Research Article

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The Humanities of Contagion: How Literary and Visual Representations of the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic Complement, Complicate and Calibrate COVID-19 Narratives

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Abstract: My article examines how literary and visual representations of the "Spanish" Flu contagion foreshadow and generate critical discourses about pandemics. D.H. Lawrence's novella *The Fox* characterises paranoia about biological abnormality and loss of agency as a likely reaction to epidemic threats, Josep Pla's literary non-fiction *The Gray Notebook* explores how the act of forgetting functions as a coping mechanism during the experience of contagion, and John Singer Sargent's painting *The Interior of a Hospital Tent* problematises the contradiction between forgetfulness and pandemic preparedness. Because these works utilise subtle but effective metaphors to understand, remember, and ethicise the trauma of living through a global contagion, they reveal the unexpected ways that metaphors rethink or generate critical resources about pandemics such as COVID-19. My article thus argues that the ability of these works to complement, complicate, and ultimately calibrate hegemonic narratives about COVID-19 makes a persuasive case for the educational relevance of humanistic insights.

Keywords: Spanish Flu, 1918-19 Flu Pandemic, COVID-19, metaphors, humanities

Introduction

During a 2021 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) interview, journalist Andrew Marr posed the following question to Physicist Professor Brian Cox: "Do you think that the experience of the pandemic is going to drive more people…away from the humanities and towards science and STEM subjects?" (BBC Politics). The "either or" phrasing of this question is fallacious because it implies that the humanities have little or nothing to contribute to the pandemic discourse, an implication often echoed by the COVID-19 health messaging of policymakers and public health institutions (Shah). As Hetan Shah – chief executive of the British Academy – pointed out in 2021, "[g]overnments have sought expert advice from the beginning of the pandemic, but that expertise tended to come from people in science, technology, engineering and maths… despite it being clear from the start that human behaviour, motivations and culture were key to an effective response." The humanities should therefore play an integral role in shaping pandemic discourse because from Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron Book* (mid-fourteenth century) to Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), works of literature and visual culture have always represented and debated the nature and impact of plagues on everyday life. My article makes a case for this argument by examining how literary and visual representations

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of the 1918–1919 Flu Pandemic – popularly and erroneously known as the “Spanish” Flu for reasons I will address later – echo and problematise contemporary narratives about COVID-19.

The “Spanish” Flu is often dubbed the “The Forgotten Pandemic” because it was largely ignored by the public consciousness in the decades after its eradication (Vázquez-Espinosa et al. 298). While some scholars blame this so-called collective amnesia on the Pandemic coinciding with the First World War (WW1) and a general desire to suppress memories of sufferings (Vázquez-Espinosa et al. 298), others like acclaimed writer and philosopher Susan Sontag argue that epidemic diseases in our modern times such as the “Spanish” Flu “have become less useful as metaphors” (71), perhaps because they lack the spectacular mythologies of medieval era plagues. Sontag also decries the inclination to metaphorise illnesses, arguing that by associating the lived experiences of patients with metaphorical figurations about dread and despair, metaphors stigmatise and ultimately dehumanise sick persons (3–6). My article addresses these claims by purporting that in D.H. Lawrence’s novella *The Fox* (1923), Pla’s literary nonfiction *The Gray Notebook* (1966) and Sargent’s painting *The Interior of a Hospital Tent* (1918), subtle but effective metaphors are employed to investigate the complex ways in which people understood, remembered and ethicised the “Spanish” Flu. Lawrence’s novella *The Fox* (1923) characterises paranoia about biological abnormality and loss of agency as a likely reaction to epidemic threats, Pla’s literary non-fiction *The Gray Notebook* (1966) explores how the act of forgetting functions as a coping mechanism during the experience of contagion, and Sargent’s painting *The Interior of a Hospital Tent* (1918) problematises the contradiction between forgetfulness and pandemic preparedness. The ability of these findings to complement, complicate, and ultimately calibrate revelations about our current COVID-19 experiences makes a persuasive case for using humanistic insights to, first, foreshadow human reactions to pandemics and, second, understand how societies ethicise and cope with the impact of contagion.

