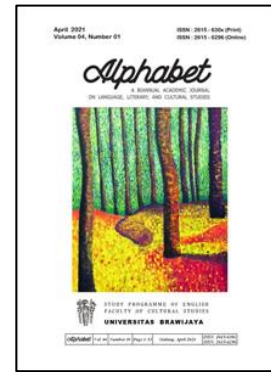


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Revisiting Literature in Times of Pandemics: The Relevance of Cultural Studies for Literary Analysis

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Revisiting Literature in Times of Pandemics: The Relevance of Cultural Studies for Literary Analysis

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Abstract

In trying to integrate science into the policy-making process, authorities and the public commonly overlook the essential role of literature in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. A close examination of the topic shows that it is more complex than the authorities' commitment to science. "We follow the science" is a way of communicating rather than implementing. Since other articulations are excluded in the articulation of "we follow science," cultural and critical studies become crucial. Arguably, literature communicates science better than the strategy adopted by the ruling elites.

Keywords: literary work, pandemic, cultural studies, and critical media studies

This piece of writing began as a brief presentation delivered at a student seminar in October 2020, then evolved into a longer piece of writing. Considering that we are now two years removed from the harrowing experience of the COVID-19 outbreak, why do we continue to highlight the significance of literary work in resolving any residual issues? When the situation looked to require immediate action in early 2020, the haunting question for literary studies was: what, exactly, is the point of debating literature? Meanwhile, in the last month of 2021, how valuable is it to other disciplines of study in the meantime? The frowning faces of colleagues from other areas reflect their unwillingness to consider it fruitful, even when it is not explicitly stated. This essay is more exploratory and critical in its approach to the subject matter. It will not present a straightforward strategy to use literature during the COVID-19 outbreak, such as offering must-read novels and a plan for reading during the lockdown. Instead, it will describe a

more complex approach to utilizing literature throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. It will begin by challenging the commonly held belief that literature is usually attributed.

The difficulty in evaluating the merits of literature may be related to the dualist view of reality, which treats literary works in both symbolic and aesthetic terms. In so doing, literature differentiates its nature by being emotive and imaginative without directly touching the empirical realm from which other scientific investigations supposedly originate.

Then, a demarcation line exists between theatre and social reality. The theatre is a *sublimation* of certain social situations, whether it *idealises* them, *parodies* them, or *calls for them to be transcended*. The theatre is simultaneously a sort of escape-hatch from social conflicts and the embodiment of these conflicts (Gurvitch, 1973, p. 76).

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This second-order world is both fictive and illogical (a.k.a. affective). Above all, this is not a natural concept. Nonetheless, it is linked to the fundamental semantic/semiotic distinct modes of perception, namely the logical and expressive modes (Guiraud 1975, p. 10). In this case, the distinction between non-literature and literature refers to the contrast between the objective and rational and the subjective and affective on the other hand. Scientific research belongs to the first category, whereas literary study, to some extent, belongs to the second. In other words, science differs from literary studies in that it is concerned with facts rather than ideas or interpretations. This is a common perspective. Whereas personal perspectives on the respective merits of Charles Dickens' and D. H. Lawrence's novels may differ, there is no place for such differences of opinion on the relative merits of Galileo's and Einstein's theories of relativity (Chalmers, 2013, p. xx).

As unfortunate as it is, early twentieth-century proponents of literary studies uncritically embraced the approach for determining the object of analysis in literary studies. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren (1986) proposed that the natural sciences approach transformed literature into science.

The problem is one of how, intellectually, to deal with art and with literary art specifically. Can it be done? And how can it be done? One answer has been: it can be done with the methods developed by the natural sciences, which need only be transferred to the study of literature. Several kinds of such transfer can be distinguished. One is the attempt to emulate the general scientific ideals of objectivity, impersonality, and certainty, an attempt which, on the whole, supports the collecting of neutral facts. Another is the effort to imitate the methods of natural science through the study of causal antecedents and origins; in practice, this 'genetic method' justifies the tracing of any kind of relationship as long as it is possible on chronological

grounds. Applied more rigidly, scientific causality is used to explain literary phenomena by the assignment of determining causes to economic, social, and political conditions (Wellek and Warren, 1986, p. 16).

