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FICTION

WORKSHOP
VIRAL SPREAD—VIRAL POLITICS
MARCH 10–11, 2022
DELMENHORST, GERMANY
(HYBRID)

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The project “Pandemic Meets Fiction” explores cultural engagements with the COVID-19 outbreak and maintains that cultural forms of expression not only react to, but also (co-)produce the current crisis. Along these lines, this module conceives of the ongoing pandemic as a nascent event shaped through various forms of cultural representation and performance across different media. In particular, “Pandemic Meets Fiction” focuses on three forms of cultural engagement: (1) the (re-)reception of earlier pandemic narratives (e.g. Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, and outbreak films such as *Outbreak*) in 2020 and 2021, (2) the iconization of scientists (in particular virologists, immunologists, and epidemiologists) during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) memeification—of both pandemic fictions and representations of scientists during the current crisis.

TEAM

Martin Butler
University of Oldenburg

Sina Farzin
Universität der Bundeswehr München

Michael Fuchs
University of Oldenburg

Fabian Hempel
Universität der Bundeswehr München



VIRAL SPREAD—VIRAL POLITICS: EPIDEMICS AND PANDEMICS IN ANALOG AND DIGITAL MEDIA, SCIENCE COMMUNICATION, AND SCIENCE JOURNALISM



WHERE

Delmenhorst, Germany
(hybrid)

WHEN

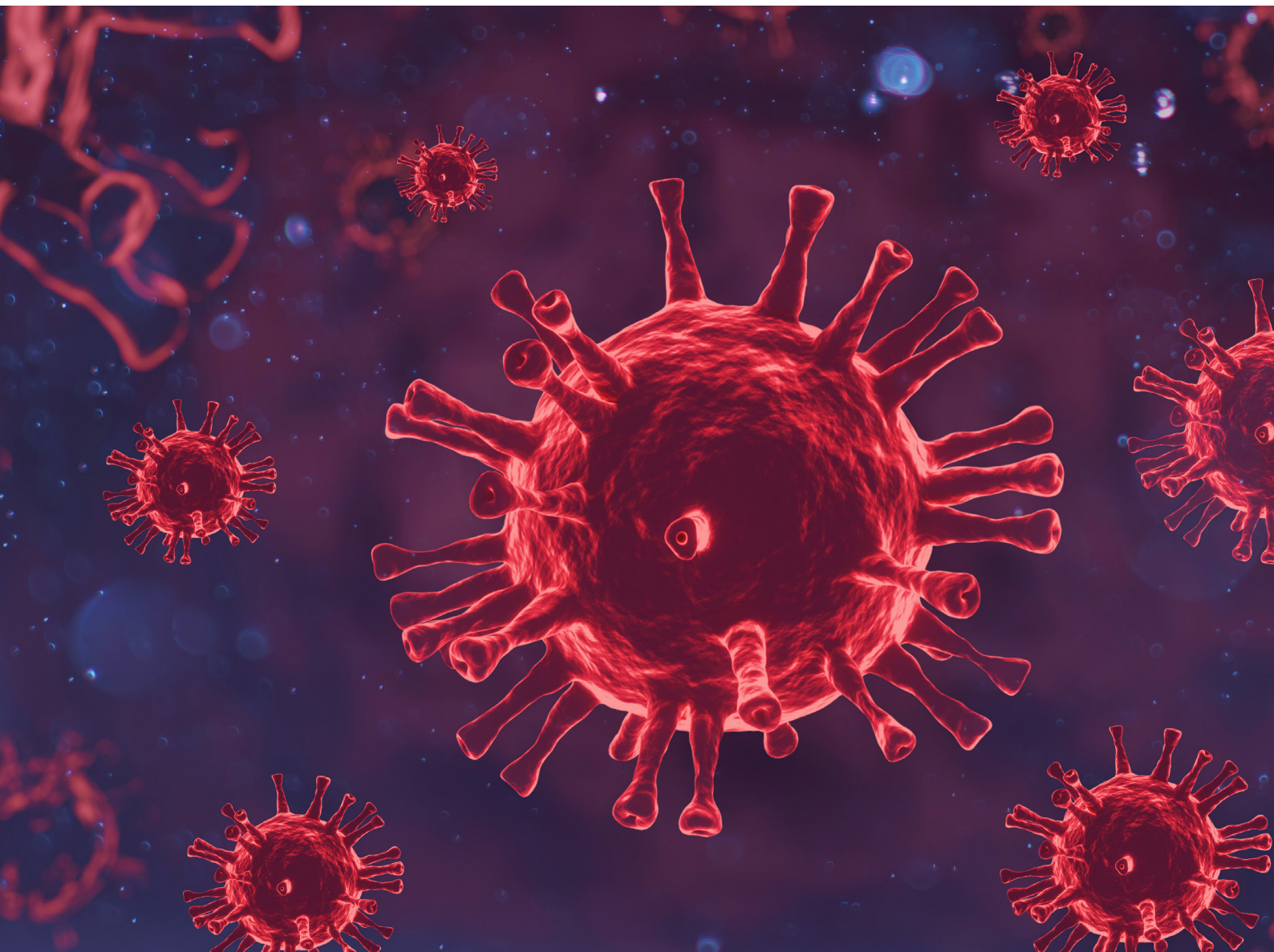
March 10–11, 2022

When COVID-19 spread across the world in the first couple of months of 2020, the scale and effects of the pandemic were unknown. However, traditional science communication and science institutions soon found ways to represent, and means to communicate, the unfolding pandemic, such as dashboards, growth charts, and visualizations of the virus. At the same time, established cultural narratives and stereotypes emerged in the media discourse: scientists went viral as caped crusaders and saints, literature classics such as Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947) and Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1349–1353) were read and cited, medical historians began to explore past responses to pandemics, and Steven Soderbergh's 2011 movie *Contagion* saw a massive increase in streaming sales as early as January 2020.

