized for emergency use in the U.K., and nine days later in the U.S., with several other vaccines (using a variety of biological platforms) following suit in the intervening months.

Simultaneously a different variety of scientific heroes raced to find treatments, many of these health care workers, like Tolkien in World War I, literally fighting in the trenches, surrounded by death on a daily basis. Faced with a lack of personal protective equipment, bed space, respirators, and even knowledge about the virus they were fighting, doctors, nurses, technicians, facilities and maintenance workers, and untold others held the line against the disease, often at the expense of their own physical, mental, and emotional health. Many other essential workers (people too-often devalued by modern society) proved themselves to be heroes as well, as they kept society from collapsing by delivering food, fuel, energy, and other essentials, again at significant risk to themselves and their families. As the great lord Elrond notes in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* "such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere" (283).

In the medievalist universe of the *Witcher* saga first responders and other volunteers die in plagues caring for others. The teenaged princess Adela dies from a plague, disobeying her step-father King Goidemar by aiding priests in caring for sick children outside of the relative safety of the castle (Sapkowski, *Baptism* 268). Halfling surgeon Milo "Rusty" Vanderbeck and his assistant, the priestess Iola, survive the dangers of their battlefield hospital only to die in the outbreak of the Catriona plague. While their colleagues abandoned their posts, these two remained, treating "the sick, because they were doctors. The fact that there was no cure for the Red Death was unimportant to them" (Sapkowski, *Lady* 336).

In our Primary World, Joseph B. McCormick, then CDC infectious disease researcher, once found a single doctor left at a Sudanese hospital during an Ebola outbreak. "They are all gone. The patients, the nurses, all of them are running away…. They see what has happened to others here. So many deaths, so quickly. They think

they will die, too. So they run away. I can't blame them[,]" the remaining physician explained. When asked why he alone stayed, he offered "I am the doctor. Where else would I go?" McCormick reflects that he felt that he was "talking to a captain who was prepared to go down with his ship" (McCormick and Fisher-Hoch 65). While such actions seem utterly heroic to those not in the medical profession, as Camus' fictional Dr. Bernard Rieux explains in *The Plague*, "there's no question of heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency…. I don't know what it means for other people. But in my case I know that it consists in doing my job" (Camus 150). Physician Barry R. Meisenberg echoes this sentiment:

> I hear Rieux's voice as I visit COVID patients for extended discussions of clinical trials through doubled face masks (mine) and over the noise of high-flow oxygen machines (theirs). It is a job I have trained for and needs doing. I think too of Rieux when I observe other clinicians supplying COVID care. It is common decency delivered every day and every night. (Meisenberg 2)

Such common decency is highlighted aboard *Babylon 5*, as Minbari ambassador Delenn and her assistant Lennier volunteer to go into the Markab isolation zone despite not knowing if their species can be infected. Captain Sheridan questions this request to offer aid to an alien species, but Delenn sharply rebukes him: "I didn't know that similarity was required for the exercise of compassion. They are afraid. We wish to do what little we can" ("Confessions and Lamentations"). Nurses who held I-pads so that dying COVID-19 patients could say good-bye to their loved ones, or held the hands of the scared and dying, did this, and far, far more. As Jennifer Stolzer (n.pg) notes of her COVID-19 rewatch of "Confessions and Lamentations", "A more fitting episode to be watching in March of 2020 I could not ask for".

While scientists raced to find vaccines for COVID-19, others searched for treatments that would prevent serious illness and death. *Babylon 5*'s Stephen Franklin develops a cutting-edge treatment too late to save his friend Dr. Lazarenn but hoping it might save other Markab, he rushes all 500 doses to the isolation zone, despite not having had time to test it (a type of emergency use very different from that of the well-tested COVID-19 vaccines). Unfortunately, it is too late for the Markab – both on the station and across the galaxy – but it is suggested that Franklin's treatment will aid the other species that the Drafa virus has crossed over into ("Confessions and Lamentations"). The heart wrenching image of Delenn and Lennier surrounded by

hundreds of dead Markabs was particularly poignant and powerful for the viewer, and reinforced the lesson that the victims of pandemics are individuals, not merely casualty figures.

In the spinoff *Crusade* the Drakh Plague infecting Earth is accidentally spread to an off-world colony of non-humans who represent the last remaining population of their kind, upping the stakes in the race to find a cure ("Patterns of the Soul"). Dr. Sarah Chambers of the science vessel *Excalibur* is able to reverse engineer another artificial nano-virus to temporarily block infection from the Drakh plague for up to 48 hours of exposure ("The Memory of War"), and commentary by series creator J. Michael Straczynski confirms that a cure would have been found during the series' second season ("Crusade"). As we approach the secondary anniversary of COVID-19, we are still searching for our own real-world cure (monoclonal antibody treatment offering limited success and promising antivirals either in late-phase clinical trials or still awaiting approval), making the swift development of vaccines that much more remarkable.

The Drakh nano-virus is able to infect multiple species because it mutates in an intelligent way, specifically targeting the biology of any species. In the real world, mutations arise by a natural "hit-or-miss" process during the viral replication process. As the pandemic moves from victim to victim, each replication creates an opportunity to roll the dice of evolution, leading to the emergence of more contagious, and sometimes even more lethal, variants. The fear is that variants will arise that will "out-smart" our vaccines. We, like the various intelligent species of the *Babylon 5* universe, are therefore in an arms race against the virus, our chief weapons being vaccines and human behavior, the latter being largely outside of the control of science.

4.   Roadblocks: Religion, Politics, and Conspiracy Theories

The war against the pandemic has certainly been hampered by politics and blatant misinformation. A careful deconstruction of the failure of the U.S. to meet the challenge of COVID-19 is certainly far beyond the purview of this short essay; however, it is fair to say that the world at large is deserving of a general reprimand. The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response of the World Health Organization concluded that the:

initial outbreak became a pandemic as a result of gaps and failings at every critical juncture of preparedness for, and response to, COVID-19… too many countries took a 'wait and see' approach rather than enacting an aggressive containment strategy that could have forestalled the global pandemic. ("COVID-19: Make it the Last Pandemic, a Summary" 2)

In December 2019, the Chinese government "downplayed the pandemic threat for several critical weeks", and by censoring information and "silencing doctors" who tried to raise the alarm about the novel disease delayed the response of the World Health Organization (Sparrow n.pg). *Babylon 5*'s Dr. Franklin chastises Lazarenn about his silence about a disease that had been slowly burning through the Markab home world for a year. Lazarenn reluctantly admits that their doctors, like those in China, were "ordered to remain silent. Our leaders were afraid the people would take the disease as a sign from the gods that we had fallen from grace. They were afraid they would be voted out for attacking the public good" ("Confessions and Lamentations").

Not only do we see political pressures at work in the Markab non-response to the Drafa virus, but misconceptions as well. Lazarenn explains that the disease's previous outbreak had only occurred on the island of Drafa, known for its moral laxity. Only the island's isolated geography avoided a broader pandemic at the time. When the disease reappeared, the shame associated with it prevented a proper medical response. Family members who considered themselves ethically above reproach instead spread the disease before dying themselves. Some feared divine retribution and tried to flee their planet, distributing it to all pockets of their population across the galaxy, including the space station, with disastrous results. This presumed connection with supernatural causes and religious retribution mirrors common superstitions surrounding terrestrial epidemics (Riva et al. 1753; Snowden 62). As Camus' Father Paneloux admonished his quarantined parishioners, "Calamity has come upon you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it…. For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff" (Camus 87).

The religious aspect of the Drafa plague response also mirrors some segments of modern human society. An American poll found that 44% of respondents felt that COVID-19 was a "sign of Christ's 'coming judgment' or a 'call to faith' or 'both'" (Sturm and Albrecht, 128-9). In earlier centuries, the Black Death of the 14th century was likewise connected with sin in the eyes of some, as was the 1918 flu epidemic

(Dein 6). But this is the first pandemic to have widespread misinformation spread at nearly the speed of light, thanks to the Internet. Hashtags such as #Jesusiscoming and online discussions of COVID-19 as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse reflect a fundamentalist Christian mindset concerning the disease (Dein 9; Kettley n.pg). Similarly, a fundamentalist priest in Sapkowski's novel *Blood of Elves* (22) warns that the military campaigns of the Nilfgaard empire are one of the prophesied plagues heralding the coming Ice Age central to the prophecies of the seeress Ithlinne. The symbolism of the Catriona plague certainly fits this apocalyptic mindset as well. Extremists could be motivated to go a step further, attempting to prevent anyone from interfering with this divine decision to bring about the apocalypse. For example, in the *Crusade* episode "Ruling from the Tomb" members of the Sacred Omega cult plot to blow up a scientific conference on the Drakh plague because they believe the disease to be sent by God in response to humanity's evil nature and therefore do not want a cure to be found. To prevent such extremist actions in our real world, the early shipments of the precious vaccines were transported across the U.S. under the watchful eye of law enforcement.

But religious ideology has also proven a roadblock in raising vaccination numbers among certain populations around the world. Polls of American evangelicals consistently show a strong belief that God will provide protection against the disease, paralleling a strong lingering vaccine hesitancy among this population (Schor and Fingerhut n.pg). President John Magufuli of Tanzania not only rejects the need for vaccines, but openly flaunts standard precautions such as masks and social distancing, believing "God would protect his people" (Cawthorne n.pg). The late spring 2021 surge in India was exacerbated by folk-beliefs that the disease simply did not exist or that God would watch over believers (Cohen 900). But as the Markab learn, religion offers no protection against a virus. Ambassador Fashar blames the station's outbreak on a human conspiracy to wipe out his people, spread through food or drinking water, or even the taint of human immorality. This paranoia leads the Markab to self-isolate "Away from outsiders. We will stay, and pray, and repent" ("Confessions and Lamentations"). What they do is die *en masse*.

In our real-world religious ideology combines with politically-motivated conspiracy theories to drive the virulent spread of misconceptions and bald-faced lies about both the disease and vaccines. According to the misinformed the disease was

created by Bill Gates to spread 5G internet or by the U.S. government to cull the American minority population or as a bioweapon against China. Vaccines contain microchips or fetal tissue, alter a recipient's genetics, turn your body into a giant magnet, or cause the disease in the first place. The vaccine might even be the dreaded mark of the beast created by the Antichrist and forewarned in the Book of Revelation (Dwoskin n.pg; Islam et al. 9-10; Lynas n.pg). Wisconsin pharmacist Steven Brandenburg intentionally spoiled 500 doses of the temperature-sensitive Moderna vaccine, motivated by his conspiracy-theory belief that the vaccine would change a recipient's DNA (Li n.pg). It is important to note that "Confessions and Lamentations" was not the first *Babylon 5* episode universe to draw upon tensions between religion and science. The Season 1 episode "Believers" pits Dr. Franklin against parents who refuse to save their son through a simple operation because they believe that any incision would allow the soul to leave their son's body. Instead, they kill the child themselves according to their tradition. Pruski uses the episode to argue that, in the case of COVID-19, "safety and ethical concerns regarding specific vaccines should, as such, not be lumped together with anti-vaxxer objections" and unfounded conspiracy theories but rather dealt with respectfully (278).

One of the most tenacious conspiracy theories is that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was intentionally created in a laboratory, despite genomic analysis to the contrary (Andersen et al. 450). Such hypothetical events are certainly legion in science fiction. For example, the nano-virus of the Drakh plague is not only intentionally engineered, but specifically used against humanity. Fans of *Babylon 5* have debated in online venues if the resurgence of Drafa is orchestrated, or if the disease itself had started as a biological weapon created by the Shadows or their allies ("Guide: Confessions and Lamentations" n.pg). The introduction of the Catriona plague into the main world of the Witcherverse is an accident, caused by Ciri's unrestricted jumping from place to place, time to time, within the multiverse, without any thought of potential contamination. As previously mentioned, the First Age plague of Middle-earth is described as connected to the evil Dark Lord Morgoth and his stronghold of Angband. The Great Plague of the Third Age, carried "with dark winds out of the East", is connected in retrospect with other contemporaneous events in Middle-earth, especially "signs of the arising of Sauron" (Tolkien, *Return* 328). Therefore, even Middle-earth is prone to conspiracy theories, in this case that the plague is contrived by Sauron in order

to decimate his enemies and facilitate his return to Mordor (despite the fact that Sauron's allies suffer losses in the plague as well).

5.   Us vs. Them: Prejudice

Babylon 5 Chief of Security Michael Garibaldi sagely warns very early in the Drafa outbreak that "when people get scared they start looking for scapegoats… trust me, this will get real ugly, real fast" ("Confessions and Lamentations"). It does not take long for Garibaldi's prediction to come true, as we see him breaking up assaults on Markab citizens who are blamed for the station quarantine. Bias and blame are dangerous partners in a time of pandemic. For example, outbreaks of smallpox and typhus in the late 1800s led to increases in anti-Chinese and anti-Semitic prejudice, as these groups were blamed for the contagions (Wald 115). The so-called "Spanish" Flu of 1918 most likely originated in either France or the U.S., the connection with Spain in the popular imagination due to the early reports appearing in a Madrid newspaper on May 22, 1918 (Liang et al. 273). The origination of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in China quickly led to discrimination against Chinese-owned and Chinese-connected businesses in the West, for example precipitous drops in patronage of Chinese restaurants (Reny and Barreto 2). Casual statements by politicians using racist terms such as "Wuhan virus", "Chinese virus", and "Kung Flu", along with appeals to "racist tropes about Chinese eating bats, snakes, and dogs" added fuel to the fire of anger, resentment, and fear (Reny and Barreto 1). The result was an alarming rise in violence against Asian-Americans beginning in March/April 2020, with anti-Asian hate crimes in large U.S. cities rising 164% from first quarter 2020 to first quarter 2021 (Levin 2). As these statistics only include incidents reported to law enforcement, the actual increase in violence could actually be much higher. Canadian law enforcement also saw an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes during COVID-19, with Canada's four largest cities reporting an astounding 532% jump (Levin 3).

The description of the Great Plague that ravaged Gondor as coming "with dark winds out of the East" of Middle-earth therefore appears both prescient and prejudicial as seen through the lens of 2020 (Tolkien *Return* 328). John Magoun explains that Tolkien's imaginary universe has a very distinct "moral geography" in which the "East is defined negatively as 'not West,' or an antiparadise", as the so-called Blessed Lands lie in the West. In particular, in *The Lord of the Rings*, "the East, or Rhûn, is dominated

by Sauron of Mordor, and its wild Men, the 'Easterlings,' are a constant threat to Gondor and the West" (139). The moralistic description of a barbaric hoard racing out of the Evil East to infect the more noble West sits even more uncomfortably in this time when anti-East sentiment rises to the level of violence against individuals and businesses who had no direct connection with the origin or initial transmission of the disease. However, the trope is a common one. Han and Curtis trace a trend of fictional epidemics moving "typically east to west, or at least from developing to developed countries" in Hollywood epidemic media, playing on the twin evils of "orientalization (perpetuating stereotypes about Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies) and othering" (Han and Curtis "Social response" 390-1).

Dimitra Fimi notes that the Easterlings, also called the "Swarthy Men", are routinely described by Tolkien in language that "brings to mind racial stereotypes of black and ethnic people and their visual representation" (146). The racial stereotypes associated with this already marginalized fictional group are doubly disconcerting in the age of COVID, as the pandemic brought "disproportionate harm… to historically marginalized groups" in the U.S., especially low-income and minority populations (Lopez et al. 719). These groups have suffered higher rates of infection, severe disease, hospitalization, and death, exacerbated by a higher likelihood of living in crowded or multigenerational conditions, inability to work from home, lack of access to health care, and higher incidences of comorbidities (Lopez et al. 719). In short, "Systemic racism is the root cause of the racial disparities evidenced in the impact of the pandemic" (Peterson n.pg). It is therefore proper that we take the time to recognize and reject the racial and cultural stereotypes that are not only all-too-common in our society, but the pop culture media that is a product of that society.

6.   The World in the After Times

Famed philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek has opined that COVID-19 "has also triggered a vast epidemic of ideological viruses which were lying dormant in our societies: fake news, paranoic conspiracy theories, explosions of racism" (39). Similarly, *Babylon 5*'s Dr. Franklin observed "Everyone's looking for someone to blame. Same old story: Black Death, AIDS, Chalmer's Syndrome. Millions die and no one remembers the lessons we've learned" ("Confessions and Lamentations"). At the end of the episode, Franklin, the medical hero who has found a treatment for the Drafa

virus too late to save the Markab species, sits at a station bar trying to find solace in his beverage. A background newscast explains that the Markab pandemic has spread across the known galaxy, leaving the species effectively extinct. The bartender jokingly offers "Hey, what do you call two billion dead Markabs? Planetary redecorating". After amusing himself at the dead's expense, the bartender turns more serious, offering that he "heard it was the Vorlons that poisoned that place. You know how they are". Reaching his breaking point with this display of racism and ignorance, Franklin mutters "Nothing changes" and walks away in disgust ("Confessions and Lamentations"). In the words of *Reddit* poster quonotxoa (n.pg) the "entire covid situation can be summed up by watching this episode I feel. The politics, the prejudice, the beliefs – it's all in there".

The impact of human behavior on pandemics, and pandemics on human behavior, is also mirrored in Middle-earth. The recently crowned King of Gondor, Telemnar, along with all his children, succumb to the Great Plague, leading to a shift in power to his nephew, Tarondor (Tolkien, *Return*, 319). The new ruler moves his official dwelling to Minas Anor, as the previously beautiful capitol city of Osgiliath is "now partly deserted" and beginning to "fall into ruin. Few of those who had fled from the plague into Ithilien or to the western dales were willing to return" (Tolkien, *Return* 328). A similar "urban shuffle" was seen in parts of the U.S. during 2020, as people working from home moved outward from large cities to smaller cities and further out into suburbs, especially in the New York and San Francisco metro areas (Patino et al. n.pg). Trench fever left Tolkien a "long hauler", hospitalized several times over two years (Carpenter 93-106). We are still learning about the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the human body. All of these outcomes echo Priscilla Ward's warnings of the consequences that derive from our popular narratives about outbreaks: "They promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles, and they change economies" (Wald 3).