In contrast, for A.F. Chalmers, who is not a literary scholar, this ingrained assumption is problematic for at least two reasons.

Many in the so-called social or human sciences subscribe to a line of argument that runs roughly as follows. "The undoubted success of physics over the last three hundred years, it is assumed, is to be attributed to the application of a special method, "the scientific method". Therefore, if the social and human sciences are to emulate the success of physics, then that is to be achieved by first understanding and formulating this method and then applying it to the social and human sciences.' Two fundamental questions are raised by this line of argument, namely, 'what is this scientific method that is alleged to be the key to the success of physics?' and 'is it legitimate to transfer that method from physics and apply it elsewhere?' (Chalmers, 2013, p. xx)

It is not that science has no role in dealing with pandemics. There are reasons to doubt, however, "that facts obtained by observation and experiment are as simple and secure as has generally been assumed" (Chalmers, 2013, p. xx). If this is the case, literature might be just as significant as science. However, how is this even possible?

Critically, this paper will propose the alternative by focusing on the following: (1) How do we (usually) relate literature to previous pandemics? Can we accept existing issues as self-evident rather than the contentious objects of antagonistic representations? The problem here concerns the debates about realism and representation. As a result, (3) how might literary work be as important as other human sciences in investigating the recent

pandemic? In this line of inquiry, I shall argue that cultural and critical media studies can provide a different agenda for subsequent research. The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies' early idea of representation as a site of struggle opened up possibilities to investigate how knowledge and power interact in a partly overlapping and partly contingent mode of relationship.

PANDEMICS AS STORIES

Outrage over the Indonesian government's denial, negligence, and odd comments erupted during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020. Scholars criticised the government for not disclosing the threat of the coronavirus beyond its economic, business, and tourism implications (Jaffrey, S., 2020; Lindsay, T. & Mann, T., 2020). A similar reaction is not entirely new. For example, Albert Camus' classic novel *The Plague* (1947) highlighted this kind of hesitation to act right in the face of an epidemic that struck Oran, a fictional city, for the sake of image and economic growth.

“There have been as many plagues as wars in history”, the doctor observes, “yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise”. Even after a few scattered deaths, “the danger remained fantastically unreal.” “It’s impossible it should be the plague; everyone knows it has vanished from the West”, says one character early in the novel, as first the rats and then the people begin to die. “Yes, everyone knew that”, replies the doctor, “except the dead”. The infection comes to a town that is obsessed with business, a place where the sole object seems to be the pursuit of wealth. The authorities are slow off the mark, reluctant to act because of the economic consequences and the reputational damage to the town (Bate, 2020, pp. 1479-1480)

Pandemics are natural forces that cause enormous casualties, but they are frequently over-

looked. It is a literary work that seems to speak up, preserve the past, and foretell the future. In other words, literary writing can tell us what some people in specific intellectual groups are thinking and feeling long before we observe a change in concrete ways. Consequently, it gives a kind of power over the past and, consequently, over the present (Livingston, 2012, p. 6).

In her lecture on the YouTube channel, Anne Sokolsky (2020), a professor of comparative literature at OWU, examines literary works that narrate the flu pandemics of 1918 that devastated Europe and America. Reviewing Elizabeth Outka's book *Viral Modernism* (2020a), which explores reasons for the few appearances of writings about this deadly pandemic, Sokolsky finds a similar recurrent pattern for the reluctance to act in the pandemic nowadays. To be similar to the derogative labelling of the 1918 flu as the "Spanish Flu", Donald Trump and some others called the COVID-19 pejoratively the "Chinese virus," "Wuhan virus," and "Kung Flu virus." In such a way, there is a sense that the "flu" originates from others, not us. It is (1) viewed as something distant, coming from elsewhere, or else in another part of the world. As a consequence, although historically a similar pandemic has occurred, the emerging one is almost thought of as new, meaning that it is foreign. In the case of COVID-19, the virus is not entirely new; it has existed and been out there, but it was not virulent from human to human. Furthermore, framed in an emergency condition, the authorities put their efforts when the flu (3) slowly gets closer – it invades the community first and then the characters' bodies (in the case that it infected the people we do know or us). Calamity is apparent, but it is obscured as abrupt.