The “Forgotten” Pandemic

Spain was neutral during WW1, 1914–1918, and unlike the warring nations who feared chatter about contagion would weaken morale, the Spanish press freely wrote about the Pandemic (Davis 6). Because Spain was the only prominent Western nation covering the spread of the Pandemic in real time, the contagion was erroneously labelled “Spanish” Flu (Davis 6). More than a century after the “Spanish” Flu contagion came to an end, the COVID-19 virus began its wide-reaching spread into almost every corner of the world, and despite being over a century apart, both pandemics have eerily striking similarities. First, there is the origins issue. It is widely believed that COVID-19 originated in the city of Wuhan in China (Kruse 3), and although many epidemiologists and virologists point to army bases in the United States of America (USA) or France as the likely origin locations of the “Spanish” Flu (Liang et al. 273), some medical researchers like Langford persuasively argue that the “Spanish” Flu may have also originated from China (473). Additionally, both the “Spanish” Flu and COVID-19 are infectious respiratory illnesses and share similar symptoms like fever, coughing, aches, and pneumonia (Ryan). Thus, although both illnesses are biologically different and targeted different age groups – unlike COVID-19, the “Spanish” Flu caused greater casualties among younger populations (Ryan) – they were similarly contracted and experienced.

Furthermore, like the COVID-19 outbreak, “the initial response to the 1918 outbreak was to play it down, and later efforts at disinfection and social distancing proved insufficient to stop the spread of a disease” (Mediavilla). There was also a profound sense of distrust for science during both pandemics (Mediavilla). In the case of COVID-19, the anger directed at scientists responsible for COVID-19 health messaging – like American epidemiologist Dr. Anthony Fauci – represents the polarising nature of scientific institutions and their recommendations on how to curb the spread of the virus (Al-Arshani). With the “Spanish” Flu, the inability of doctors in Spain, for example, to properly diagnose and treat the infection diminished science’s credibility and many turned to religion or other mystical forces for aid (Mediavilla). Both illnesses also disregarded the notion of hierarchies. Just like all the high-profile world leaders who tested positive for COVID-19 – Donald Trump of USA, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, etc. (Gadarian et al. 74) – the “Spanish” Flu infected dignitaries like King Alfonso XIII of Spain and his head of government, Manuel García Prieto (Mediavilla).

Despite these eerie similarities, very few policy-makers and institutions used the "Spanish" Flu as a reference point when devising and implementing strategies to curb the spread of COVID-19.[1] They rightfully emphasised the "hard facts" of science (Al-Arshani) but naively paid very little – if any – attention to the experiences and lessons of living through the "Spanish" Flu contagion. A reason for this oversight is perhaps the aforesaid characterisation of the "Spanish" Flu as the "forgotten" Pandemic. As previously stated, some scholars argue that people chose to suppress memories of the contagion in order to alleviate the amplified grief of concurrent crises (WW1 and the Flu) (Vázquez-Espinosa et al. 298). Memories of the WW1 – on the other hand – remain active in the public consciousness because as journalist Jonathan Freedland points out – paraphrasing novelist Graham Swift – wars "offer a compelling, linear story. There are causes and consequences, battles, surrenders and treaties, all taking place in a defined space and time" (Freedland). Conversely, pandemics are mysterious and indefinite, often lacking "the essential ingredients of a story: clear heroes and villains with intent and motive" (Freedland). The act of commemorating a war is ultimately a "moral exercise" that remembers loss but also celebrates the triumphant victor (Freedland). With pandemics, there is no material or even moral triumphant victor, so the "bereaved cannot console themselves that the dead made a sacrifice for some higher cause" (Freeland). This also arguably explains why communities around the world chose to commemorate the WW1 while suppressing memories of the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic.