COVID-19 has also had a palpable effect on the creation of popular media. For example, work on the second season of *The Witcher*, Netflix's adaptation Sapkowski's saga, was halted in March 2020 due to positive COVID tests. Filming resumed in August, but was paused a second time by another cluster of cases (Wiseman n.pg). So much of our lives was put on hold during the pandemic; weddings were rescheduled, college educations postponed, anniversary and birthday celebrations skipped or driven

into virtual reality. But none of these inconveniences can be compared to the utter personal and public devastation resulting from the deaths of millions of fellow human beings. Andrzej Sapkowski captures just a hint of this sorrow in describing how smallpox victim Little Eye is ultimately tended to by her friend and mentor Dandelion: he "had carried her out in his arms between corpses being cremated on funeral pyres and had buried her far from the city, in the forest, alone and peaceful, and, as she had asked, buried two things with her: her lute and her sky blue pearl" (Sapkowski, *Sword* 246).

Žižek compares our response to COVID-19 with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of reacting to terminal illness and other catastrophic events:

> First there was a denial (nothing serious is going on); then, anger (usually in a racist or anti-state form: the Chinese are guilty, our state is not efficient…); next comes bargaining (OK, there are some victims, but it's less serious than SARS, and we can limit the damage…); if this doesn't work, depression arises (let's not kid ourselves, we are all doomed)…. (51)

He muses "how would will [sic] the final stage of acceptance look?" (Žižek 51). Indeed, as we begin to emerge on the other side of the pandemic, what lessons will we take with us from the experience? J. Michael Straczynski wisely offers that the lesson of the Drafa virus is "if you make a disease political on either side, you're gonna die. You have to set aside all that crap and just Deal With The Problem. The only 'side' this episode took was in advocating compassion for those afflicted" ("Guide: Confessions and Lamentations" n.pg). His thoughtful character Delenn perhaps more eloquently offers that "we honor the memory of those who are no longer with us by using what we have learned to save others. To exercise faith and patience and charity. To reach out to those who are afraid. If we can do that, then their passing will have had meaning - and we will grow from it" ("Confessions and Lamentations"). In a note to his philosophical essay *Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth*, Tolkien describes the beliefs of the elf Finrod about the far future of his fallen world, Arda Marred. Finrod has a vision of a new world as not merely unmarred, but "richer than the 'first design'". In Arda Re-made Elves and Men will each separately find joy and content, and an interplay of friendship, a bond of which will be the Past" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's* 333). Likewise, may our new normal be a time of lessons learned and increased compassion, as we reflect on our shared experiences lived largely apart.

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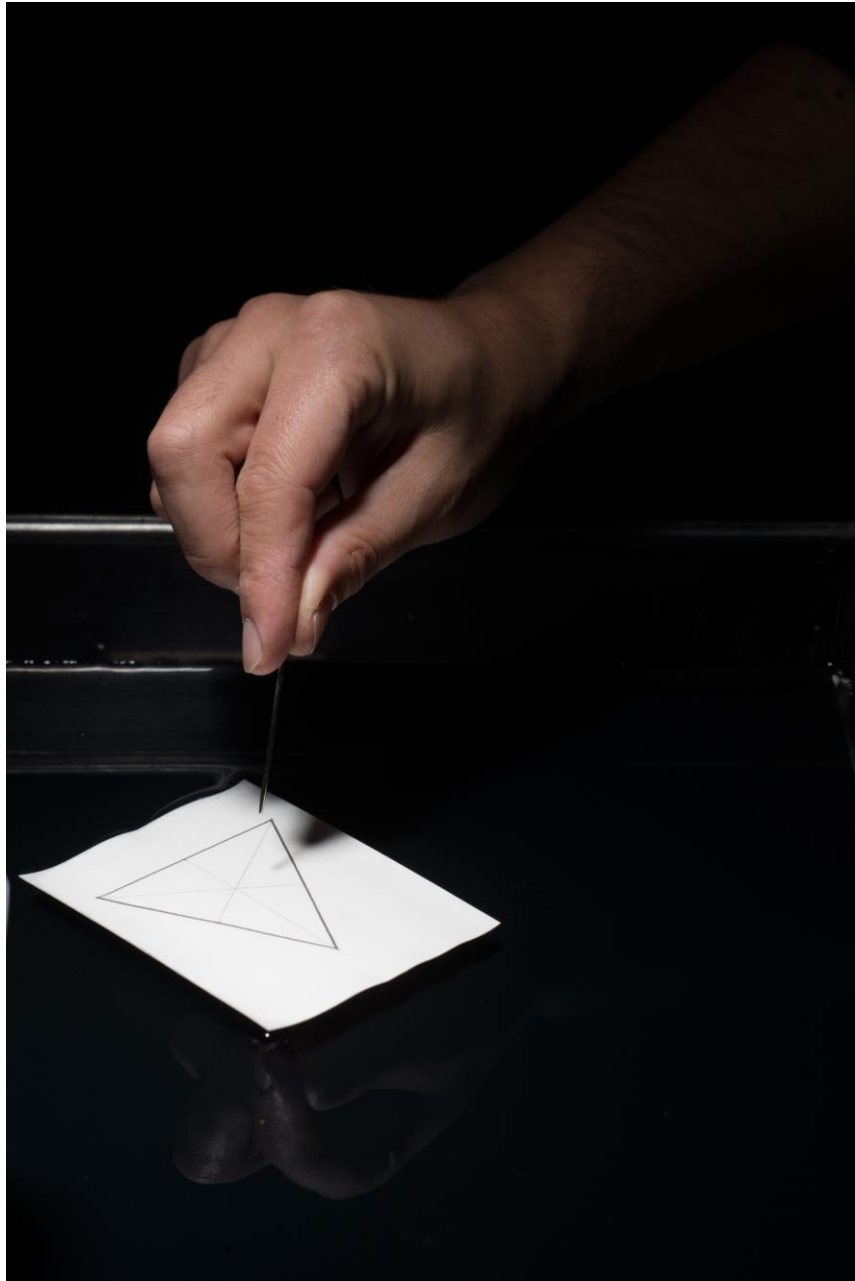
Photo: João Paulo Serafim

Social Stratification in Comics: Representations of Status and Class to the Growth of Genre

Stephen Poon

Abstract | This paper offers a critical examination of comics' role in constructing, establishing, and giving meaning to the system of social stratification through status and class representations. Literature presents a spectrum of scholarly critiques on theories related to social class and status, and to align the principles of justice, morality,

and equality to cultural symbolisms in comics. Primary research comprises a textual analysis of social stratification in the study of cultural artefacts and characters from *Spider-Man* and *Batman* comics. Case studies demonstrate how social class, power, wealth, and status are explicitly personified in comics through symbolic elements found such as equipment and technology which embodies the ideals of class and power, and through elements of status conflict such as the structured social relationships between masters and employees. Findings, established the relevance of stratification of status and class in the symbolically constructed social conditions that fictional characters live in. Partly due to popular media, audiences are shown to increasingly identify with comics' symbolic messages and are aware of meaningful visual narratives of justice and social equality in their formation of cultural worldviews. The paper's conclusion urges researchers and educators to undertake further exploration on the sociological function of comics as an accessible discourse tool to encounter cultural differences in global societies.

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Introduction

Comics are sites where superheroes and super beings are suggestive portraits of social change, and where scientific and cultural knowledge are applied in equal measure. Comics are sought-after cultural commodities. They are mainstream tools of visual expression as well as a specialty art medium with morphologies of forms and intended audiences (Jenkins 14). At the same time, comics use textual signifiers that are often not pinned down to specific semiotics and cultural systems of meaning; readers must reach their own interpretations, with creatively imagined possible outcomes (Kukkonen 51-86).

In "History and Comics", Paul Buhle (315-323) wrote that problematic interpretations of historic events especially pertaining social movements, have surged among today's digital and web generation, many who increasingly view comics as an aspect of knowledge in their (already) pared-down list of books. Some researchers are concerned that visualising the world through comics boils down to nothing but providing audiences simplified chunk of general understanding on social problems, where readers "see" aspects of the world indulgently using aesthetic illustrations, narratives, and speech bubbles, all at the expense of scholarly prose which could offer a stronger appreciation of the full, yet not always, coherent picture.

Professor Charles Hatfield acknowledges that "comics … play a developmental role in the reading life of children" (360). Comics publishers, searching for new spins on classic 'good versus evil' plots, have noted that comics are a growth market segment for early literacy products. Researching the evolution of children's literature in the early 2000s, Hatfield reports growing recognition for comic art potential and the various informal tactics that attempt to use comics as serious teaching tools. Sales, critical popularity, and marketing have all contributed to the "wordless" genre becoming a lucrative and popular cultural text for children, cult comic art followers, and general readers alike (Smith 131).

However, the rapid evolution of modern comics as a transmedia sector have resulted in differences in perceptions of comics' sociological function among creative industry stakeholders (traditional and digital publishers, comic artists, visual communicators, marketers), and culture scholars.

Graphic novels, anime, and manga increasingly express audiences' desires to debate, dialogue, and share perspectives on issues affecting global societies. Cultural scholars weigh in with their own critical observations about the benefits of comics genre's popularity among youth and adult markets. This has contributed to perceptual differences that contemporary comics have very disparate agendas.

As legitimate artefacts of culture, comics have sustained creative industries, with licensing, distribution, and marketing revenues from mainstreaming of the genre over the last two decades (Lopes 92-97). The superheroes of comics are iconified for their cultural impacts on global societies as they predominate in popular leisure and entertainment franchises today, from films to amusement parks.

The 2000s saw the emergence of big-budget superhero films and action-film franchises based on comics, such as *X-Men* (Dir. Bryan Singer, 2006) the first superhero film of the century; *Iron Man* (Dir. Jon Favreau, 2008), *Superman Returns* (Dir. Bryan Singer, 2006) and *The Dark Knight* (Dir. Christopher Nolan, 2008).

Studies reveal that the Western comic publishing industry has always pandered to more adult consumers' tastes. These have resulted in comic books' resurgence as mainstream cultural products, birthing new media hybridity and the reimagining of Western superheroes for other societies (Jenkins 96). Hybridity is a frequent element in digital convergence trends.

Consequently, among less media-engaged societies, there would often arise a resistance to Western ideologies being incorporated, assimilated, or encroaching into their cultures (Jenkins 112). Nevertheless, comics-based content from films to animations and as character marketing for commercial advertising, represent a genre of highly marketable pop culture, besides being interesting case studies for filmmakers.

Animation works, for instance, are studied and taught for their direction, production design, visual and stunt effects, videography, scripting, and other creative aspects (New York Film Academy). Based on the classic tactical marketing strategy of summertime releases, comics-inspired superhero films occasionally pick up industry awards, such as *The Dark Knight* that won an Oscar for the portrayal of the Joker by Heath Ledger.

Jenkins provocatively suggests in the classic transmedia book *Convergence Culture*, that these visual mediums metaphorically remind audiences of their own social ranks, status, and roles as the fantasies they "insert" themselves into could be inclusive or exclusionary (174).

For instance, Mila Bongco (151-176), in citing the collaboration by comic book writer Grant Morrison and illustrator Dave McKean in the highly acclaimed 1989 *Arkham Asylum*, comments that the convergence of cultural meaning making within comics makes it an ambiguous postmodern "power narrative". In *Arkham Asylum*, Batman's Dark Knight archetype is subsumed with a disturbing passion to satirise the Joker's madness and moral vacuity, which led to tragic outcomes weaved upon the realities of psychiatric madness.

Comics' Visual Design System and Narrative Schemes

Comics have taken decades to be in the commercial spotlight as a visual communication medium. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud applies the fundamentals of semiotics developed by C.S. Peirce, who argued that human understanding of meaning through images, gestures and signs comes from "juxtaposed pictorial and other images [arranged] in deliberate sequence" (8). Another principal definition of comics attributes the term *sequential art* to experimental cartoonist Will Eisner, where stories are told through a series of strips or panels.

Twentieth-century comics began in the 1930s in Italian magazines, and graphical speech balloons were also introduced (Castaldi 80). Readers were presented

with simplistic articulation of thoughts, plots, and verbalised views to accompany body language and other nonverbal aspects of visual communication (Bramlett 382). David Kunzle produced a double-serial volume of scholarship on comics in a quest to find the thematic "prehistoric" origins of comic as contemporary graphic art. His books were published over the span of two decades (1973 and 1990) to demonstrate the power of timeless comics as cultural artefacts.

While postmodernists lament the purpose of comics genre tracking (Donald Simpson), Kunzle arguably pushed the boundaries of McCloud's thesis, especially since the latter insisted that comics' value had been "squandered, ignored and misunderstood for generations" (Boxer). Additionally, comics as a storytelling medium have been called "the invisible art" (Manning 66). This implies that readers expect the genre to carry no more weight than as accessible sites of familiar icons, characters, places, symbols, and imageries that *resemble* real life and real societal issues. Discussing the popularity of costumed superheroes, from "strip funnies" to fledgling post-World War I "action -adventure" graphic novel publications, Petty (4) claims that:

[At] their height, superhero comics [*Captain Marvel*, *Superman*, *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*, *The Spectre*, *Captain America*, and etc.] were selling up to a million copies per monthly issue. It was a good time to be a hero.

There are numerous challenges to taking comics into constructive realms, from its historical antecedents as 'alternative literature' for readers seeking relatable, vernacular art over a century ago, to becoming a more inclusive, increasingly critical subject of art, design, media, pedagogical and literary discussions. Comics' representations of social situations attempt to temporally remove readers from their own cultural realities, inviting them to look back at history from a distance (Johnson 3).

Crucially, comics resonate with readers as they symbolically construct and illuminate social conditions from discrimination to oppression and poverty, by structuring visual plots that demand audiences to focus on their social reality to interpret narratives for themselves. The social conditions in which comics are conceived, produced and distributed are an intensely studied area of contemporary cultural research (Brienza 105; Palmer 3).

Comics contextualises the relationships and conflicts between protagonists and antagonists to draw audiences to read and appreciate them on aesthetics levels (Iser, cited by Connors: 34), as well as offer educating and enlightening depictions of societal conditions through critiquing structures of class, honour, stigmatisation, law, guilt, and punishment (Fennell 319).

Literacy experts argue comics' debatable nature as a literacy medium; some scholars think comics allow school-age readers to overcome learning reluctance by being a textual interaction tool to attain reading competency and construct meaning (Connors 27). As a medium of neutral communication, comics are subject to constant critical questioning by the comic authors themselves, since superheroes are temporal characters with 'grown-up voices', who attempts to dignify comic book artists' articulation of "else-worlds" comprising their personal ideologies and socio-political interpretations of social issues through visual crafts (Waid and Ross 151).

Morality and law enforcement form another significant theme. Comics examine this invisible thread that upholds societal harmony and progress, providing accessible cultural framing of the codes and duties of citizenry and socio-political relations between authorities, enforcement agencies, society, and reformers. Ideologies of legal change, liberty, civil rights, social equality, and etc challenge audiences' critical thinking (Cedeira Serantes).

Stratification and Conflict Theories

Stratification has been defined variedly, but for the purpose of this paper, it refers to the hierarchical systems of enacted laws, customs and organised economic production which apportions social rewards in accordance to accepted cultural customs for identity politics, wealth, prestige, affiliations, religious positions, and ethnic dominance.

European classical economists Georg Hegel and Max Weber pioneered theories on social class differences and proposed that social stratification play a role in the legitimisation and stabilisation of power structures and systems through imposing the dominant will of specific parties on others of lower ranks. Characteristics of domination are based on three enacted forms of authority: legal, traditional, and charismatic (Weber, cited by Nostwick 35).

Stratification is largely derived from socioeconomic theories which argue that the formal structures and systems of economic classes perpetuate social inequality. Upper classes employ unfair distribution systems to gain privileges, attain economic success, and to sustain their wealth. The wealthy, powerful and educated codify stratification through social hierarchies, offering limited opportunities and quantities of lower classes to rise.

Conflict theories are useful to explain the conditions wherein justice is measured in the fair distribution of economic resource. The theory argues that perpetuating class divisions oppresses lower classes to seek their share of social resources. Evolutionary capitalism shows that resources are distributed for social survival, until a surplus (leftover) exists at a certain point in time and power determines how the surplus is distributed. These may include systems for the division of labour (Haferkamp and Smelser 110).

Various cultural interpretative schemes have emerged in the study of comics as a site of identity and social class discourses, through examining conceptual and narrative themes such as racial discrimination, corruption, and homosexuality. Hillary Chute argues that *discourse value* is one of the ways comics are perceived as a legitimate medium used in discussing stratification in this century.

Studying the development of political awareness through the cartoons of Joe Sacco, Chute examines how Sacco compellingly captures social class discourses through themes such as justice and human rights (821), concluding that comics reflect the cultural diversity of ideologies by raising questions about self-identity which become pertinent for social progress.

Cedeira Serantes pushed this notion further, applying the constructivist method in a multimodal framework to study 21st century comics' reading experience through interviews with comic book fans. He developed four dimensions signifying the concept of status. First, the development of *self-identity*, second, attitudes towards *materiality*; third, perceptions of *institutional power* and *class divisions*; and fourth, *temporality*, since audiences spend short periods engaging with graphic texts.

University of Helsinki researcher Kai Mikkonen applies structuralism theories developed by Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond and Tzvetan Todorov to critique how complex social class narratives are communicated in web-based graphic comics through the sequencing of dialogues and conversations.

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These studies and findings from literature suggest that comics can greatly impact the social construction of worldviews, affecting audiences' knowledge about social realities and influencing cultural attitudes towards certain social classes.