In reviewing literary writings affected by the 1918 pandemic, Sokolsky continues that those who are willing (4) to write stories (both fiction and non-fiction) about the pandemic are usually survivors who are especially interested in writing about (5) what it means to endure something so awful to be on the verge

of death. In Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1937), for example, the author describes a "beatific vision," a near-death experience in which she was "free of the pain and fear that had overwhelmed her body." Meanwhile, in William Maxwell's *They Came Like Swallows* (1937), the protagonist suffers from a disturbing "contagion guilt," fearful of passing a lethal sickness on to another person. The character in the story is overcome with "what-if" thinking as he recalls his own pregnant mother's death, such as what if he had not entered the room that caused the injury, or, in the future, what if the contact causes harm (Outka, 2020b). These types of pandemic writing are significant as the focus of the story shifts away from illness in the medical sense. More importantly, they eliminate trauma, a common motive/theme imposed on practically all narratives deriving from lethal pandemic threats.

A story in a literary work also addresses another vital issue during the epidemic, which authorities sometimes assume are personal matters, namely mental health during the lockdown. In many cases, according to Rajiv Tandon (2020), a psychiatrist, mental health during the pandemic takes a back seat to physical health.

As I discuss this opinion with my medical colleagues (including some psychiatrists), their immediate response is in the negative-COVID-19 is a respiratory infection/disease requiring the attention of pulmonologists, intensive care specialists, infectious disease specialists, and epidemiologists, not psychiatrists. When I discuss the mental health effects of any epidemic on the general population with specific reference to COVID-19 (Wang et al., 2020) and specific mental health challenges faced by the above healthcare professionals (Chen et al., 2020), they promptly change their opinion (some reluctantly!) and acknowledge an important place for Psychiatry (Tandon, 2020)

It is difficult to prioritise a non-quantifiable discipline, much like literary studies.

Referring to *Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus, Banerjee et al. (2020) started their investigation by asking, "while the world's scientific forum is racing towards a vaccine and antiviral development to achieve a definitive cure, have we evolved a practical and rational psychological reaction to COVID-19?" The novel, for Banerjee, gave a solid foundation to explore "social absurdity" and how to manage it. In a circumstance when humankind faces an illness that affects the entire world with unknown medication, the high intensity of "the fear of an end" during a pandemic or an epidemic triggers a battle between seeking the aim of life and nothingness, as the novel explains. Despite ongoing exposure to the increasing number of infections, fatalities, and recoveries during the pandemic that instils fear, the novel provides something provocative, perhaps unintentionally back to Christianity. It is "not a tale of despair, but that of rejuvenation and lessons learned for "redemption" through the "obvious" sufferings (Banerjee et al., 2020)." In many ways, governments avoid and overlook this "anxiety to death" in terms of moral and individual ethics.

In addition, Elizabeth Outka (2020a) speculates on the reasons behind the challenges of incorporating pandemics into coherent narratives. In some ways, a pandemic complicates any attempt to characterize it as a hero or villain because it is non-human and natural for some reason. People were confronted with something mostly unpredictable, borderless, and ambiguous when the 1918 flu pandemic struck. In a way, the epidemic is plotless. Compared to human disasters such as war, a pandemic, and illness in general, it challenges anthropocentrism in scientific endeavour. At best, people can impose a narrative on such a natural force to make it more structured and understandable while leaving the rest open and ambiguous. "The pandemic literature embraces this tension: it frequently foregoes obvious storylines in ways that reflect the outbreak's narrative constraints while also creat-

ing new tactics to provide some sense of structure" (Outka, 2020a, p. 30). For the sake of this research, the specified literature features during the pandemic are critical, as we shall see later that authorities frequently utilize a notion of war in comparison to a pandemic, which has, predictably, less inventive and fruitful tenets than literary works' approaches.