The real-world event and its possible premediations in various past narratives (or past reflections on and responses to epidemics and pandemics) seemed to be uncannily en-

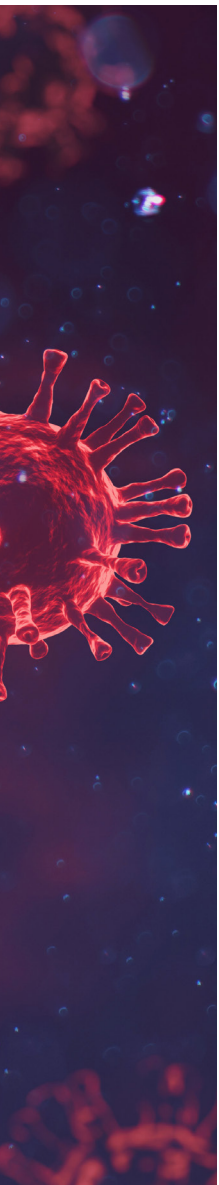
tangled with the unfolding real-world event. Indeed, on January 8, 2020, Netflix launched a documentary series titled *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak*, which announced that “it’s a guarantee that another version of that killer flu [i.e., the Spanish flu] will reappear. We don’t know when. But we should always presume that it will be soon.” Anindita Banerjee and Sherryl Vint thus note in their introduction to a symposium on pandemics in a recent issue of *Science Fiction Studies*: “The specter of its emergence was as robustly rehearsed in war-game pandemic simulations that have become staples of policy and governance as it was in killer viruses and zombie contagions that have returned with a vengeance to entertain viewers and gamers.” Indeed, science journalists and science communicators compulsively returned to eerily prescient narratives and visualizations in an attempt to contain the unknown situation within known frameworks, to mold into shape the viral hyperobject.

The perception of the COVID-19 pandemic as a global event has been relying on a variety of analog and digital cultural artifacts that have been trying to make sense of what has been happening around the world; while some of these attempts have been shaped by relatively new digital and social media, they have also often relied on established, sometimes even ancient, patterns of narrating catastrophe and crisis.



This workshop is envisioned as the first step in a publication project. In the workshop and resultant publication, we would like to explore the complex and mutually constitutive relationship between (re)configurations of the pandemic in (popular) culture, public discourse, and science (communication) in order to trace the different ways of “telling stories” about epidemics and pandemics, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, we would like to explore both how actors in the different domains have reacted to this (purportedly) novel situation through specific forms of representation and storytelling that, however, frequently resort to familiar scripts and characters to make sense of the (purportedly) unprecedented and unexpected. In so doing, the workshop and attendant publication seek to uncover the transformative potential of narrativization across the different domains and to shed light on the ways in which these various narratives and representations contribute to the production of knowledge. Topics may, thus, include (but are not limited to):

- » re-reading earlier pandemic fictions/re-watching outbreak movies/re-playing pandemic (video) games
- » the emergence of “corona fictions”
- » the role of science/scientists in pandemic/outbreak narratives
- » science narratives of the pandemic/of pandemics as narratives about science
- » “going viral” (memes about the pandemic; memes about virologists, immunologists, and epidemiologists; memes about containment measures; the viral character of SARS-Cov-2 representations, etc.)
- » narrating the pandemic on social media
- » COVID-19 episodes in medical drama television
- » intertextual connections between science, public, and popular culture discourses on the pandemic
- » narrative strategies in nonfiction books (articles, essays, etc.) about epidemics/pandemics
- » visualizing the virus/viral spread
- » corona containment measures and enhancing existing inequalities (e.g. “essential” workers vs. participants in the knowledge economy; intersections between corona and the reemergence of #BLM)
- » “alternative” corona narratives in fiction and nonfiction (e.g. stories and reports about how corona confronted the majority with the lives of particularly vulnerable groups such as immunodeficient people)
- » narrating corona beyond the Global North



ROADMAP

August 31, 2021

September 15, 2021

February 13, 2022

March 10–11, 2022

May 1, 2022

October 31, 2022

submit abstracts (about 250 words; to michael.fuchs@uol.de)
notifications

submit drafts (about 2,000 words, but full manuscripts are also fine), which will be distributed among workshop participants (not only contributors)

workshop in Delmenhorst and online (hybrid format)

editors circulate additional feedback

submission of revised essays



IMAGE CREDITS

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Triumph of Death* (c. 1562). Public domain image. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Triumph_of_Death#/media/File:The_Triumph_of_Death_by_Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder.jpg
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