Textual Analysis of Comic: An Overview

Textual analysis, according to McKee, is a sensemaking methodology to gather data. This practice is applied to uncover and clarify value judgements and perceptions behind controversial themes. Communications researcher J. P. Williams studied the evolution of popular culture through rhetorical analysis. In her dissertation, Williams critiqued comics' fantasy character portrayals, arguing that close examination of gender identity roles showcases the compatibility of comics with audiences' worldviews, norms, and attitudes towards issues such as sexual equality.

Textual analysis in researching comics has evolved from the traditional examination of sequential and configurative structuration of visual imageries (with units such as panels, pictorial runes, and speech balloons), to the less structured, more ambiguous visual literacy as well as message interpretations of character designs and plots based on class relationships (Dunst et al).

Nuanced expressions of human conditions are seen when comics are analysed through a simple equation: *"cognitive + aesthetics"*. Within the pages of comics and graphic novels are storytelling panels which have the ability to cut through structured social class narratives using relatable fantasy, dialogues, and design elements to develop audience's aesthetic responses (Connors 15-21). These form the basis of readers' immersion into a world of superheroes and supervillains as told through "weaved multimodal" texts.

In "digging deeper to better understand certain kinds of information" (Denisoff 456), researchers need to distinguish between texts with *latent* and *surface* meanings, as audience's interpretations may not align with the comic artists' or authors' intended meanings. This is a crucial factor, as comics have undergone substantial and significant cultural reframing. Being increasingly accessible has resulted in perceptual shifts of their value, as audiences gain awareness and makes inferences about social class divisions and stratification *for themselves* as well as to further understand their meanings *for others* in society.

To sum up, textual analyses enable insights into these shifts by documenting diverse themes and perspectives and shaping answers to the many complex questions related to local and geopolitical ideologies, as well as important economic and social issues which underpin sociological development of social classes in the accumulation of wealth and power.

This in turn contributes to the spread of comics' genre popularity as a fascinating subject of cultural, humanities, and social science scholarship. Hence, the use of textual analysis in understanding social stratification in comics is applied for this paper.

Stratification: A Textual Analysis of *Spider-Man* and *Batman*

The *Spider-Man* series, published by Marvel Comics beginning in 1962 and cemented by positive audience response in 1963 (*Britannica*), tells of orphaned Peter Parker, an introverted high school student turned news reporter, whose job personifies a sense of personal awareness towards social injustice. In school, he deals with rejection and loneliness. Science is the only real solution he turns to. The narrative sees him attempting to fight for justice for commonfolk in an attempt to create an idealised world he desires to live in.

Spider-Man's dual nature reflects Weber's principle of *charismatic* authority, which perceives a legitimate social conflict in the ways individuals in society gain vicarious triumphs over heroic personal struggles against unjust systems and nefarious criminals. Spiderman's alter ego Peter Parker shows an individual's difficulties to balance a stolid, humdrum routine as a journalist and his self-perceived "moral" duty as a crimefighter, while caring for family and community.

This contrasts with Batman, whose alter ego, Bruce Wayne, despite being scion of a wealthy family, is marked for a lifetime role: that of addressing social problems. His fate shifts when he is orphaned during a street robbery, becoming sole heir of the fictitious Wayne Enterprises, Inc., a family corporation modelled after *multinational companies* (MNC), a conglomerate with interests in aerospace, steel manufacturing, chemical, electronics, medical, and shipbuilding. Bruce grows increasingly doubtful of the existence of social justice, even as he rubs shoulders with the elite class in the squalid setting of crime-ridden Gotham City. Perceptions of his charisma comes from

his vigilante methods of crusading to obtain justice for the oppressed, and from the prestige status accorded by peers due to large contributions from Wayne Foundation, the non-profit which helps the community and victims of crime.

In this manner, Batman's creator Bob Kane constructed a character that lived under the system of traditional authority Weber described (Lopes 20). This is an essential psychological reality of the socially conservative 1940s era in which Batman was created (Johnson 4; Smith 134). This reflects Brienza, whose study of Japanese and American comics suggests that social conditions derive from the "social and organisational context of production and dissemination" (105).

Kevin Borg discusses structural duality in examining social systems as both the means and outcomes of stratification (797). Citing technologist Wiebe E. Bijker and structuralist Anthony Giddens, Borg states that resource distribution is an intentional process, where the formal rules governing acceptable divisions of social classes are the product of temporality perceived as legitimate expression of ownership.

The chauffeur, the basis of Borg's article, exemplifies this. Social interactions such as the dialogues and formal verbal exchanges between Bruce Wayne and his chauffeur Alfred are important stratification elements.

The symbolic construction and portrayal of superheroes' dependence on personal assistants, secretarial staff and other necessary workers is relevant to class discourse as the rules and resources in the "master/slave" system are externalised within fictional storytelling frames. Assorted hired hands from servants, butlers, accountants, and digital AI solutions, act as sturdy ramparts for respective "bosses", assuming administrative responsibilities and performing mundane tasks, working unobtrusively in the background in a range of needful "sidekick" roles (Rocher et al 9).

Externalities weave together the cultural reality of the superhero's limitations. Fictional assistants justify the practice of social stratification which dictate acceptable master/slave behaviours. Employers recognise and value henchmen who thrive on hard work, while demonstrating loyalty, dutifulness, street-smart intelligence, and protectiveness. These characteristic traits, albeit often stereotypically portrayed, symbolise the indispensability of skilled or professional employees (Rocher et al 18).

In Spider-Man's case, the master/employee relationship conflict is personified by Peter's nemesis, Dr Otto Gunther Octavius (Doctor Octopus or Doc Ock). Octavius

hires Peter as a laboratory assistant, discovering the latter's alter ego activities as a superhero, but without publicly disclosing his knowledge.

Octavius' mean-spiritedness develops concurrently with his negligence towards work safety protocols. As a case study in neuroticism, Octavius allows a deeper understanding of irredeemable criminal behaviour that stems from personal failures, including parental opposition to his marriage, and rampant obsession with career recognition (Holland, cited by Dudenhoeffer 126-129).

Technology and Status Legitimisation in Comics

Technology empowers masters in the comic universe, being portrayed as incredibly expensive, and therefore, symbolising tools of wealthy classes who can afford to advance socially, in their zeal for domination or recognition of success.

Technological glitches are frequently the central triggers which unnerve the human controllers of the system or machine; the rest of the morality tale falls in place in the grand narrative, albeit from philanthropic or profiteering motives.

Without technological problems, there would hardly be gripping "experiment-gone-wrong" scenarios where antagonists play morally conflicted roles. Imes Chiu states the cultural attitude towards materiality as status symbol indicates the agentic power of technology to produce hierarchical structures which is then exploited by the capitalistic classes (32). Social hierarchies are also symbolised by everyday objects and technological apparatuses which demonstrate that power is a capacity to create 'sensible order' in society: "you can, you will, and because you did, you can" (Herbuth 469).

Octavius, the Marvel Universe's dual-nature invention of brilliant nuclear physicist-turned-rogue, developed four radiation-resistant mechanical arms to aid in researching the capacities of atomic powers, typifies the real threats of 'science gone wrong'. His formidable tentacle arms, harnessed to engirdle his stocky body, symbolise extraordinary human strength. An accidental radiation leak and explosion fused the laboratory apparatus to Octavius' body. With his brain re-wired to accommodate four mechanical arms and a tarnished reputation, Octavius turns to a life of a crime.

In Batman's Gotham City, advanced technologies are *de rigueur* to its power narrative, signifying its material complicity to conduct (and sometimes, triumph over) crime and vice. To counterbalance this, protagonist Bruce Wayne's indolent playboy

character, from his entrenched position of wealth, shows concern for community welfare, with the non-profit arm Wayne Foundation funding scientific research and philanthropic deeds to reduce global social inequalities (Smith 132).

Batman does not possess superhuman abilities but leverages on the inherently divided social structures and economic systems of Gotham. At the same time, Batman relies on superior technological gadgets to defeat villains. One of these, a utility belt, acts as armour. Designing the belt himself is a unique touch of creative aesthetics, showcasing his intelligence and attention to detail. The belt includes a Bat-Cuff, designed with a sliding mechanism of lock and release, that requires cutting off.

Another signifier of status in Batman comics is the mode of transportation, the Batmobile. Sophisticated, menacing, high speed and high prestige, the Batmobile is a tech icon bearing close resemblance to military weaponry, calculated to instigate fear of law and justice in his perpetual battles to nab or eliminate the baddies (Birkenstein 129-132).

A slew of costume staples, technological equipment and gadgetries enable audiences to appreciate the role of externalities in crimefighting, either owned or amassed by protagonists or their opponents.

Villainy is symbolised through weapons used for self-interests, wickedness, or greed, contrasting with their use for protection, defence, and as empowering agents for change by 'good' superheroes. When self-interests and justice conflicts, the standoffs and fights between lead characters and antagonists legitimises comics as recursive texts which construct and mirror the cultural reality of social class conflicts and morality problems.

What is uncomfortable is when comics' portrayal of justice, morality, and equal rights become open battlegrounds for public clashes. Since individuals' judgements of good and evil are based on social expectations and cultural norms of what constitutes ethical behaviours, audiences' perceptions of comic characters' morality compass, cannot ultimately be resolved with definitive answers but only plausible outcomes.

A final reflection on this dilemma comes from culture critic Jeanne Holland, writing in *Anatomy of the Superhero Film* (Dudenhoeffer 126). In the decade after global terrorism struck New York on September 11, 2001, Holland believes Americans recovering from the shock of suicide bombing post-9/11 should have seen the symbolic connections that 2004's *Spider-Man 2* made with the real-life terror incidence.

This nuanced ability in the "reinscription of good and evil" (289), which happens through comics' ability to reframe flawed social conditions and political relations, would have helped more audiences to come to terms with the horrors of terrorism and embrace a new vision of a stronger America.

Conclusions

"Humans don't just survive; they discover, [and] they create." ~ *Ratatouille*

What lessons may be gathered from textual insights on comics, and how do comics' fictional schemes influence society's perceptions of reality? To begin with, themes of morality and ethics of individual choices are socially constructed elements of superhero storytelling. This implies its cultural potential to improve perceptions of equality, justice, and to seek solutions for social change.

Secondly, findings suggest a tremendous potential in social and educational research for comics to be a legitimate platform for learning - the goal being to get children into the habit of reading and thought development.

Research point to varied creative possibilities that educators could leverage on. Comics could play a role to enhance social awareness through visual literacy approaches for younger age and adolescent audiences, and as alternative teaching strategies to conventional textbooks for subjects ranging from political history, psychology, visual communication, technology, and innovation.

If public awareness of issues such as behavioural dysfunctionalities, social class differences and ethnic-based injustices can be increased via comics, manga, or digital mediums such as games and apps, there is untapped potential to garner critical responses among interested stakeholders such as comic graphic designers and digital content producers. This area is ripe for further contextual research.

Thirdly, stratification in comics help audiences consciously *define* class, what class *means*, and encourages conversations on how stratification impact resource distribution. By portraying cultural worldviews through social constructions of fictional realms and superheroes, comics can be a continuum to study class distinctions and to heighten audiences' acceptance as a legitimate cultural artefact, implying its sociological function as accessible tools to encounter global, socio-political realities. These experiences trigger philosophic questions about class systems, economic

determinism, and social histories, to examine possible policy improvements and find solutions for dysfunctional socioeconomic systems and structures.

Superheroes' ubiquity and relatability through popular media have transformed the comic genre from being merely cultural artefacts created to entertain youth to an empire of veritable social change agents with latent cultural capital to dramatically alter twenty-first century society.

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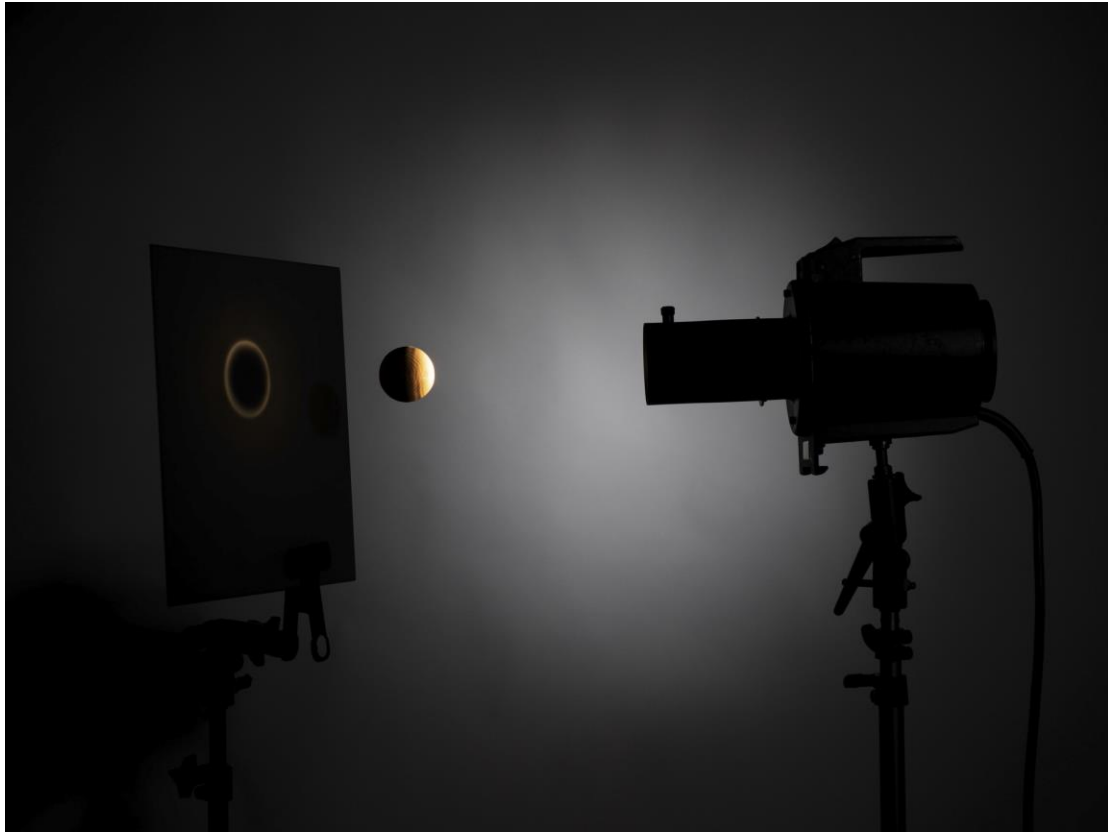
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Ecocritical Approach toward Ustopias: Divergent Attitudes towards Scientific Advancement in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* and Emily Mandel's *Station Eleven*

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Abstract | Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) shows the world from a high-tech Artificial Friend's perspective who discovers the miraculous nature of the sun and fights the pollution caused by technological advancements. In a contrasting manner, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) is set twenty years after the breakout of the lethal "Georgia flu" and narrates the miseries of humankind in a clean world where the sun and stars can be seen more vividly than ever, but technological advancement and medicine have become elements of the past. While both novels are set in dystopian futures where humanity is threatened, their depicted dystopias are radically different. Their approaches towards technological advancements radically differ; however, the premonitions they carry, which are the collapse of humankind and irreversibly environmental damage in the future, is the same. Both works belonging to the genre of "ustopia," a word coined by Margaret Atwood, express anxiety and hope in their subtle idiosyncratic ways despite their divergent attitudes towards science and technology.

This study aims to read these two novels comparatively from an ecocritical perspective and draw on psychoanalysis to illuminate the root of the expressed anxiety in these works. Moreover, the article shows how modern ustopias embrace hope for humankind's survival in times of crisis and delineate how it could be preserved by drawing on these two novels. In the end, the paper points out the ostensibly different ways of damage control proposed by ustopias that would keep humankind and humanity alive even in a post-apocalyptic world.

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1.   Introduction

Dystopian fiction delineates humankind's worst nightmares from different perspectives and mainly attempts to warn people about the threats hidden in different scientific, political, and social advancements. On the other hand, utopian fiction shows the perfection that human life could achieve by attending to a crisis and resolving the issues to create a world where nightmarish visions are overcome. To refer to utopian or dystopian works, Margaret Atwood, the author of several great literary works in the genres, coins the word "ustopia" in *Dire Cartographies* (2015) to refer to works that depict "the imagined perfect society and its opposite" (n.pg.). As she later states, she believes that there is "within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia" (n.pg.). Although ustopian fictional works do not necessarily carry the same admonitions or align with each other thematically, they share two communal elements: deeply rooted anxiety of disruption and genuine hope for circumvention of impending disastrous outcomes.

Humankind's environment is of great significance in ustopias regardless of their themes, settings, or different perspectives. This attention paid to the surroundings can be traced from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) to Ishiguro's latest novel, *Klara and the Sun* (2021). The fear of getting too attached to technological advancements, forgetting to live without them, and changing the natural orders as well as causing irreversible damage to the environment has been one of the most highlighted themes in ustopias; however, every premonition regarding the disastrous consequences of technological advancement carries a subtle fascination with technology in its heart and vice versa. Emily Mandel's *Station Eleven* post-pandemic world and Ishiguro's

Klara and the Sun depict societies where humankind's extinction is probable, and both narratives can be categorized as ustopias. While Ishiguro's novel is set in a high-tech world of lifted children and Cootings Machines, Emily Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) depicts the everyday hardships in a post-pandemic world after humankind lost all the technological advancements due to the death of seven billion people to the Georgia Flu. The contrast between the two narratives highlights the affinity between their fear of human extinction under two drastically different circumstances. Studying two narratives that show divergent attitudes towards technology while expressing the same anxieties shows how technological advancements could become as threatening as pandemics.