However, one issue needs to be resolved. We could argue that the pandemic literature makes it difficult to categorize it as a "reflection" or "expression." This issue can then be discarded. As Turner (1974, p. 270) suggested, pandemic literature may create a delicate balance between focusing on structural limits and writers' agency in examining, evaluating, and questioning society and culture. The pandemic literature exemplifies anti-structure rather than structure and even contributes to its formation. However, a dualism between a symbolic order and reality persists. According to Kabel and Phillipson (2021), Camus' *The Plague* and COVID-19 deal with structural violence and misery differently. The COVID-19 exacerbated other social calamities and perpetuated structural injustice, racism, authoritarianism, massive datafication, and xenophobia. If humanity is to avoid the mistakes of these multiple disastrous responses, they advocate for reflective analysis aimed at significant societal change, decolonization, and racial violence. They claim, in this concern, that Camus' novel *The Plague* does not help (Kabel & Phillipson, 2021, p. 3).

"INVISIBLE FICTION" DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Following the sharp surge in infections caused by COVID-19 in 2020, authorities worldwide have repeatedly said that "we are following science" in dealing with the cases. However, based on our experiences, we have seen a wide range of interpretations of what "scientific approaches" mean across countries and continents and how science is differently put into practice. Some governments recommended stringent limits and lockdowns, while others recommended less strict measures. It is

more of a problem of policy than a scientific one. As we imagine, falsification, a process to test whether something is wrong in science, has a different place within political policies during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of the United Kingdom, the problem is apparent. "Politicians may show themselves as merely implementing scientific advice," Alex Stevens said, "but when science meets politics, it can be a question of the survival of the ideas that fit" (Stevens, 2020, p. 560). To put it bluntly, there is no difference in Indonesia. A newspaper reported the situation in a similar tone.

Many would argue that – regardless of his moral and political choices – President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo is a man of action. But few, even among his voters, would say the former furniture businessman was a man of science . . . The President cares about science, too, but only applied science, which tends to have a much larger impact on the economy. Schools and universities have been redesigned to function as human factories to produce “skilled workers”. Pure science? That’s a whole different story. Sadly, the situation has not changed at all, even as the worst global pandemic in recent memory claws its way into the country, with at least 200 dead on Indonesian soil. Still, Jokowi seems to have little regard for scientists, the people who know far more about pandemics than any of his economic or political advisers at the State Palace (The Jakarta Post, 2020, para. 3-4).

In short, cherry-picking evidence to fit a theory is not exclusive to the academic setting.

Nonetheless, this investigation will lead to a different path. It is not nurturing a political economy criticism that questions "what scientific procedures have been applied and recognizes the emerging implications for certain socio-political contexts". The study, in reverse, initiates the inquiry by examining the representations of the concept of science. It asks

"whose knowledge" when authorities claim to have dealt with the COVID-19 using science. It is double. First, an investigation follows a pragmatic approach, asking "when, why, and to whom" people enunciated the concept of science during the COVID-19 pandemic. If articulation is not merely concerned with contested representations but transformation, the investigation's focus will shift. It explores the various methods in which people *engage* with science concerning the COVID-19 and examines the entire range of activities that characterize what makes the COVID-19 so contextually sensitive. Since this part may require independent research, this article will concentrate on the second part for analysis.

Second, this paper proposes paying closer attention to the technologies, institutions, and practices commonly referred to as "the media." Its central argument is that our understanding of the media significantly impacts how we interpret empirical scientific formations during COVID-19, from the global vantage point of academia to smaller-scale, more localized initiatives. Whenever it is about science, what we read, access, evaluate, and hear are those we get via books, newspapers, television, and the Internet. Conventionally, then, the singular "medium" is either idealized as a means of transmitting a message (communication) or as a container of ideological distortion (alienation). For information theorists, the medium has no bearing on the content. Others have asserted that it is an integral part of the message ('the medium is the message'; McLuhan, 1994, p. 7). Meanwhile, the plural term "media" is most frequently used to refer to contemporary technologies such as television, radio, the Internet, and text messaging. However, those popular understandings of the terms "medium" and "media" have arguably served to obscure both the contingent nature of and political commitment inherent in disseminating knowledge (scientific or otherwise) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the current purpose, the term "*media*" is understood in terms of relations. It con-

nects various types of practices, such as the relationship between writing and reading, television producers and viewers, or large-scale government information channels and localized group initiatives, considered as analytical or critical concepts, and considered as a theoretical premise for connecting respective practitioners in each of these paired sets of practices. At this point, we could argue that to understand the world out there, i.e., the relationship between science and the COVID-19, it must have been mediated or mass-mediated to make sense. If pandemics are so thoroughly mass-mediated, how might media studies theory shed light on pandemic discourses?

Take, for example, the issues embedded in predicting, managing, and controlling the pandemic. In so doing, scientists worldwide have developed epidemiological models based on the scant information available about COVID-19. However, slight modifications to the modelers' assumptions can significantly impact their estimates and implications. While other models exist, for certain reasons, the UK government has strongly emphasized one developed by Dr Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist at Imperial College London, who has earned the moniker "Professor Lockdown". Ferguson first announced widespread panic in mid-March 2020 due to a mathematical model's prediction of the COVID-19 death rate in the United Kingdom. For this paper, the problem is more than a model to follow, as the call for controlling the pandemic includes a hegemonic position and marginalizes alternatives.

Uncertainty was further marginalized, or rather disguised, by employing Future Oriented Statistical Projections, or predictions of the ensuing course of a disease . . . By presenting the future course of a disease as knowable through numbers, the remaining uncertainties appeared to melt away. Further, risk was often treated as though it could be bounded spatially and temporally through recourse to bodily, geographic, and temporal metaphors while the at-

tendant uncertainties were bracketed to produce a momentary feeling of certainty. These strategies offered a means of cloaking risk management decisions in the guise of rationality despite the underlying uncertainties involved. In this way, governments, advisory committees, and other institutions charged with managing disease upheld their mandate to plan for the future in a “rational” manner. Such rationality was often only temporary in appearance, readily dissolving as uncertainties resurfaced (Ponte, 2005, pp. vi-vii).

Several characteristics of the discourse around scientific integration during COVID-19 are typical. While only significant concerns are recognized, they are hierarchically structured and intimately interrelated. The defining conditions for this connection are expressed in a particular practical reason: instrumental rationality must be transformed into action to correct a situation that has become disordered, dysfunctional, or even hazardous. This type of response is dubious; as Outka stated previously, we are confronted with something inhuman, and the story is nonlinear, if not plotless.

Calculations and predictions about COVID-19 disseminated to people are not about “following the science” but rather about communicating. The information conveyed is intended to persuade the audience that they are subject to action. John Hartley argued that language creates audiences discursively. Following Hartley’s argument (1992, pp. 104–105), the pandemic-in-public, like television and nations, is a product of distinct institutional discourses; what the pandemic “means” is contingent on how those institutional discourses construct it for their own ends. Three institutions stand out in this regard as discursively constructing (the pandemic on) television: the television industry (networks, stations, and producers); political/legal institutions (typically formalized as regulatory bodies, but occasionally as government-sponsored inquiries and reports); and critical institutions

(academic, journalistic, and—on a rare occasion—self-constituted audience organizations or pressure groups). Each claims to speak on behalf of the audience, albeit significantly different. As a result, audiences are not simply constructed; they are “invisible fictions” institutionally produced to enable various institutions to control their own survival mechanisms. Although audiences could be imagined empirically, theoretically, or politically, the result is always a fiction that serves the institution that created them. “There is no ‘actual’ audience that lies beyond its production as a category, which is merely to say that audiences are only ever encountered *per se* as *representations*” (Hartley, 1992, p. 105).