Kazuo Ishiguro's latest novel narrates the story of an atomized world from a high-tech robot's perspective. Klara, the robot, is an Artificial Friend (AF) that can only be purchased by high-rank people whose offspring could get lifted by genetic engineering and have robots as friends. Besides creating a new hierarchal order in society, the lifting process's side effects could put some children's health at risk. This new world has also deprived children of schools and provided them with manufactured AFs. The narrative repeatedly mentions the sun, introduces it as a source of clean power with healing effects, and even allows Klara to personify it by calling it "the Sun". The rivalry between the Cootings Machine as the primary source of air pollution and the Sun invites the reader to ecological consciousness by reminding them of the healing power of a nature that is being destroyed by manufactured technological advancements. However, since Klara is also a machine, technology is a double-edged sword rather than a foul destructive element. As stated by Fredrick Turner, "at its best, technology is for us an euphoric escape from nature; at its worst, a diabolical destruction of it" (Glotfelty and Fromm 45). Klara, the meticulous AF, can be regarded as the source of new hope for humanity because she is too naïve to be affected by the disruptions in society. While human society feels lost and hopeless, Klara sees excellent potential in humankind with her "unusual insight" and "observational abilities" (Ishiguro 268).

Taking a divergent path towards creating a dystopian vision, Emily Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) depicts a world devoid of technology twenty years after the outbreak of the Georgia Flu that eradicated the majority of the human population and pushed the remaining society into a struggle for survival without electricity, medicine, and technology. Many celebrated modern ustopias are built upon the theme of the

dangers of scientific and technological advancements and view "technology as either alien or brethren" (Glotfelty and Fromm 78). *Station Eleven's* realistic attitude towards a world without technology reveals the contemporary irretrievable dependency on scientific advancements despite their negative impact. While most ustopias regard technology and modern science as the sources of division and social atomization, *Station Eleven* shows how technology-driven societies fail to function without them. Away from the idealistic view that humankind could live on cleaner earth and go back to the pre-technology era if they lost their inventions, Mandel's work shows how, even after twenty years of being deprived of them, recreating technology becomes necessary to find other communities and rebuild civilization. The work is thematically close to Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), set in the twenty-first century, where an unknown lethal disease eliminates all people and makes all human efforts meaningless. This study reads *Klara and the Sun* and *Station Eleven* comparatively in the light of ecocriticism to later – by applying psychoanalysis – find the type and root of the expressed anxieties in them.

2.   The Double-Edged Sword of Technology

Scientific advancements have been "a source of both hope and fear" in modern literary works since they provide humankind with "solutions that only generate new problems, as in the bioethical riddles spawned by genetic engineering" (Glotfelty and Fromm 79). Humankind lost the hardly gained trust in science that had developed throughout centuries upon encountering the aftermaths of the horrendous incidents of the twentieth century. Two World Wars, the Cold War, the outbreak of the Spanish flu, the drought of the Dust Bowl, the Great Chinese Famine, the Second Indochina War, and the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki shattered all the high hopes that had flourished as a result of trusting scientific advancements and civilized diplomacy. In the twentieth century, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse rode their unstoppable galloping horses, but in the end, there came no dramatic Apocalypse but only more miseries. It was proved that the world would not literally come to an end, even when pestilence, war, famine, and death were gathered; therefore, apocalyptic visions changed. By delving into scientific findings, humankind, the most self-centered species, realized that their extinction does not necessarily coincide with the end of the world; however, recognizing the probability of extinction fuelled a new fear that

revealed itself in various science fiction works. Genese Marie Sodikoff, in *The Anthropology of Extinction: Essays on Culture and Species Death* (2011), states:

> The sixth extinction is neither abrupt nor spectacular. No smashing asteroids or giant volcanic eruptions. No global pandemics as yet. Only the slow, cumulative effects of greenhouse gases, rain forest depletion, and a brand of imperialism that extols the virtues of high mass consumption. (2)

When Sodikoff's book was published in 2011, the earth had not yet encountered the COVID-19 pandemic or the extreme heatwave of 2021 that increased the temperature in Antarctica to 18.3 celsius. Nevertheless, the probability of "the six extinction" seems much higher from our outlook in 2021. Although today's world's ecological crisis seems threatening, *Station Eleven*'s post-apocalyptic vision shows how humankind could continue surviving on this planet, even after losing seven billion people, by staying rational and maintaining genuine hope.

As stated by Shane Hall, "climate change, pandemics, and terrorism all disrupt dominant social, economic, and political relations, and call into question the taken-for-granted boundaries that discipline populations" (Slovic et al. 135). The society in *Station Eleven* survives the pandemic despite the tremendous outbreak of the Georgia Flu but fails to function efficiently since the means of restoring order have been eliminated. Twenty years after the lethal virus outbreak, uninfected people continue to struggle to find a way to find other communities with which they can re-establish the pre-outbreak institutions and increase their chance of survival. Marco Caracciolo coins the term "negative strategy" to describe a novel concept in new ustopias whose portrayal of the aftermath has shifted from apocalyptic visions to a more accurate depiction of humankind and humanity's situations in a world after a major disruption:

> …the emphasis falls not on apocalypse as a plot device, but on its power to disrupt the protagonists' experience of reality—and particularly their sense of a sharp demarcation between human societies and nonhuman things and processes. This conceptual destabilization is an effect of what I call "negative strategies": the postworld emerges as the narrative negates (i.e., subtracts or pares down) some of the salient characteristics of the pre-world—features with which readers are familiar through their everyday reality. (223)

Caracciolo then draws on linguistics and the psychological effects of negation on the human mind to express that ustopias "evoke the post-world as a negation of the pre-world—a strategy that, as a matter of fact, affirms the pre-world while foregrounding its absence in affectively charged terms" (226). *Station Eleven* and *Klara and the Sun* both depict a world different from ours, to subtly mention the elements whose disappearance could affect human life. Despite being different in nature, pandemics and dependency on technology become the same threatening agents that could, as Caracciolo puts it, "disrupt" our world.

Reading these narratives brings us the critical inquiry regarding the depicted circumstances: Could their visions of the future be prevented in real life? As stated by Atwood, ustopias attempt to answer critical questions; "how badly have we messed up the planet? Can we dig ourselves out? What would a species-wide self-rescue effort look like if played out in actuality?" The twenty-first-century reader, aware of rapid climate changes and scientific advancements, feels close to the crisis yet cannot avert the crisis. Although the narratives depict fictional realities, their closeness to the twenty-first-century's objective reality deepens the anxiety of the impending disruption in the reader's mind.

Surprisingly, the premonition of technological advancement carries a subtle fascination with scientific discoveries and inventions that reveal the tremendous potentials of the human mind. Giving credit to Klara's meticulous nature is appraising the human mind for creating an AF that would remind humans of their potential, regardless of their desperate situation caused by the irreversible damage they have done to nature and the environment. The nightmarish visions of technology can be traced back to the eighteenth century after the Industrial Revolution, when many workers felt their jobs were threatened by new modes of production that deployed technological advancements. The English Luddites of the late eighteenth century tended to stop any changes by breaking manufacturing equipment, and ever since the word Luddite has become a term to describe those opposing technological advancements and disagreeing with progress. As it can be inferred, the Luddhism found in works such as *Klara and the Sun* and Richard K. Morgan's cyberpunk novel, *Altered Carbon* (2002), is more a critique of class division rather than of technology itself. The works assume that the technological advancements must be distributed among individuals equally; otherwise, they would be harmful to human society as they excessively empower the rich and

weaken the poor. One of the major themes of Ishiguro's novel can be found in Mr. Arthur's idea, which states that "lifted or not, the genuine ability has to get noticed. Unless this world's *completely crazy* now" (Ishiguro 205). These works attempt to answer a critical question: What will the future look like if technological advancements become a means of socioeconomic stratification in the hands of dominant groups?

On the other hand, *Station Eleven* stands far away from Luddhism and depicts a world devoid of technology with no antibiotics or chemotherapy. People live on a clean earth, not concerned with global warming or the greenhouse effect, and have equal chances of survival; however, their situation could still lead to the extinction of their species. While *Klara and the Sun* expresses worries about manufactured threats that could be aborted, *Station Eleven* narrates the aftermath of a breakout of a highly lethal virus that is by no means artificial. Mandel's novel goes one step further in showing the anxiety of disrupting the natural order and concentrates on the consequences of a major disruption regardless of its cause. Instead of inducing guilt to the twenty-first-century reader and rebuking them for their dependency on technology that would change the natural order, the narrative summons the power of the human mind to solve an inevitable issue. While some ustopias evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of technology and try to propose methods to prevent a disaster, its anticipation in *Station Eleven* makes the readers face their worst nightmares and ponder on them to figure out modes of resilience that could guarantee survival in the face of any kind of life-threatening crisis on earth. Nevertheless, the narrative attempts to answer a critical question: what if the disruption occurs despite all our efforts?

On another level, in several post-extropianist narratives, such as *Klara and the Sun,* Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and Richard K. Morgan's cyberpunk *Altered Carbon*, the criticism is not directed towards the technological advancement but its distribution among different classes and communities in society. While the works are not against transhumanism and genetic advancements, they reveal their controversial natures. Just as the indefinite lifespans in *Altered Carbon*, in Ishiguro's novel genetic lifting and purchasing AFs is not available to every family, and they both have consequences. Lucy Perry draws on "the worlds portrayed by Atwood and Houellebecq" to elaborate on "technophilia, technocracy and extropianism" (Adiseshiah and Hildyard 166). She states that in their works, "technology consequently becomes a conceit – an extended metaphor for age and its attendant ills,

diminishments, disaffections and malaise" (Adiseshiah and Hildyard 169). Thus, technology in post-extropianist works could be regarded as a symbol of objects that can disrupt the natural order if deployed wrongly.

Furthermore, the concepts are also altered in *Station Eleven's* post-pandemic world that has drifted back in time. The technology that was a source of pollution and threat in the pre-pandemic world of the narrative is now eliminated. Instead, technology has now become the only hope for the communities to find each other and reconstruct civilization by restoring orders. People in *Station Eleven* are different from those who created technological advancements in the first place because they are familiar with their threats and disadvantages but still choose to restore them. Kristen ponders Sartre's famous statement that "hell is other people" and poses a question: "If hell is other people, what is a world with almost no people in it" (Mandel Ch.24)? The narrative shows how it would be impossible for the modern Man who has experienced technology to go back in time, indicating that scientific and technological advancements were inevitable and necessary for the populated earth. It is too late for the eight-billion human population to avert changes because, just as Miranda realizes her marriage is too damaged to be mended upon seeing Arthur and Elizabeth together, "it's too late, and it's been too late for a while" (Mandel Ch.15). It is too late for humankind to jettison technology after using it to increase lifespan, quality of life, and mass production and, as "the clarinet" realizes, the twenty-first-century human life is different for the seen cannot be unseen:

> He'd trotted out his usual arguments, about how Shakespeare had lived in a plague-ridden society with no electricity and so did the Traveling Symphony. But look, she'd told him, the difference was that they'd seen electricity, they'd seen everything, they'd watched a civilization collapse, and Shakespeare hadn't. (Mandel Ch.49)

Mandel ironically states that "the era of light pollution had come to an end" (Ch. 43), and later highlights the importance of electricity to express that eliminating technological advancements is not the answer to our issues. In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), social engineering led to establishing a country that would not ply any scientific or technological advancements to cleanse the earth and bring back fertility.

Paradoxically, technology that has become a necessity for the long-term survival of our species harms and threatens our existence. While in *Klara and the Sun,* the pollution produced by the Cootings Machine is discussed, its purpose is never revealed to the readers. The readers are unaware of its significance and necessity, and they only know its pollution prevents sun rays from reaching the earth. What if this machine produces electricity or refines water in their world? However, *Station Eleven* bravely excludes itself from Neo- Luddistic dystopias that show technology as the most threatening factor to human existence by narrating the life before and after the era of technology and science from an objective perspective that shows human's irreversible dependency on the advancements achieved over the last few centuries. *Station Eleven* accepts the disruption and tries to see if this crisis can be managed. Nevertheless, both narratives express anxiety and worries about human life.

3.   The Era of Anxiety

A man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,
"The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."

Before the Copernican Revolution church had convinced people to be the central figures in the world and humans believed themselves to be the sole sublime creature. Modern science and philosophy shattered the idea and proved that the human species were not prioritized from a naturalist point of view, and that nature's ultimate goal exceeded nurturing them. In ancient times, lethal catastrophic events were considered means of punishment, and fortunate natural events were regarded as divine blessings. However, science opened humans' eyes to the indifference of nature towards their species and showed how they were equal to other living parts of the natural system. When science gradually replaced previously established ideas, in Kohutian terms, human's *self object needs,* "internal needs, which must be at least partially met by another person" (Baker and Baker 2), were neglected. Humankind realized that neither rain's blessings nor the catastrophic thunders were reactions to them, and they simply happened for scientific reasons. The realization injured the species narcissistically; thus, technology became the primary means to control the negligent nature.

Subsequently, technological advancements impacted social orders as they changed the modes of production and provided humans with higher quality of life. In explaining the impact of technology on social changes, Lois Defleur draws on Rosenberg to point out Karl Marx's technological determinism and states that Marx "maintained, of course, that ultimately the dominant classes use technology for both ideological and economic ends" (406). The nightmarish use of nuclear physics and other scientific advancements, such as the chemicals used in chemical weapons in the twentieth century, strengthened this theory. Furthermore, the mishaps of the twentieth century ingrained in the human mind the anxiety of disruption, which in today's world is enhanced by rapid changes both in technology and in the environment.

One of the primary sources of anxiety in futuristic fictional works and ustopias is "disintegration anxiety", which is related to eco-anxiety. As stated by Heinz Kohut, "the disintegration anxiety is the anticipation of the breakup of the self" (104). The disintegration anxiety crawls upon the human mind when encountering the fact that the environment does not acknowledge their significance, and their existence is not prioritized. The realization that the world could continue to exist even if they cease to induces anxiety in the human mind. The fear of technological singularity, artificial intelligence's overpowerment of human life, manufactured technological advancements, or eradication by global pandemics and other natural catastrophes highlight the disintegration anxiety since their uniqueness and significance in the world are disregarded.

Eco-anxiety is one of the strongest communal elements in futuristic fiction, where the human condition on earth has deteriorated. This anxiety is camouflaged in various ways in different works; the fear of extinction in *Station Eleven* and *Klara and the Sun* is ultimately a concern over the deterioration of humankind's situation after Man has irreversibly altered the natural order. In one of the most informative articles on anxiety, "Uncertainty and Anticipation in Anxiety" (2013), Dan Grupe and Jack Nitschke differentiate uncertainty from unpredictability and later discuss how uncertainty "is inextricably linked to the phenomenological experience of anxiety arising from unpredictable future events" (489). All the ustopias, whether utopian or dystopian, are saturated with anxiety, and they either try to remind us of the destination our current path will take us or the potential we have to avoid disasters and make a better future.

In *Psychology and Climate Change* (2018), Susan Clayton and Christie Manning study the psychological impact of rapid climate changes on the human psyche. By drawing on abundant studies, they show how these changes induce anxiety and introduce three ways in which "planet wide processes" could affect the individual:

> 1. Direct impacts related to disasters and acute environmental disruptions
> 2. Indirect impacts as climate-related issues ripple through societies and cultures, and
> 3. Vicarious impacts as those distant or buffered from direct impacts experience psychological distress or vicarious trauma. (10.1)

In this regard, writing speculative climate fiction, which has already been impacted in the third way by anticipation, becomes a coping mechanism that deals with the disruption anxiety caused by an impending crisis. Climate fiction, as one of the "therapeutic activities associated with climate change," becomes an effort "to adapt to changes and mental health impacts" (Clayton and Christie 10.7).

Paul Robbins and Sarah Moore coin the phrase "ecological anxiety disorder" to refer to the human mind's reaction to the rapid deterioration in the ecosystem, leading to either anthropophobia or autophobia (3). They draw on Jacques Lacan to resolve these anxieties. They discuss how, according to Lacan, anxiety is replaced with fear when the sufferer focuses on a specific object and how this displacement becomes problematic since it concentrates "irrational energy" on "harmless or inevitable objects" rather than on "the unresolvable" (10). They continue to show the problematic nature of this displacement:

> In this way, both the anthrophobe and the autophobe have replaced the anxiety necessary to scientific inquiry, with phobia (of people or of the self) that is expressed in terms of their inability to explain or act effectively in the face of ecological concerns. The anthrophobe despairs: 'why can't I convince the world to act before the ecology is impaired beyond recovery?' Conversely, the autophobe asks, 'who am I to impose my own vision of the world's proper structure or function on science?' (10)

Both of the phobias mentioned above can be found in the selected works in this article; however, *Station Eleven* acknowledges the "inevitable" condition, refrains from Luddism and addresses the anxiety produced from the fear of science's failure in

controlling a virus's global outbreak. Neither technology nor humankind is blamed for the eradication of seven billion people during the pandemic. Instead, Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *Klara and the Sun* blame scientific advancements but fail to depict the world without the technological advancements they disapprove of and ignore the rewarding utilities of scientific advancements while unveiling their appalling side-effects. The inherent Luddism in Ishiguro's two celebrated novels replaces the anxiety produced by uncertainty with fear, just as mentioned in Robbins and Moore's article.

The anxiety found in the works of the genre resembles the anxiety felt while driving by Mr. X, one of the patients mentioned in Heinz Kohut's *The Restoration of the Self* (2012). Although there had been no problem, the patient recalled that he had started a trail of thoughts about running out of fuel and not getting any help while being on the road. Mr. X's "fantasy" had induced great anxiety in him as he had finally found himself "alone, helpless and powerless" in that scenario (204). However, he had suddenly remembered the stashed gasoline in the trunk and kept dreaming that he would use it to resolve the issues:

> He dug into the heap and, by God!, here indeed was the old can – rusty, battered, dilapidated, yet still filled with gasoline – just what he had hope to find, what he needed. The daydream ended with his pouring the gasoline into the tank and driving off again. (204)

The uncertainties of the future induce anxiety in modern people, which pushes their minds to detail the most nightmarish visions of the future and enables creative minds to portray the consequences of today's technological efforts. Nevertheless, a rusty ancient box in our trunk contains one of the most essential elements for human life that has accompanied us since our creation. Hope, the only thing that remained in Pandora's box[1], is the sole remedy for the anxiety of modern humans.