METAPHORS “WE DIE BY”

As we learn from literary works, linking epidemics or pandemics to “war” is a natural leap for authorities confronted with the difficult task of convincing the entire populace. Although there is a strong argument that using the term “war” to describe complex socio-economic challenges such as poverty, public health concerns such as the new coronavirus, or drug addiction is an insufficient framework, the metaphor remains alluring. Politicians, the general population, and social media platforms have all used this analogy to describe the COVID-19 pandemic. In a televised address, French President Emmanuel Macron declared, “We are at war” on March 16th, 2020. President Donald Trump of the United States of America has labeled himself a “wartime president” without recourse. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson used Churchill’s Second World War words to compete, declaring the COVID-19 as a dangerous foe. “We must act like any wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy.” Visual and discursive military analogies are reportedly employed to emphasize the seriousness of the issues at hand and the haste with which they must be resolved. War metaphors efficiently grab people’s attention, elicit emotions, frame the unexpected via culturally accepted beliefs,

and channel their responses (Hobart, 2020, para. 1).

President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo declared on Tuesday a public health **emergency** in response to the escalating coronavirus outbreak in the country as tensions rose between the central government and regional heads over how to address the pandemic (Jakarta Post, 2020, para. 1)

During this summit, I encouraged G20 leaders **to win the wars** against COVID-19 and the weakening global economy,” President Jokowi said on his official Twitter page @jokowi on Thursday, March 26, 2020. “Therefore, G20, together with WHO, must lead efforts to discover the COVID-19 anti-virus and cure,” President Jokowi added (Anggoro, 2020, para. 1).

The ongoing **economic crisis** is also **the worst in history**. In the first quarter of 2020, our economy grew by 2.97%, but in the second quarter, the growth contracted by 5.32%,” Jokowi told members of the People’s Consultative Assembly, the country’s highest law-making body (Andriyanto, 2020, para. 3).

Metaphors and analogies such as “war”, “emergency”, or “crisis” referring to the World War II-era have been pervasive in the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak.

Metaphors are practical and powerful. Nevertheless, are they transparent and innocent? Whereas most people think of metaphor as a poetic and rhetorical technique, a type of unusual language that people imagine they can live without, Lakoff and Johnson revealed that metaphor is everywhere, in language, cognition, and behavior. Our daily conceptual framework is intrinsically metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, pp. 13-14). Metaphors become integral to how we view the world and are constitutive of it. However, it is also hegemonic.

Metaphors involve a sleight of hand: they appear descriptive or illuminating, but always represent something as something it is not. This enables political and media agents strategically to frame ‘political reality’ and to address inexperienced publics as citizens, as a community, as sharing values. An inanimate cluster of RNA is anthropomorphized as ‘the enemy’ who is responsible for all the trouble—usually the ‘non-West’ (e.g. Trump’s ‘Chinese virus’ caused by dirty eating habits)—and allows apportion of praise or blame. Seemingly commonsense steps like containing and defeating the enemy are naturalized, no matter how grotesquely inappropriate. This neat way of dividing, hierarchizing and pitting humans against one another is reminiscent of Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony (Hobart, 2020, para. 2).

Here, Roland Barthes’ concept of “myth” becomes helpful in comprehending the difficulties associated with metaphor in the current COVID-19 setting. Barthes (1973) was interested in the function of myth in a class-conscious industrialized capitalist society. According to Barthes, myth helps to naturalize and universalize the bourgeoisie’s class interests. A myth is not a story but an associative chain of concepts operating subconsciously. In Barthesian myths, the audience is unaware that they are dealing with a myth that is ideological and embedded in capitalist society’s power structure (Fiske, 1989, pp. 133–134). Understood in this way, the metaphor of war used to describe the current pandemic is more concealing than illuminating.

Could we argue that we rely on myths far more than we do on ostensibly “following science”? In a scene depicting a violent conflict between Oedipus and Tiresias, Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* brings it up for discussion. Oedipus, who can see with his eyes, accuses Tiresias, who is physically blind, of being unable to “see” a cure for the epidemic ravaging Thebes. For Tiresias, who has the ability to see the fu-

ture, Oedipus, the King, is considerably more blind than he believes.

TIRESIAS : How terrible—to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees! I knew it well, but I put it from my mind, else I never would have come (lines. 359-362).

OEDIPUS : It does but not for you, old man. You've lost your power, stone-blind, stone-deaf--senses, eyes blind as stone! (lines 422-424).

TIRESIAS : So, you mock my blindness? Let me tell you this ... You with your precious eyes, you're blind to the corruption of your life (lines 468-471).

In view of the current pandemic, the metaphorical usage of the phrase "seeing and not seeing" in the play may be particularly enlightening. Should we claim that the elite of society, like Oedipus, has been blind in several instances, particularly when it comes to facing the urgent challenges of the pandemic? What are the most prevalent reasons for people to close their eyes, aside from focusing on the logic of action, i.e., getting the work done and the problem solved? Regarding the pandemic virus, the ruling class (which includes governments and broadcasters in many developing countries) takes the default position that the mass media's mission is to distribute knowledge to the general public as part of the fight against the virus. So, they commit themselves to a mass communication paradigm that is founded on the transmission of messages and which, in Gramscian terms, may be common sense but is not good sense, as a result (Hobart, 2007, p. 129).

Considering how powerful metaphor (or myth, to use the Barthesian term) can be, a radical myth can only develop within a specific area of politics where radicalism has achieved a certain level of institutionalization and can therefore be taken for granted, with the result that it can serve to naturalize the interests of those in power within the domain in which it exists. In contrast to how quickly stories vary

in content, the process of mythologizing remains consistent and universal. Stuart Hall (1973) goes into further depth on the subject. According to Stuart Hall's *Encoding/Decoding*, when viewers are given the power to generate their own thoughts about what they are watching, producers lose control over the meaning of what they are experiencing. Consequently, they go to considerable measures to develop "preferential texts," which reflect and support the "prevailing cultural order" and "prevailing-hegemonic" interpretation that viewers have been purposefully persuaded to accept by thorough manipulation of the media. He would argue that the vast bulk of what we know—whether it is about our political leaders or viruses—has been replicated and irreversibly mediated, and that, as a result, Cultural Studies and Critical Media Studies are vitally needed in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

The reluctance to include literary works in the current pandemic is not a matter of "fantasy" versus "reality," but rather of a refusal to think or, failing that, of defending the status quo. In contrast to applied, sugar-coated, or muddy philosophy, literary writing is a distinct mode of philosophical thought in the broad sense, as Gary Saul Morson (1994) noted. Because "people explain the world in part by telling stories about it," narrative is vital for grasping our modes of understanding (Morson, 1994, p. 19). With the proliferation of "information modes," it is critical to use a critical media studies perspective, as practically all narratives are now extensively mediated by mass media and other means. What becomes more relevant is that when reality is mediated, whoever or whatever is mediating becomes involved in a number of complicated ways. Following Hobart (2007), if media and cultural studies have a defining concept, it is articulation, which has the dual sense of "to speak" and "to connect." Depending on the circumstances, individual actors represent the world

in distinctive, and usually antagonistic, ways. Thus, imagery of the universe as systematic, orderly, and governed by reason, causes, or code, while consistent and stable, results from a closed (and compelling) articulatory approach. Whatever its adherents believe, articulations are never stable but are constantly moving, uncertain and susceptible to counter-articulation. If "the factual" is one of the most dominating articulations of the late twentieth-century world, it is only possible after it has been articulated through the media.

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