4.   The Remedy of Hope

Regardless of the various attitudes in ustopias, hope is a common element that embellishes these works because, as stated by Atwood, "we're too hopeful a species"

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[1] The expression "Pandora's box" refers to Hesiod's long didactic poem, *Works and Days* (700 BC) in which it is imagined that Pandora let all the evils of the world out but was fast enough to close the lid to preserve hope.

to capitulate to our fears and anxieties. *Klara and the Sun* is full of hope that despite the irretrievable damage humankind has caused to the earth, the everlasting nature never stops granting its healing power. Although Klara consciously decides to destroy the Cootings Machine, it must be noted that Klara is a manufactured artificial intelligence whose wisdom of choice is meant to remind humankind what a marvelous brain they have. When Klara tells Paul about destroying the Cootings Machine in order to help Josie by letting her be exposed to sun rays, he tells her: "Truth is, you've started me hoping again" (Ishiguro 202). To describe Klara in Fredrick Turner's words, she shows "the optimism of the amateur" in her character "just like the flowers growing in the desolation of Mount St. Helens testify to what in human beings we would call a lunatic hopefulness" (Glotfelty and Fromm 45). In the end, Klara perishes, but there is no despair in losing her, and she is happy for she has accomplished her mission as an AF, which was to bring back the hope humankind had forgotten. While in many modern science fiction literary works, artificial intelligence is elevated to human level, in Ishiguro's work, Klara is simply a high-tech robot that fails to replace Josie despite being able to mimic her; therefore, she is a reminder of the significance of the human mind. Klara's solutions to the several issues raised throughout the novel show how the human mind can solve problems by maintaining hope as the most human element.

In an ecocritical study on *The Rime of the Modern Mariner* (2011), Pramod Nayar borrows from Donna Haraway to argue that "humans do not evolve outside of nature and lifeforms, they evolve with them," and adds that "any hope of regeneration, redemption and rescue for the humans can only emerge from acknowledging this embedded, co-evolving nature of humanity" (Slovic et al. 29). As seen in *Station Eleven,* the expressed hope reveals a hankering for reconstructing civilization in an environment that has been cleansed for the last twenty years in the absence of technology and industry. The aide-memoire in *Klara and the Sun* is the intelligence of the human mind remembered when an AF indulges it. In *Station Eleven,* the invisible thread that binds the post-outbreak broke human to the modern-technology-addicted human is cultural achievements; therefore, history, literature, music, and paper books become means of retrieving modernism, modern science, and technological consciousness. Hope becomes vital in ustopias, "Because Survival is Insufficient" (Mandel Ch.11). As stated by Pieter Vermeulen, the novel "juxtaposes its sense of inevitable doom with a resolute hope in the persistence of human culture" (12).

Station Eleven delves deeper into the psychological impact of technology by showing how culture and technology are co-related. The Traveling Symphony used to perform modern plays at the beginning of the post-pandemic era, but later they started performing Shakespeare because it was demanded. While this indicates the perpetuity of Shakespeare, it also shows how taste and mentality vary with social changes. Modern plays responded to the modern era, so by losing all the technological advancements, *Station Eleven*'s new society is by no means considered modern since it has lost its modern institutions and order as well. Ironically, the motto on their lead caravan, "*Because life is insufficient,*" belongs to *Star Trek*. Thus, shifting the performance to Shakespeare does not come from nostalgia but from the hope of restoring all technological achievements. *Station Eleven*'s humans try to cope with the loss of scientific and technological advancements temporarily; therefore, they must remind themselves that centuries ago their kind lived without them. Despite having experienced an era of invention and modern technology, people's actual life in the narrative is closer to the sixteenth-century lifestyle rather than that of the previous generation. Ironically, it is necessary for them to eradicate their pre-pandemic mentality and start thinking like those who lived in the pre-technological eras to regain their pre-pandemic status. This can be best witnessed in an ironic passage in the narrative about the Milky Way's glowing stars:

> One of the great scientific questions of Galileo's time was whether the Milky Way was made up of individual stars. Impossible to imagine this ever having been in question in the age of electricity, but the night sky was a wash of light in Galileo's age, and it was a wash of light now. The era of light pollution had come to an end. The increasing brilliance meant the grid was failing, darkness pooling over the earth. (Ch.43)

Parallelizing Galileo's time with the current situation is witty as it shows how thoughts and scientific knowledge need to be accompanied by external objects and equipment to be useful.

Living in an era of rapid technological advancements and changes provides a rich background for futuristic novels. The twentieth century showed how catastrophic events could situate humankind in a fragile situation and destroy all the achievements and institutions they are proud to have created and developed over thousands of years.

While different ustopias have different attitudes towards technology and science, they all have the element of hope in common to remind us that it is not human to live in despair. Uninformed optimism and false hope fail to help human progress, but in a time of distress and post-apocalypse, if we are as lucky and patient as Clark was, we might finally see the light again:

> Kirsten looked, but at first she couldn't comprehend what she was seeing. She stepped back. "It isn't possible," she said.
> "But there it is. Look again."
> In the distance, pinpricks of light are arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity. (Mandel Ch.51)

Ironically, regaining electricity ingrains the seeds of hope in the hearts of people who were once criticizing technology. While admiring simpler times of the past, one must remember that many advantages of technological advancements were unknown to people and it is impossible for one who has enjoyed the benefits of electricity to go back to living in the darkness.

5.   Conclusion

Today's world of pandemics, global warming, and other ecological crises allows the creative mind to imagine the most horrendous nightmarish scenarios and make efforts to prevent disasters and control damages in case they occur. While these fictional works written by various twenty-first-century authors vary in theme, perspective, and style, they embrace two human elements of anxiety and hope upon which defense mechanisms can be built. The disintegration anxiety, which devours modern minds and reminds people of their stance in the world, could lead to eco-anxiety once people realize nature's indifference towards Homo Sapiens's existence. The COVID-19 pandemic and 2021's heatwave are enough evidence that the dystopian visions found in *Station Eleven* and *Klara and the Sun* are probable to become real and affect our survival on earth.

Novels like *Klara and the Sun*, which express anthropophobia or autophobia, invite the human population to reconsider their actions on earth and prevent impending disastrous events by drawing attention to the importance of curbing environmental

damage and minimizing the changes made in the natural world. On the other hand, *Station Eleven's* post-pandemic vision regards the dystopia as inevitable and makes the reader face the worst-case scenario and deal with it. While both these divergent perspectives induce anxiety, they also remind us of the only constant element accompanying human beings since their emergence on the earth: Hope. While not all Cootings Machines could be destroyed and humans are well-aware that part of the ecological crisis is irresolvable, even if the inevitable happens there is only one element safely protected, and that is what Kristen preserves in her heart by believing that hope must be restored because "survival is insufficient" (Mandel Ch.11).

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Companion Possibilities and Problems: Techno-Viral Reconfigurations of the Post/Human and Society in *The Companions*

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Abstract | As morbid as it may seem, exploring any literary representation of contagion during a real-world pandemic such as the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) allows for a timely consideration of the ways in which literature reflects our present and foreshadows our future. Published in 2020 and during the time of the Coronavirus pandemic, Katie M. Flynn's *The Companions*, provides an almost prophetic vision of life and livelihood determined by a pandemic. Although classified as science fiction, there is little about Flynn's vision that is far-fetched; it certainly is not far-off. The novel brings together thematic considerations of nonhumanness, biopower, and ethics under the umbrella of a contagion narrative. This paper examines these themes alongside a cultural analysis of human sensibilities that are reconfigured in response to the impact of the fictional pandemic. The reconfigured human sensibilities are posthuman insofar as they internalize the pandemic and are juxtaposed with the enhanced sensibilities of the companion robots. Drawing on theories in posthumanism and virology, this paper adds to the genre of contagion literature by examining the ways in which non-living viruses lead to an evolution in who is considered human and what humanity entails. Beginning with the theoretical interventions into contagion literature and henceforth

analysing *The Companions* as a narrative of posthuman contagion, this paper concludes by situating the novel in the ongoing debate about the viability of posthuman theory even as forces of capitalism bear upon who can be deemed human. As the Coronavirus continues to invade virtually every aspect of life; socio-cultural, political, economic, and course of geographical, the imperative to study a contagion novel such as *The Companions* becomes all the more urgent. Flynn's novel attempts to go beyond the universal category of the human but is nonetheless attuned to the larger force of capitalism that exercises far-reaching implications of biopower over these companions species that challenge the human.

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An airborne virus; conspiracy theories of its origins; worldwide travel bans; state-ordered quarantines; millions dead. Although this accurately describes the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and its global impact from 2019 onward, in this case it refers to the fictional virus depicted in Katie M. Flynn's novel, *The Companions* (2020). Set in an unspecified future, Flynn's novel explores what it means to be human when the human body has undergone alterations. During the novel, these alterations are necessitated by the spread of multiple virus outbreaks which prompt Metis Corp to create the companionship program – a software that uploads dying or dead people. Once infected by the virus, the now-dead hosts take different forms that still "pass for human" (110). In *The Companions,* these new humans are created both organically as well as mechanically; organic insofar as the virus enters their bodies, and mechanically insofar as they become the property of Metis Corp. Whether taken over by the virus or taken over by Metis, the novel reveals a shared process of creating new versions of existence. Although the technological alteration of human embodiment in the novel resembles the transhumanist philosophy of a centralized techno-scientific 'way out' of humanism (Ferrando 28), *The Companions* also directs attention to a viral alteration of human existence. Therefore, this paper theorizes the techno-viral refashioning of the human as posthuman owing to the merger of virus and human as well as technology and human.

The particular concept of posthuman formation, that is a combination of human, technological, and viral, which I explore vis-à-vis *The Companions,* follows Rosi Braidotti's claim that in posthuman theory:

The subject is a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, *viral*) relations (…) with relational linkages of the *contaminating/viral* kind which interconnect it to a variety of others, starting from the environmental or eco-others and include the technological apparatus. (193)

In the novel, the companions act as transversal entities created out of the merger between human, virus, and technology. In theoretical terms laid out by Braidotti, *The Companions* reflects the posthuman turn towards non-human entities which decenter the human as a stable, autonomous, and exceptional organism. Given its 2020 publication, *The Companions* warrants attention for providing one of the most recent engagements with a viral outbreak which gives impetus to the formation of a transversal posthumanism.

Spotlighting Flynn's novel through posthuman theory is made all the more significant due to the real-world effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. Both fiction and reality have created 'new' conceptions of life and living. My analysis of the novel's portrayal of posthuman existence and posthuman futurity which occurs alongside repeated viral outbreaks directs attention to the cultural implications of disease narratives as argued by Craig A. Gordon. Following Gordon's theory that tuberculosis "functions as a crucial cultural relay (…) of a wide spectrum of residual and emergent understanding of the body and its relation to society" (36-37), I argue that the unspecified virus in *The Companions* is used to reflect the ontological, cultural, scientific, and political implications of existing in the twenty-first century. Thus, the biological and technological moderations described in the novel create new forms of life much in the same way that the coronavirus has created a 'new normal'. The posthuman versions of existence in the novel become a kind of futuristic 'new normal' for the characters. In this sense, the formulation of a posthuman future through viruses and technology in *The Companions* is similar to the claim by Laura Seiler that "humankind faces a post-human future" (271). This future, she goes on to specify, will be owed to the use of "genetic engineering and other technologies to become what we have never been before" which will "alter us as we create new living organisms, machines with human intelligence, and humans with machine parts and genetically enhanced bodies" (271). *The Companions* dissolves the boundaries separating human

organism and nonhuman virus and technology. As such, different types of beings in *The Companions* are theorized as now-normal beings owing to the changes in society brought on by the virus. This framing of posthuman normalcy follows other disciplinary interrogations of the 'new normal', from curriculum design (Goodson & Schostak 2021), socio-spatial implications (Salama 2020), macroeconomics (Peña 2020), and of course technology (Evans 2020). I add to studies of the 'new normal' by proposing a new posthuman normal as envisioned by Flynn. Through a Cultural Studies approach to investigating representations of social interactions, corporate strategies, and technological advancements – all influenced by the persistence of a virus – I direct attention to reconfigurations of humanness, consciousness, and embodiment that contribute to being posthuman. Where the Coronavirus has created a "new normal", *The Companions* portrays a society that has been irrevocably altered by a similar degree of 'new normalcy' brought on by the virus.

The virus, which remains unnamed throughout the novel, bears upon the argument made by Henry E. Sigerist concerning the usage of illness as a literary subject. "It is not the disease itself" he writes, "but the effect it has on an individual's life that interests the writer" (182). I follow Sigerist's claim about illness narratives to the extent where *The Companions* depicts new forms of life and livelihoods that are created by a virus. However, insofar as Sigerist underestimates the centrality of disease to the creation of such forms of life, this paper asserts, through the granular focus on the virus, that the disease is its own form of "life" which in turn creates new lifeforms. As part of my claim to different modes of existence referred to as being posthuman, it incorporates viruses into its challenge to the human exceptionalism that has grounded liberal humanism. Flynn's posthuman vision, in which the virus gives rise to multiple ways of being, is made more significant due to the submicroscopic size of the virus. Although a fraction smaller than the smallest bacteria, the "power of viral formations has become manifest in the pandemic, stressing the agency of non-human forces and the overall importance of Gaia as a living, symbiotic planet" (Braidotti 466). Flynn's novel draws attention to the enormous impact of the nonhuman and diminutive status of the virus in destabilizing human exceptionalism. What is at stake by exploring representations of posthumanity in *The Companions* is encapsulated by my central question of who and what gets to be included in the historically exclusive category of "human". To

circumvent the problematic concept of "the human", this paper refers to the characters of the novel as representing ways of being and existing.

The significance of the virus to both being posthuman and creating posthumans in *The Companions* extends Katherine Hayles's argument that "the novel coronavirus is posthuman in at least two senses" (68). According to Hayles, viruses are posthuman because they are "oblivious to human intentions" and evolves "toward simplicity", unlike humans who evolve toward complexity (68). Rather than distinguishing humans from the posthuman virus, I converge the two in its conceptualization of humans who have become posthumanized because of a virus. This conception of the posthuman does not only look to physical changes to the human body but the psychological, social, ecological, and technological futures that follow the viral invasion of the self and society. The eight perspectives that converge during the novel explore "ways for being different in the future" (Badmington 23) that are co-constituted by the virus and technology. The companions of the novel therefore are those humanoids who either willingly or not, have their consciousness uploaded to a robot shell.

The novel begins with the people of California in forced quarantine following the outbreak of a deadly virus. At first, the origins of the virus are unknown. As it continues to spread, the novel describes different types of people referred to as companions. Beginning with one of the characters, Lilac, the novel interweaves personal experiences of the virus as part of a larger portrayal of a collective society grappling with the physical, psychological, and socio-cultural changes brought on by the outbreak. Although the novel's outset appears to be little more than another variation of a dystopic story where humans and robots co-exist, the narrative swiftly moves into a deep introspection focalized through Lilac, one of the humanoid companions to Dahlia. Lilac interweaves a sympathetic account of her life before her consciousness was uploaded with her present difficulty in being a servile companion to Dahlia and her family. The novel begins with Dahlia asking Lilac to tell her about her teenage life and friendship with Nikki. As Dahlia helps Lilac fill in the gaps before her consciousness was uploaded to the companionship program, Lilac realizes that she did not commit suicide but was knocked unconscious and left for dead on the beach by Red – another teenager. Lilac also remembers Nikki, who was with her that night but could not be found at the beach. The events leading up that moment involved Red blaming Lilac for being humiliated at her house party. When Lilac and Nikki leave the house to

visit the beach with their boyfriends, Red follows them. The last thing Lilac remembers is that while looking for Nikki, she unexpectedly finds Red who hits her with a shovel. Dahlia explains that Lilac did not die but was converted into a companion. Upon learning this, Lilac sets off to find Nikki.

Following Lilac's focalized narrative, the novel floats through the perspectives of Cam, a human employee at an Elderly Care facility; Gabe, a child messenger; Jakob, an actor who becomes a companion; Ms Espera, an elderly woman debating whether to be converted into a companion; Rolly, a teenager who runs a disposal center for discarded companion shells; Kit, a companion who is also Gabe's guardian; and Rachel, a companion on the search for Lilac. The web of perspectives coalesces around Lilac and her nonhuman companion programming. During the novel, each character crosses paths with Lilac. Through the interlinked focalizations, the novel channels some of its most salient musings on the nature of existence, who gets access to being considered human, and what a posthuman future looks like. Along with the different narrative focalizations which channel unique ideas about humanness and being, the characters also have overlapping experiences of repeated viral outbreaks which together with the technology recalibrate their lives. I theorize new configurations of human sensibilities and ideas of embodiment that are co-constituted by the ontological impact of viruses.

Lilac's introspection and subtextual framing of posthuman existence deserves attention for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is her actions that set the novel in motion. Secondly, she is the nucleus around which the other characters revolve. Through her personal experience of being converted into a companion robot, the novel draws attention to the coding of posthuman self-awareness in the companionship program. This self-awareness is exemplified by Lilac's ability to remember her past life as a human. Her capacity for nostalgia challenges the humanist tradition which classified humans as ontologically distinct owed in large part to their ability to reason and have consciousness. The destabilizing impact on the human-nonhuman binary effected by Lilac's posthuman awareness highlights Kay Anderson's point of a thinking human subject that is decentred through materialist engagements with nature, science, and technology. Anderson's approach to decentering the thinking human subject utilizes a Cultural Geography approach which in examining "the microbes that make up our own more-than-human bodies" (5), resists the claim of "rational consciousness directing all else" (5). Lilac's desperate attempt to remember how she became a companion reveals

a certain degree of consciousness previously thought to have existed only in humans. Neither completely human nor completely robot, she processes information along both 'networks' of existence. When asked by Dahlia to recount her life as a teenager, Lilac says: "I call up the memories, feel them supercharge my system, and begin the telling" (6). The neural exchange between both cognitive networks – the brain and the companionship storage program – are bound together in feedback loop. Through the shared transmission of information processed by the brain and filtered through the program, Flynn establishes a form of posthuman subjectivity that "powers" the human memory through technology. Lilac becomes increasingly humanized as the narrative moves between her past and present to the point where she eventually runs away from Dahlia, an act of autonomy previously unseen in companion robots who exist to serve their human owners. Lilac's perception of her past therefore humanizes her despite having the appearance of something non-human.

The co-opting of technology to extend human capability is a defining feature of posthuman theory argued by the likes of Donna J. Haraway (1991), Katherine Hayles (2005), and Nick Bostrom (2008), to name a few. Functioning as a prosthetic attachment as well as enabling a multisensory awareness of the environment, the companionship program and virus represent the kind of biotechnological enhancement discussed by Andy Miah, particularly as it relates to the "symbiosis of the organic and machinic" which "takes place in its most extreme form through the merging of humans with medical technology, allowing the transplantation of limbs, and the re-constructing of life, which utilizes technology and biology" (83). In *The Companions,* Jakob's agent explains that the companion biotechnology is a project that extends life "indefinitely" (111). The extension of life through cybernetic enhancement aligns with Haraway's concept of the technology as prosthesis. Denying a "fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism" (178), Haraway urges that "in imagination and in other practice, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves" (178). *The Companions* highlights such an intimacy between not just the machine and the organic human, but also the inorganic virus. The robot hardware and companionship software become prosthetic devices for human consciousness in a similar way to the viral outbreak becoming an evolutionary prosthetic to the human organism. Lilac's system which "registers the presence of airborne toxins" (20) functions similar to Hayles's argument that robotic sensors "may

open new evolutionary pathways for both humans and intelligent machines" ("Computing" 137). These pathways, Hayles goes on to argue, challenge "our current conceptions of what it means to be human" (137). Both viral toxins and technology permeate the human body in *The Companions* to create posthuman sensory and survivability enhancements.

The companionship program's ability to improve human limitations is made all the more significant when juxtaposed by the human characters who succumb to the effects of such limitations. We are told by Cam that one of the elderly women, Mrs Cozier, suffered from dementia which, added to her depression, was "taking her as it had so many others, time morphing past into present, whole memories cleaved, lost, sometimes for the better" (58). Mrs Cozier's eventual death makes clear the limitations of a human lifespan. Although the less-advanced companions, such as Lilac before her upgrade, are subject to wear and tear and eventual disposal, they still outlive their human counterparts. The humans of the novel are caught between two inorganic forms of life, viruses which predate humans, and companions which outlive humans. *The Companions* draws attention to the augmentation of human life with the inorganic virus and companion software to produce posthuman life that is not vulnerable to the limitations on remembering and mortality. The novel's iteration, therefore, of posthuman futurity establishes inorganic agents as crucial to the extension of human limitations.

In addition to the extension of life, the form of biotechnological enhancement enabled through the companionship program challenges the ontological exceptionalism of humanness. Lilac's cognition, even as a robot companion, is emphasized as the novel's main challenge to a 'human essence' which Francis Fukuyama claims will be lost due to biotechnological enhancements: "biotechnology will cause us in some way to lose our humanity – that is, some essential quality that has always underpinned our sense of who we are and where we are going" (101). In the novel, anti-companion characters such as Dahlia's mother, Cam, Rolly, and initially Ms Espera exemplify the ideals of a human essence as argued by Fukuyuma. Dahlia's mother and Cam refer to companions as a "thing" (35, 55), Rolly and his Pa take delight in feeding obsolete companions through the metal clamps (275), and Ms Espera is afraid of being a companion because she does not want to be someone's "property" (219). *The Companions,* however, envisions a biotechnological posthuman future that humanizes

the companions even as it does away with vague, anthropocentric notions of a single human essence. When Ms Espera eventually decides to become a companion, she later learns that "companions do have an olfactory sense" which then triggers some of her memories (286). Similar to Lilac, Ms Espera's ability to recall her memories reveals a posthuman ability to co-exist with the techno-viral development of cognition. Clara Mucci's psychoanalytic argument that "what makes us human is the persistence of memory" (185) ironically serves to highlight the nonhuman companion robots as ostensibly human*ized* because of their capacity for remembering. *The Companions,* therefore, allows us to reconsider the posthuman condition as not a departure from humanness but a convergence of human cognition and cybernetics.

Through the techno-viral configuration of posthuman states of existence, the novel moves away from species-specific definitions of the human. Flynn's portrayal of the companions as unique in their consciousness and cognition departs from the historically exclusive category of 'the human' which has been characterized by such traits as civility, emotional responsiveness, rationality, agency, and individuality. During the novel, Lilac visits Mrs Cozier twice in a repeated attempt at filling the gaps in the companion's memory. It comes as a shock to Cam, therefore, when Lilac's responsiveness appears more human than the companion program would seem to typify. Lilac's ability to "develop a relationship" (55) comes as much as a surprise to Cam as her capacity for remorse and hope, which he finds "so human" (101). Lilac's emotional responsiveness makes her more human than the human character, Ms Cozier. The novel therefore dispels the notion that only human beings are capable of human responses. Lilac's posthuman sensibility – a combination of technological enhancement, emotional sensitivity, and interpersonal awareness – bears testament to Bostrom's argument that "enhancements may make us, or our descendants, 'posthuman', beings" who have "entirely new sensibilities or modalities – as well as the ability to control their own emotions" (203). The enhanced emotional responsiveness displayed by Lilac defies the humanist logic that classified nonhumans as inferior species. Her enhancement allows for what Bostrom calls a dignified, not a dehumanized, posthuman existence (213). *The Companions* invites us to recognise how alternative humanities are configured and presented as a challenge to normative, species-specific notions of the human.

Existing alongside the nonhuman companions is the nonhuman virus. Although relegated to the background, the virus is a significant co-constituting evolutionary agent for the characters of the novel. The urgent threat posed by the new virus, "airborne virus number whatever letter tag" (65), encourages the development of new technology in the form companionship software. This technology leads to new formations of beings called the companions. The triangulation of machine, organism, and virus in co-constituting posthuman existence informs the novel's title of technology and viruses as "companion species".[1] Carl Zimmer gives an indication of this companionship in his description of viruses as constituting a web of relations with humans. Alluding to a process of human-organic and nonhuman-inorganic co-evolution, Zimmer argues that "Scientists have found that all living things have mosaics of genomes, with hundreds or thousands of genes imported by viruses" (51). Flynn's portrayal of a virus that co-exists with the people reflects the interventions in virology by the likes of Zimmer as well as molecular geneticist Karin Moelling who goes one step further in describing viruses as "a major factor in evolution" which "might have preceded and enabled the emergence of cells and thus provide us with a glimpse into our evolutionary past" (1033). While *The Companions* is focused more on the evolutionary future of the posthuman, not the past, Moelling's point that "viruses might not only be the doom but at the same time the hope of humanity" (1033) resounds with Flynn's exploration of viruses as co-evolving the human category.

The existence of the virus in *The Companions,* as much as it challenges the exceptional existence of the humans, is unable to challenge the deeper capitalist workings at play. In fact, the same virus that channels ideas about nonhuman ontology is also revealed to be manipulated by biotechnology to regulate the human population. With the novel's focus placed largely on portraying the humanity of non-human beings, the posthuman narrative inadequately addresses the conspicuous, yet unstoppable criminal enterprise of genetic engineering. In the novel, Metis Corp is the company responsible for creating and distributing companions. In the absence of any governmental agencies, Metis Corp, described as a "medfirm" by Kit (306), stands as the only organization that has authority to supply companions and thereby shape the

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[1] I incorporate viruses into what Haraway (2003) calls the "queer family of companion species" (11). Where Haraway focuses on the "significant otherness" between the companion species of humans and dogs, this paper examines on "viral otherness" as its own form of companion to the human.

future. As a "medfirm", Metis Corp uses humans as disposable capital to increase their profits through companionship. Their corporate power is consolidated by scientists involved in genetic engineering of viruses. The capitalistic overtones of the novel – in which new bodies are created and commodified by a virus that is itself created by the corporation – present a challenge to the humane associations of the companionship program. As much as the companions represent a potential for moving beyond the exceptional human category, the program's means to an end raises concerns around ethics, capitalism, and technological saturation. Each of these concerns undermine the possibilities offered by human enhancement. Therefore, the kind of posthuman and posthuman futures envisioned by *The Companions,* although escaping the confines of humanist ideology, remain problematic due to their entanglement with global economic systems and biotechnological control of the nonhuman.

The Companions invites us to consider what is left out, as much as what is gained, through an engineered relationship between human and nonhuman agents. Gabe, the only child character of the novel with chapters focalized through his perspective, is significant to the novel's overall commentary on Metis Corp's unethical scientific engineering. Gabe's raw interpretation of the kind of society being created by Metis Corp echoes criticisms of posthumanism as well as scientific debates of the biotechnological manipulation of viruses. As I have argued, the companions represent a diverse, posthuman species in the novel which itself marks a departure from the universal human species. However, the means through which the companions are created point to a forced evolution of the human. We learn from Gabe that the Metis Corp scientists "cooked up those viruses" and used human carriers to ensure a quick transmission (157). The microbial manipulation of viruses for the purposes of accumulating wealth coincides with the manipulation of human beings who are the necessary hosts. Gabe's speculation of genetic engineering resembles one of the conspiracy theories behind COVID-19. According to Roland Imhoff and Pia Lamberty, the argument that COVID-19 was created as a bioweapon follows the claim that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was "intentionally manufactured and purposefully spread as a bioweapon for political or economic gains" (1111). Unlike SARS-CoV-2, the virus in *The Companions* is suggested as purposefully spread to control the human population for economic gain. The novel, therefore, emphasizes the impact of its conspiracy theory on creating sub-divisions among the different species. Through the portrayal of far-

reaching implications of genetic engineering of the virus, Flynn cautions against science encroaching on the manipulation of life itself.

The novelistic portrayal of genetically engineered humans to satisfy a particular market portends a bleak future for human society. As Gabe goes on to explain, the scientists involved in genetic engineering form part of the capitalization method of human bodies which ensures Metis Corp's control. Referring to the scientists, Gabe says "They were believers. In the culling, in getting the state back on track" (157). Their aim to ensure state control over the human population through the containment of the very virus they created gives impetus to the companionship program. This cyclic perpetuation of capitalism by corporate control of biotechnology is alluded to by Rolly when he laments that "Metis figured out how to upload our dead and lease them back to us" (255). The capitalist feedback loop created by Metis Corp binds human populations into an unending form of biopolitical control. As an apparatus of biotechnological state control, the companionship program turns Metis Corp into a technocracy that exercises a futuristic version of Michel Foucault's biopower. According to Foucault, "bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production" (140-41).

In the novel, the "controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production" occurs through the companionship program, which is itself created out of another form of biopolitical control – over viruses. The parallel forms of bio-power depicted in the novel converge as a controlled experiment of how to determine life. Where Foucault establishes the relation of capitalism to biopower, Flynn highlights Metis Corp as the agent of capitalism owing to their heavy investment and control over biotechnologies associated with the companionship program. Although the companions have greater cognition, ability, and more intuitive emotions, the process of their creation, through virus engineering, raises questions of unethical scientific procedures. Metis Corp's sole license to create and distribute companions forces some of its former scientists to create a black market. Kit reveals that these scientists were engaged in "shadow transactions" involving the illegal creation of companions. Directing attention to the deliberate form of viral manipulation, Kit goes on to say that the independent scientists "knew what they were doing, the call for carriers they were putting out" (302). The disposability attached to human life, while it replaces the anthropocentric

underpinnings of humanism, is nevertheless motivated by the unethical practice of forced evolution. As much as Metis Corp's genetic engineering project creates new forms of existence, it is a project created out of the need to control all forms of existence. Fukuyama's critique of posthumanism responds to this need to control aspects of human nature. With a nod to the impact of biopower, Fukuyama argues that "the most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a 'posthuman' stage of history" (7).

In *The Companions,* the aspect of human nature under threat is human evolution. Although Fukuyama's anti-posthuman argues for a vague notion of human nature which "has provided a stable continuity to our experience as a species" (7), an essence of stability I have argued against, his caution against the effects of biotechnology takes the form of unethical genetic engineering of the virus. Flynn's posthuman companion species while destabilizing the singular category of the human are created in a way that imbues the companions with unchecked, superhuman power. The companionship program encourages the disposability of the human body by allowing companions to upgrade their hardware as much as they can as well as their computer processing software. The alterability of human body parts and cognition enabled by companionship drives the capitalist demand for more companions which increasingly moves the world of the novel towards a posthuman stage. As much as the companions represent a biotechnological evolution of the human species, they are equally shown to be disposable due to the continuous advancements in upgrading made available by Metis Corp.

Rolly refers to the impact of biotechnology in churning out companions which threaten the human population, in some cases causing death. Metis Corp's rapid production of companion robots together with its increasing technological advancements results in more sophisticated companions who develop the ability to act outside of their programming. Lilac's early realization that she is "supposed to be command-driven" (28) is later revisited in the novel with fatal consequences. As the first companion to go rogue, Lilac's running away from Dahlia foreshadows later acts of companions turning on their human counterparts. Rolly notes that the aftermath of a companion in Dallas murdering his wife has the press wondering "How had he defied his security programming, they demanded from the screen, endangered the human to whom he'd been leased, his own wife?" (343). The extent of scientific engineering is

such that people begin to speculate on robots becoming the dominant species. If the novel's challenge to anthropocentrism is to replace it with the biotechnological power then Flynn only reproduces a new form of exceptionalism whereby the posthuman companion species exercise power beyond their programming. Like the companions who act outside of their assigned limits, Metis Corp extends their biopower toward the eventual control of the human population through forced sequestering.

The analogous connection between the virus and nonhuman companions drives the novel's biotechnological vision for the future. It is a future that allows us to consider different kinds of existences that depart from a singular category of the human. Similar to the socio-cultural associations of a 'new normal' created by the Coronavirus disease, the viral outbreaks in *The Companions* creates new conceptions of humanity that diverge from the singular, unified humanist conception of 'the human'. In this way, the novelistic imagination of different ways to exist complements the real-world effects of pandemic that has taught us different ways to live. However, the kind of future imagined in the novel, as much as it dismantles a singular and superior 'human' category remains vulnerable to overarching forces of global capitalism. This future is predicated on the economic determinism of human life which during the novel becomes subsumed by advancements in technology as well as in the scientific engineering of a virus.

Flynn complicates our understanding of posthumanism as possibility by having the posthumans of the novel, the companions, be created out of a need to control the human population. While the companions have memories, sentience, and rationality, they also have the stigma of being corporate apparatuses used to ensure the state's biopower. As much as *The Companions* allows us to imagine the beginning of new ways to have humanity without being human, the novel makes it difficult to imagine the end of capitalism. This is because the technologies that improve memory, emotions, and lifespan are financed and controlled by inhumane corporations. Through the companionship program, Metis Corp assumes biopolitical control of the population which ultimately resembles an apocalyptic vision for the human and nonhuman characters. The novel reveals a posthuman future that carries potential as much as it does problems. Although Flynn is able to provide new orientations toward embodiment and re-configure humanity through the rupturing of human-nonhuman encounters, the posthuman sensibilities created out of these new orientations and reconfigurations are

still bound by forces of capitalist biopower. *The Companions* invites us to consider that, in the twenty-first century, the threat to posthuman existence is no longer the Western liberal humanist tradition but a global capitalist order that is consolidated through the unequitable access to biotechnological apparatuses. If we are already posthuman, an assemblage of human and nonhuman beings, then Flynn invites us to question what exactly constitutes the human and nonhumanness of our twenty-first century bio-political and ontological posthuman selves.

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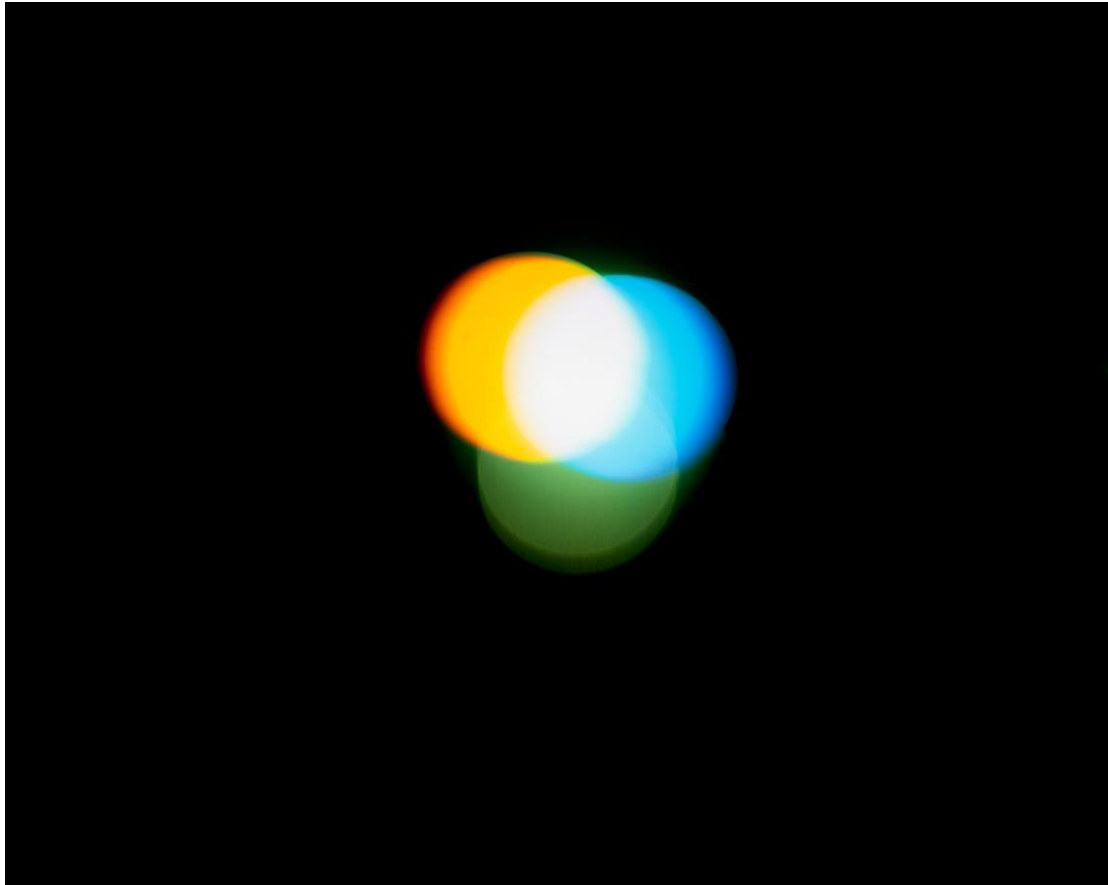Zimmer, Carl. *A Planet of Viruses.* Chicago: Chicago UP, 2015.

Photo: João Paulo Serafim

It's not Just the Virus: Unfurling Layers of Identity, Power and Emotion Beneath/Beyond the Plot in the Movie *Containment* (2015)

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Abstract | The fear of human extinction – real or illusionary – is essentially rooted in the layers of the human subconscious mind. Since the 1918 flu, the world film industry has been intermittently exploring and encashing subjects like zombies, viruses, pandemics, epidemics, and apocalypse. The present article discusses a less talked about but highly promising British thriller film, *Containment,* which hit the cinemas in September 2015. *Containment* is around 80 minutes long movie hitting at the very core of conflicts and crises in a situation where a group of people has been trapped inside their homes without any prior information. They are left with no food, electricity, and other essential commodities. The movie is a beautiful projection of vulnerability of human values, lost love, cooperation, sympathy and empathy, individual v/s community, morality and immorality, freedom and subjection, power dynamics, identity politics, intellectual and emotional responses in the face of unprecedented and undesired tragedy. More than what the movie shows, it is discussed and debated for what it hides, controls, and does not deliver. Along with the apparently delivered scope

of the movie, the article looks for "what isn't there" right away. The purpose is to bridge the gap between the fictional environment of the plot with socio-political aspects of life which go beyond the story. It lays bare the filmmakers' encoded concepts and motifs in the movie – intentional and unintentional both.

Keywords | Pandemic; Containment; Identity; Power; Psychosocial.

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1.   Introduction: Plot and Setting

The fear of the unknown and unseen has been plaguing humans in the real and the imaginary world since the inception of humanity. It has found expressions in different art forms, be it literature, documentaries, folklores, movies, and other imaginative forms. The present outbreak of COVID-19 has made humanity rethink this praxis. Since the Flu in 1918, Hollywood and world cinemas have intermittently been exploring and encashing subjects like zombies, viruses, pandemics, epidemics, and apocalypse as threats to the human existence on Earth. For example, movies such as: *Virus* (2019), *Flu* (2013), *World War Z* (2013), *Contagion* (2011), *Black Death* (2010), *Blindness* (2008), *Quarantine* (2008), *I Am Legend* (2007), *28 Days Later* (2002), *12 Monkeys* (1995), *Outbreak* (1995), *Death in Venice* (1971), *Strain* (1971), *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) have made their imprints in cinematic history. When only imagining situations in literature and witnessing them on screen send chills down our spines, COVID-19 has propelled us to experience that in real life.

In modern times, cinema plays a ubiquitous role in shaping and reshaping the human phenomenological experience. It makes visualization of everything experienced and imagined possible. In "Pandemic in Cinema" Professor Pena remarks that "[w]e often turn to the cinema not just to reflect on our lives but to see possibilities of lives which we have not lived (…) these become ways in which we can experience our darkest fears safely". Therefore, motion pictures inspire and encourage viewers' cognitive actions. Notably, the projection of pandemics on screen can affect viewers in two ways. On the one hand, the audience may replicate the negative responses depicted on film like terror, frenzy, violence and homicide. On the other hand, the denouement in the movie, reflecting the victory of life over death and humanity over pandemic, may enthuse hope and optimism among the audience to face real-life situations. The present

article takes a less talked about but a very promising movie, *Containment*, which hit the cinemas in September 2015. More than what the movie shows, it is discussed and debated for what it hides, controls, and does not deliver. Along with the apparently delivered scope of the movie, the article looks for "what isn't there" right away. The purpose is to bridge the gap between the fictional environment of the plot and the socio-political aspects of life which go beyond the story.

Directed by Neil McEnery-West, *Containment* is a British thriller film starring Lee Ross, Sheila Reid, Louise Brealey, Pippa Nixon, Andrew Leung, William Postlethwaite, and Gabriel Senior. The film is set in the 1970s era council block in Weston, Southampton, UK. Mcenery-West began shooting the film in 2008, fulfilling a lifelong dream of directing a thriller. Based on the novel *Lord of the Flies*, West's original concept had one main character confined in an apartment. But writer David Lemon expanded on this concept, and the two collaborated to create *Containment.* The movie carved out a niche in the hearts of movie critics and the East End Film Festival awarded *Containment* the Accession Award in 2015.

Containment is around 80 minutes long and addresses core conflicts and crises in a situation where a group of people has been trapped inside their homes without any prior information – with no food, electricity, or essential commodities. The movie is a beautiful projection of the vulnerability of human values, lost love, cooperation, sympathy, individual v/s community, morality and immorality, empathy, power dynamics, identity politics and intellectual and emotional responses in the face of unprecedented and undesired tragedy. It expresses the idea that the freedom all of us take for granted becomes an ultimate priority when taken away. *Containment* shares the prospect and premises with earlier applauded pandemic films: *Rec* [1] and *Quarantine* [2].

The opening scene displays sealed apartments inside leviathan buildings. Mark, a failed artist who is estranged from his wife and son, awakens to find himself trapped in his flat with no way out. He observes strange figures in Hazmat suits guarding the grounds outside where a military tent has been erected. Sergei, Mark's next-door neighbor, tears into the wall between their flats to find an escape. Gradually, all fellow

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[1] *Rec*. (short for record) is a 2007 Spanish found footage horror film with claustrophobic settings where the residents are quarantined in their building in the wake of an unknown virus breakout.
[2] *Quarantine* (2008) is the USA remake of *Rec.*

residents – Enid, Sally, and Aiden, ally with Mark and Sergei to defend themselves from the 'Hazmats'. In their struggle to make out what is happening outside, Mark and Sergei rescue Nicu (Sergei's younger brother) and kidnap a Hazmat nurse (Hazel). When Hazel reveals that the real danger is inside the building – a virus of unknown origin that might infect any one of them, tempers fray and fear takes over. With a handful of characters, the movie showcases the different hues of human nature. The violent Sergei, the silent Nicu, Mark – the one with the humane side – Sally and Aiden – a grumpy couple where the woman is trying to give her best to manage the relationship – and Enid – the cranky old woman – have to come together in a battle for survival. All of a sudden, their yet another ordinary day turns out to be the crack of doom. Pushing everything mundane to the background, freedom and life become their priority.

2. Gaps and Silences: A Reader's Response to *Containment* as a Visual Text

Life is utterly convoluted and contradictory and so are its representation in the form of creativity. Like artists in other fields, filmmakers too have their limitations when it comes to capturing every aspect of existence. Invariably, every film informs something but remains silent about many more possibilities as one perspective cannot encapsulate real life. This way, the visual text is one of the ways of attributing ideals to things by excluding or including them. Like true creative piece, *Containment* displays certain aspects in-depth but simultaneously leaves room for the viewer's imagination. These gaps and silences allow the readers to churn out their understanding of the story. "Meaning comes into existence only in the act of reading" (Martin 161) and even a literal silence in day-to-day life has its ramifications and what to say of metaphorical silence? As Wolfgang Iser alleges, "reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" ("The Reading Process" 377). The present effort is to skim through the literal meaning and conceptual understanding of *Containment* as a visual text. The essay does not aspire to analyze the technical aspects related to cinematography.

Containment does not offer all its concerns directly as the silence and absence of such topics would raise more curiosity , leading the audience to think and ruminate on those issues more seriously. Thus, the study of gaps and silences can be an effective instrument to extrapolate beyond-the-plot issues in the movie. As Iser explains: "no tale can ever be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a

story gains its dynamism. Thus, whenever the flow is interrupted, and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps" ("The Reading Process" 380).

Containment is full of examples where the filmmaker has knowingly left numerous gaps and silences. Questions such as where does the virus come from? What will the consequences be once the majority of the population is infected? Why is Nicu quiet throughout the entire film? Why is it that only some apartments are portrayed, leaving out the rest of society? Why does Sergei knowingly succumb to the crowd? What does ending refer to? What was the last message on the phone? Why did Nicu keep Mark and his family's picture? A massive cloud of questions lingers in the minds of the audience. This adds to the beauty of the movie that leaves the audience to find answers for themselves. Every viewer could have a different perspective to fill in the gaps; the present attempt is one from such innumerable possibilities.

The claustrophobic setting of the movie is highly suggestive. The mammoth buildings with similar architecture signal the predominance of man-made structures. People make and occupy them for security purposes, but these structures help the authorities to seal the windows and doors more quickly, keeping the residents trapped inside. It indicates the Frankensteinian nature of human progress. In his movie review, Taylor Holmes argues that the movie's setting conjures Chicago's Cabrini Green developments, which were demolished later on. He maintains that, "When I lived in Chicago and drove by Cabrini Green, they exuded this sort of illness. Tall. Imposing. Distinct. With an air of poison to them. And that is how the apartment buildings of *Containment* feel to me when you first see them". Four identical apartment towers belittle everything else in the area and become omens of violence and conspiracies. This is how "*Containment* cultivates a consistently enigmatic atmosphere, and invokes an eagerness to hurry along with each scene, not because the film needs to end, but because it arouses an appetite of anticipation" (Ward).

Intermittently, the movie resorts to close-up shots of the animals like ants, birds, and sometimes flies, which were the carriers of various pandemics throughout human history. These multiple signals confuse or keep the readers in suspense that any of them can be responsible for the virus. Therefore, despite being conclusive, the plot is open to myriad interpretations. Elements of suspense are scattered through all means – in the story, settings, characters, cinematography, dialogue, and props.

2.1   The Vibrant Kaleidoscope of Characters

However, in a Sci-Fi horror movie, there is not enough scope to fully develop the personality of the characters who are frequently reduced to stereotypes or are underdeveloped. Generally, they do the bare minimum because one can tell who is who and their fundamental personality. Partially, this idea seems right about the characters in *Containment* too. However, the movie's characters deserve to be analyzed as each character exhibits disparate human values and attributes. There are three generations involved in the characters. By bringing three generations together, the filmmaker was able to bring the past (Enid), the present (Mark, Sergei, Sally, Aiden) and the future (Nicu) in concert. The death of every character shows how their attitude and action take them to their destiny.

Moreover, the response of the characters from different generations do vary at certain points, but the strife for survival somehow seems very common across generations. Nonetheless, all the characters in the movie seem to represent different reactions in face of the worst-case scenario. The old reminiscent Enid looks pretty calm and composed most of the time. She can envisage death creeping up on her. Life is not much better than death to Enid as she ageing and lives alone . She (who symbolizes the past) dies in her sleep very peacefully. The adult characters have different personalities. Mark is very caring and supportive and seems to be the promising agent of resilience and survival. He is a compassionate harbinger of humanity. The expectations of the audience are glued to him until the end. What is more, Mark's death seems to be a bit less painful than remaining ones; rather, one can say that he does not die at all. There is a possibility of him being alive later on because his body is not shown dead. So, with the hope of Mark being alive, there is hope that humanity and human values, like sympathy, love, compassion, are alive too.

Then, we have Sergei – a hot-headed, violent, self-centered person, who represents psychopaths during quarantine in pandemics and his lynching by a mob forestalls the fate of such people. His cruelty is paid off in his brutal death. Another character , Sally – a true epitome of her profession – strives to save others. She dies trying to persuade people not to use violence. Sally's boyfriend, Aiden, is a conspiracy theorist who comes up with different theories about the people in hazmat suits being terrorists, authorities, or war teams. The sceptical Aiden wanted to conspire against

others to sneak out alone. He tries to escape from the building by stealing the only vaccine but becomes a victim of his self-perpetuated conspiracy as a sniper from the rooftop shoots him down. Hazel, a comrade from the hazmat team, does her duty as the governmental agency. As an individual, she does not take sides – the authority's or the residents'. Consequently, she becomes a *Trishanku*[3] (a Hung), welcomed nowhere. Sergei kills Hazel in his frenzy of self-protection. The youngest one, Nicu, seems to be the most frightened in the entire movie. The terror on his face displays the fear inside his heart as he does not utter even a word. Nicu – the observer – m does not get involved in the situation and unconditionally follows adults' instructions. He accepts the course of destiny and ultimately survives. All adults (the present) pull their weight in saving Nicu – the future. This ending indicates humanity will survive on this earth regardless of all kinds of threats in the form of natural and unnatural disasters.

Another theory may be that Mark is dreaming it all. Mark is a jilted husband and an estranged father. The day on which the movie opens is his son's custodial hearing day. His subconscious fear that he may lose his son is reflected in this dream where he glares at an old family photograph time and again. The story seems to be a dream because Mark finds the front door and windows of his and other buildings glued shut. It is infeasible that governmental authorities could seal such a large number of doors and windows in a night without anyone knowing or without disturbing anyone's sleep.

The fear of losing someone very close to one's heart disturbs humans to the core. In dreams, we do not see the people in their real personalities and form. The dream always manifests its meanings through symbolic figures. The disguised form of his son in this dream is Nicu, wearing his son's spacesuit, whom Mark tries to save until his last breath. Karen's appearance (Mark's wife) in the dream, who is callous and apathetic towards them, could be Sergei. Just like Karen uses her role as a mother to dominate and imprison Mark's, Sergei's domineering authority as a guardian has made Nicu numb and silent. Thus, the movie suggests that a failed marriage affects both the physical and the psychological growth of children. In the end, the saving of all the children by the authorities is an emblem of divinity safeguarding the human future from

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[3] *Trishanku* is a legendary character from Hindu mythology who hangs upside down between Heaven and Earth, belonging nowhere.

the ugly face of human conflict and selfishness. It is like the Biblical Armageddon.[4] The movie suggests that the Armageddon happens when all the corrupted elders die and the human race rejuvenate afresh, pure and divine. It also hits the point that despite human beings living with lots of categories and boundaries in the name of caste and class, the very essence of all boundaries is shattered when it comes to survival crises.

2.2   Why is Nicu Silent?

Actor Gabriel Senior portrays Nicu, Sergei's younger brother, who is reclusive yet attentive. At the beginning, Nicu is lost in his own world. He does not say anything, but his intent eyes take everything in – be it the rising tensions between citizens and outside forces or his older brother's growing potential for violence. Niku's silence is the most intriguing and potent aspect of the plot. His silence promises numerous meanings. One of the reasons for Nicu's silence could be that his function is that of an observer, watching the furore of the crumbling human civilization. The filmmaker makes him wear an astronaut suit as he is alone in a strangely devilish society. Maybe all the children at the end imply that only children are uncorrupted and redeemable. If one takes Nicu just as a child – innocent and inexperienced – m his silence means children have no rights. They are stifled voices, not worth listening to. He remains silent because he relates to the future generation that cannot intervene in what is happening in the present. The future can thus only act when its time comes.

Moreover, Nicu's brother Sergei is a psycho. In his brother's company, Nicu has endured a traumatic childhood. He would have had to face dangerous outcomes if he were to speak, as Sergei gets violent whenever anybody speaks. So, for Nicu, to be silent is to be safe. That may be the reason Nicu develops a very quick and profound bond with Mark. In Mark, he finds a father figure. With him, Nicu experiences the love, care and compassion that a child longs for in a family. He even keeps a photograph of Mark with his wife and son all the time with him. He seems fed up with Sergei's belligerent and violent attitude. He is not shocked and terrified when the agitated mob lynches Sergei; instead, he weeps and is distraught when Mark is hurt and they have to separate. This attitude of Nicu puts his parenting in the dock. What is more, he is the

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[4] Armageddon refers to the final battle between good and evil before the Judgment Day. The New Testament describes it as a dramatic and catastrophic conflict, especially if it is viewed as potentially destroying the entire world or the human race.

symbol of the kind of generation that will come into shape in an inappropriate and unconducive family environment. Therefore, it cannot be a coincidence that NICU is an acronym for Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. It is a section of the hospital dedicated entirely to the treatment of infants. Most babies admitted to the NICU are either premature or have a medical condition that needs particular attention.

Furthermore, Sergei makes it clear to Mark that Nicu does not have any speech disability. If one considers the effects of this virus on the human body as told by Hazel, the virus catches the throat first, and the infected person loses the capacity to speak, then it spreads down the body and finally results in multiple organ failure. There is a chance Nicu is the virus carrier, and it has taken away his voice. If this hypothesis proves true, the viewers can conjecture another sequel of the movie where Nicu – the rampant virus carrier – will move freely in society and the chain of infection will never be broken no matter what the authorities do.

2.3 Power Dynamics and Identity Politics

The movie reinforces the role of the state in its citizens' lives. It raises serious questions like: is the state a protector or a hegemonic entity? The colony residents are contained in their houses by state authority without any prior information. The intercom repeats the message at regular intervals that they should not panic as the situation is under control. However, the Oslo residents do not believe the state and its machinery; instead, they take it as an offence to their lives and freedom. They try to retaliate and get out of the situation by killing the state representatives who claim to save them. Citizens' mistrust of the state and its machinery is a serious question over the state's role in the present scenario. Stapleton argues that:

> Despite the threat of a virus, it is the unknown, the power and position that the strangers have because of their protective suits, and the 'man versus man' nature of events that the protagonists (and audiences) are invited to fear most. (...) *Containment* is a thriller with a great human angle to play on: the true threat is not the airborne virus, but the behaviour that it elicits in all those reacting to it. (n.pg.)

Foucault alleges that each process of modernity has crucially impacted the state-citizen relationship. His most influential work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, provides a picture of a current society where he investigates how the

government has exerted ever-greater control over personal elements of our life. Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's nineteenth-century jail reforms as a paradigm for what happens to a society in contemporary times. He criticises and contextualizes Jeremy's panopticon as an epitome of state tyranny.

> Foucault explores the transition from what he terms a "culture of spectacle" to a "carceral culture". Whereas in the former punishment was effected on the body in public displays of torture, dismemberment, and obliteration, in the latter punishment and discipline become internalized and directed to the constitution and, when necessary, rehabilitation of social subjects. (Qtd. in Felluga).

The panopticon model[5] seems in operation in the movie where there is one-way control and communication from the authorities. The lack of transparency is disconcerting to the residents of Oslo Tower. The residents have to listen and follow the intercom. They are left with no means of voicing their issues or concerns. It is a panopticon way for the minority to control the majority. The sniper on the rooftop of the tower's building is an analogue to Bentham's guard in his panopticon model. Therefore, the film is a political parable censoring the modern-day state services in the United Kingdom. Hazel's hostage is an emblem of civilians' rebellion and resistance against the so-called state intervention and protection provided against the deadly virus. The audience is informed that there is a disease, but one does not find anyone dying from it. Under the capitalist gaze, all are in the "Hobbesian Trap" compelled to the fear-motivated, pre-emptive, and self-defensive responses.

History shows that during pandemics identity politics take over and stigmatization and scapegoating come into play. "Viruses know no borders and thus become easily entangled with contemporary anxieties over migration and refugees. Asian populations in Chinatowns of various Western cities were victimized in the wake of a severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)" (Han and Curtis). In *Containment*, Enid holds immigration responsible for virus outbreaks. Later on, when gases are released to neutralize the Oslo residents, the movie is symbolically referring to ethnic cleansing, such as the one committed by Hitler during the Holocaust.

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[5] In his book *The Panopticon Writings*, Jeremy Bentham proposed that the ideal jail would have cells open to a central tower. Individuals in the cells do not interact with one another. They cannot see if there is someone in the tower, so they believe they are being watched at all times.

There are fleeting references to the changing features and physiognomy of power. Enid keeps referring to the World War time and again. Whenever she looks at the situation, she says that "it wasn't like this in the war" (*Containment*), which suggests she must have witnessed the Second World War – the first major war in Europe with technical weapons. Hence, the continuous comparison between the past wars and this present unseen enemy invokes the future threat humanity must face with biological wars taking the place of wars with machinery.

3.   Social Response and Psychosocial Consequences

The film very aptly addresses how a person's true self emerges when his/her survival is endangered. Ideas like home, freedom, fear or morality are dismissed when survival is at stake. The movie picturizes a new social order in the wake of capitalism where all needs and services are catered at one's home at the snap of one's fingers. This has reduced human interaction to the minimum. The Oslo residents epitomise a reclusive lifestyle – a by-product of capitalist culture. Mark does not even notice the people living on the other side of his apartment's walls. Enid, Mark's old-aged neighbour, complains about it incessantly; she says, "It was ages you [Mark] said hello to me. People around here not good enough for you?" (*Containment* 20:16-21). He does not even recognize Sally, his other neighbour, who remarks that Mark does not care to meet the people living around him. However, a question arises: can capitalist consumerism be a substitute for philanthropy or the human touch? The movie answers this with a big "No". Humans' mutual love, care, and support could be the only panacea in a catastrophic situation like a pandemic.

The movie trailer announces that "nothing can contain fear". It is not the virus the authorities threaten; it is the human (citizen's) response that shakes off the state. The challenge lies in maintaining peace and harmony. When the residents of the Oslo Tower come to know about a virus, a dogfight starts for vaccines even when no one is sure whether they are infected or not. A paranoid mob manifests an inevitable social response – existentialist agony, avarice, self-interest, and pessimism. Pappas posits that:

> Historically, there has been an exaggerated fear related to infection compared to other conditions. Infection possesses unique characteristics

that account for this disproportionate degree of fear: it is transmitted rapidly and invisibly; historically, it has accounted for major morbidity and mortality; old forms re-emerge, and new forms emerge; both the media and society are often in awe. (n.pg.)

Ofttimes, without knowing the actual situation, people start overreacting and fear spreads even faster than the virus. The movie shows, very aesthetically, that no one dies because of the virus; instead, most people die because of their fears, insecurities, violence and self-centeredness. The principal fear among the characters is the fear of extinction. The uncertainty of life and particularly a peaceful and happy life is focused on. The story previews the idea that death is imminent; one may talk about death nonchalantly, but human philosophy does not come to the rescue when one has to face it. In face of possible extinction, people resort to action and violence.

Containment emphasizes the notion of civilization as a mirage. The mutual killings by uncouth and uncontrolled Oslo residents question the metanarrative of culture and civilization. The modern psychosis of man (showing the animal within) interrogates the inner morals of humanity at large. The viewers tend to ask: Is there any possible response other than violence? If yes, why do people resort to violence in such a situation? Is it just the mob mentality of "knowing little and processing nothing" that leads to social unrest? Who is included in the mob? Is there not any individual accountability? Psychological studies have proved that in people of criminal nature (for instance Sergei in *Containment*), "fear is actually the root of all anger" and resultantly of violence (Bonn n.pg.). Though the movie shows many examples of violence, the message seems to be that violence cannot be a solution. It espouses that, even under the threat of death, love finds a way. The imperturbable bonhomie of Enid, Mark, Nicu and Sally exemplifies the possibility of hope in desperate times.

Another important idea that the movie brings home is the importance of freedom in human life. The movie compels us to regard freedom as a human necessity, not a social privilege. When something is taken away from us, we realise its importance. Likewise, we, the self-proclaimed most superior organisms on Earth, consider freedom to be a natural phenomenon. But what if this freedom is taken away from us and when we try to get it back, it costs us our life? In such a situation, home, the most coveted and safest haven, looks like pandemonium or hell. Home matters if it includes the freedom to go in/out at any time. Not going much into the philosophical discourse on

liberty and freedom, let us take Berlin's straightforward and inclusive meaning of freedom. In Berlin's words, by virtue of freedom, one will "wish to be a subject, not an object" (131).

In *Containment*, due to quarantine, Nick's home (the utopia) becomes a heterotopia.[6] The home became heterotopia as deranged neighbours gather to save their lives. The sense of freedom materializes the idea of home, which in captivity is no better than a prison. Referring to the German invasion and exploitation that took away liberty from people, Satre altercates, "The very cruelty of the enemy pushed us to the extremity of the human condition by forcing us to ask the questions which we can ignore in peacetime" (Qtd in Manzi). When Satre writes it, he highlights the importance of freedom for human beings, which becomes especially valued during enslavement. Similarly, the Oslo residents want to be the subject, not the objects.

The neighbours break Mark's wall to come together when facing a threatening situation. The breaking of walls suggests that the personal can become public when it comes to survival. The message is to convince the viewer that even microbes, like the virus, are interconnected with all organisms on Earth. Similarly, people realize that every life is relatable and affects one another when such a pandemic comes about. If the realization that peaceful co-existence through interdependence is possible and becomes common knowledge among all people, most human problems will be resolved.

4.   What does the Ending suggest?

The ending of *Containment* is a puzzle with multiple interpretations. On the one side, the movie has been criticized for having an unresolved ending with all the major protagonists dead. Only some children survive but those too end up in the clutches of the state which they have been trying to avoid since the beginning. So, their struggle for freedom seems to fail towards the end. Contrarily, if one goes with the positive aspects in the last scene, which shows a group of young children safely sitting in the camp in the care of the state representatives, the message is that everything is fine now. These young children are hale and hearty, referring to the next generation sitting together, happy and hopeful. Therefore, in the end, the existence of human life on this

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[6] Heterotopia is a term coined by the philosopher Michel Foucault to describe cultural, institutional, and discursive environments that are unpleasant, intense, incompatible, contradictory, or altering.

Earth is being reemphasized. Although the movie envisions a conflict between the state and the residents of the Oslo tower, by safeguarding the children it also indicates the protective role of the state.

The movie touches upon the concept of "self" and "other" as well. The building residents often talk in terms of "we" (the Oslo residents) and "they" (the hazmats). The communication gap on the government's side has made them think there are two sides. Nevertheless, this is how tragic stories are born: due to communication gaps and miscommunication. They allow future generations to learn from human follies. If the residents had been well informed and had followed the instructions given by the authorities, then their fate would have been different. There would not have been any story to tell, though, any mistake to improve upon or learn from. This is how human frailty leads to tragedy and leaves stories for the coming generation.

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REVIEW

Photo: João Paulo Serafim

REVIEW | *Pandemic* **(2020)**

BY | Ambika Raja

When the Coronavirus pandemic spread across the world in 2020 it not only brought all facets of global health systems, trade, economy, and education to a standstill but also created a severe and long-lasting impact on the daily lives of people across the planet. How did the unprecedented pandemic deter humans from carrying on with their routine activities? How were individuals and communities transformed during the peak of the health crisis? What aspects of human lives were massively affected by the situation? These are a couple of questions the web graphic novel *Pandemic* tries to address through its short stories rich in visuals and texts.

Developed by the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, a collective of seven major media houses and local institutions focusing on issues in the Charlotte region in the US, and BOOM Charlotte, an art-led initiative, the graphic novel has been created under a project titled *The Pandemic: Stories of COVID-19*. In an attempt to cater to the immediate needs of Charlotte residents during the Coronavirus pandemic by providing

reliable information and news that can keep communities safe and healthy, the graphic novel tells stories of how the COVID-19 has affected the health, work, and finances of people, through a collection of seven short tales written by several writers and artists (Boraks n.pg). Unlike news reports that strictly focus on facts and figures related to the pandemic, or human-interest articles that narrate individual experiences solely using texts, *Pandemic* offers a blend of relatable tales alongside factual information on the COVID crisis through simple, short sentences and vibrant images, making it interesting and intelligible for readers across all age groups. While the focus of the graphic novel is limited to one particular region, Charlotte in North Carolina, the narrative captures the experiences of numerous individuals hailing from diverse backgrounds and belonging to different races, ethnicity, nationality, and gender thus rendering insights into varied human experiences. Additionally, the novel also views the impact of the pandemic from multiple lenses including death, separation, isolation, homelessness, and employment crisis, and this ensures that a holistic approach is taken towards the subject under discussion.

Prior to delving into the stories of individuals, the novel, in its introductory section, offers a glimpse of the timeline of the Coronavirus pandemic and the immediate response of the North Carolina authorities to the burgeoning issue. The words "Today, we have confirmed our first presumptive positive results for the new Coronavirus in North Carolina," (Introduction) spoken by the state Governor Roy Cooper and represented in the first panel of the graphic novel, establish the theme and purpose of *Pandemic*. It is worth noting here that the predominant colours in the introductory chapter are blue and black as opposed to the colour red which is usually used in narratives that involve danger, disease, or a sense of urgency. Perhaps, it is a conscious decision on the part of the content creators as the colour blue stands for a sense of trust, credibility, and knowledge, and is usually used in a majority of healthcare logos. The closing down of schools, shutting down of bars, safety instructions and death report mentioned in the chapter foreshadows the tales of tragedies and hope described in the subsequent sections of the novel.

The seven succeeding chapters discuss the tales of affected individuals and families through first or second-person narrative. The story of Charlotte music teacher Cedric Meekins, who is one among the first in the region to be affected by the pandemic, traces how he contracted the virus, the immediate effects it had on his health,

and his slow recovery. The faceless images of people illustrated as long black figures suggest COVID-led death looming large over every individual. In the penultimate panel of the story, the visuals zoom in on the different parts of Meekins' body that have been affected by the virus. His inability to hold an ink pen properly and his difficulty in walking provide readers insights into the minutest troubles the virus can create. Meekins' transformation from a patient to a fully recovered person represented through an image of him wearing a bandanna, sunglasses, and sporting a goatee resonates with the underlying message of the story that "healing is a daily process" (Morabito et al. n.pg.).

Each tale of the graphic novel differs from one another in terms of content, visuals, narrative style, and usage of colours and panels. For instance, the opening sequence of Juan Chagoyan's story has been illustrated in the form of a social media interaction featuring the live streaming of his funeral and a subsequent voice call with the members of his family. At a stage when the globe is moving towards a hybrid model involving virtual and in-person interactions, the representations of Chagoyan's story using virtual motifs are in line with the current and future trends. In an effort to highlight the plight of immigrant families, who have been some of the most vulnerable during the pandemic, the story encapsulates diverse aspects of the lives of immigrants. Chagoyan's quote "I can't be sick. I won't be able to work for a few weeks. I don't have papers," (Chapter 2) suggests the risks beyond health-related ones that the pandemic has posed on immigrant families. Staying true to their journalistic instincts, the writers have not only covered Chagoyan's untimely death but have also probed into the callousness on the part of hospital authorities in giving proper updates regarding the patient's condition to his family. "They never really let us know what was going on," says Ana, the victim's sister, indicating the helpless situation of several immigrant families who not only face financial hardships but find it difficult to communicate with the authorities in a language they are not well-versed in, which in this case is English. It is worth mentioning here that all the chapters of the graphic novel *Pandemic* have been published in both English as well as in Spanish (which is also the most commonly spoken foreign language in Charlotte) on the web pages of the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative and BOOM Charlotte. The availability of the graphic novel in more than one language ensures that crucial information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is made accessible to a larger population and not just to the English-speaking community.

The tales of suffering, isolation, and hope in *Pandemic* have been characterized in the backdrop of the political situation in the US, specifically, the emergence of the anti-mask protests in various parts of the country. Jordan Grunawalt in his article "The Villain Unmasked: COVID-19 and the Necropolitics of the Anti-Mask Movement" points out that when nationwide stay-at-home orders were first instituted, an exemption was demanded by several anti-mask protestors as they believed that it tampered with their personal, national, and economic freedoms. In the final tale of the graphic narratives, the protagonist strongly sets across the message that wearing a mask is not about freedom, but rather "it's about whether or not you care about other people" (Chapter 7).

Beginning on a tone of fear and panic, *Pandemic* culminates on a note of hope and possibilities. Since the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous articles and reports have been published on the subject, some of which have been found to be misleading and fake thus providing wrong information to readers. In contrast, the graphic novel *Pandemic* provides a comprehensive insight into the global issue from a human-interest perspective meanwhile ensuring that accurate facts, figures and other medical nuances related to COVID-19 are not left out. The non-fictional and grave subject is dealt with sensibly and the presence of visuals ensure that the readers' attention is retained throughout the length of the work. For those who are keen on knowing the multiple impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic, the web graphic novel is a definite go-to.

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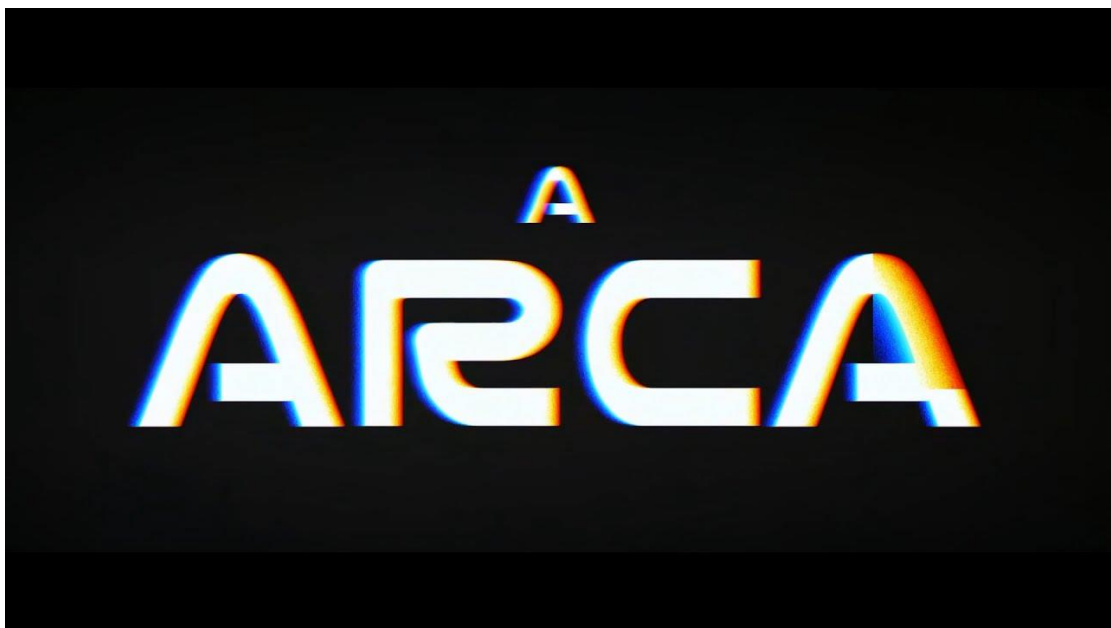
FICTION

A Arca **(2022)**

Written by: Vítor Carvalho
Directed by: Francisco Mota, Maria Penedo, Vítor Carvalho

The year is 2040. Humankind has been practically exterminated by a deadly virus causing vital organ failure. An A.I was built with the sole purpose of keeping the few remaining survivors alive. Its name was U.M.S. (Universal Mediation System). Now, there are only two people left on Earth, one of them living under the care of the AI. Not living, surviving. He's had no human contact whatsoever for years until he finally receives a message from the only other person alive.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNCHauNGwhc

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Elana Gomel | Elana Gomel is an Associate Professor at the Department of English and American Studies at Tel-Aviv University. She has taught and researched at Princeton, Stanford, University of Hong Kong, and Venice International University. She is the author of five academic books and numerous articles on subjects such as narrative theory, posthumanism, science fiction, Dickens, and Victorian culture. Among her books are Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject (OSU Press, 2003), Narrative Space and Time: Representing Impossible Topologies in Literature (Routledge 2014), and Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2014). She is currently working on a book project about narratology of the future and editing The Palgrave Reader of International Fantasy and a new volume on serial killers and serial spectators for Brill. She is also an award-winning fiction writer who has published more than a hundred short stories, several novellas and five novels.

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