In *Pandemic Re-Awakenings: The Forgotten and Unforgotten 'Spanish' Flu of 1918-1919*, a plethora of other credible reasons for the latter's suppression are presented. For example, historian Beiner discusses how early to mid-twentieth-century academics often dismissed the scholarly value of oral history (32). As a result of this dismissal, the stories and memories of the "Spanish" Flu survivors were never broadly documented, amplified, and preserved (Beiner 32). In the case of nations under colonial rule, the recurrence of epidemics like the bubonic plague in Senegal "overshadowed" the "Spanish" Flu (Beiner 43) and in Nigeria, educated locals interpreted "the mismanagement of the health crisis in 1918-19" as a failure of colonial leadership and thus subsumed memories of the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic into a larger anti-imperialism narrative about examples of "colonial affronts" (Beiner 43).

The humanities have also been accused of creatively overlooking the 1918–1919 Pandemic. Scholars describe literature about the "Spanish" Flu as "scarce" and in her essay "On Being Ill," English writer Virginia Woolf bemoaned the thematic absence of the contagion in literature (Vázquez-Espinosa et al. 298). In the realm of music, although a few songs and indirect musical references about the Pandemic were produced, "perhaps because the Spanish flu was suffered largely in private, there were no grand choral requiems or symphonic laments for the victims of the virus" (Wise). Artists were also arguably disinterested because depictions of WWI felt more meaningful and beguiling than "bedridden patients" battling the "Spanish" Flu (Goldstein 285). Some scholars thus purport that "only a few notable works of art in our museums to remind us of the suffering and devastation caused by the 1918 flu pandemic" (Goldstein 285).

In this article, I problematise the hegemonic view that writers and artists equally sidelined or overlooked the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic. Because the humanities largely relied on the richness of metaphors to understand the Pandemic, references to the virus in literature and art are subtle but not nonexistent or even scarce. For example, artists Edvard Munch and Egon Schiele depicted the harrowing experience of contamination in works like *Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu* (1919) and *The Family* (1918), respectively, and the "art movements that came out of this period" metaphorically explored themes of pandemic-related hopelessness and resilience (Kambhampaty). Moreover, an extensive study by three Spanish researchers – titled "The Spanish flu and fiction literature" – lists over 30 literary works by American and British authors with references to the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic (Vázquez-Espinosa et al. 299–300). And although these references are usually discreet or minimal – Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1936) being one of the few exceptions – they represent the reality of how people coped with the trauma of living through the 1918–1919 contagion.

1 "Nonpharmaceutical Interventions Implemented by US Cities During the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic" by Markel et al. is one of the few examples of pre-COVID-19 medical scholarship that uses strategies implemented during the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic to develop and/or strengthen discourses about pandemic preparedness.

My article thus argues that the compelling metaphorisation of the "Spanish" Flu experience – in works like Lawrence's *The Fox*, Pla's *The Gray Notebook* and Sargent's *The Interior of a Hospital* – illustrates the unique ways in which the humanities remember and ethicise pandemics. In other words, the most well-preserved memories about the "Spanish" Flu – everyday narratives about the complex nature and impact of the Influenza on everyday people – are arguably found in the creative metaphors of writers and artists like D.H Lawrence, Josep Pla, and John Singer Sargent. These creative metaphors – I argue further – complement and complicate ongoing experiences of living with and through COVID-19. By studying their significance, policy-makers and institutions can adequately anticipate and understand COVID-19's full and varied impact on societies across the globe. As Molly Worthen – professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill – points out, the humanities provide "people in the medical world a much broader context for understanding the broader culture and community and history that produces the health situation in front of them" (Greenfield).

Biological Abnormality and Loss of Agency

Although published in 1923, several pandemic-related metaphors in D.H. Lawrence's novella *The Fox* complement contemporary COVID-19 discourses and reveal interesting insights about the existential dread triggered and sustained by the spread of an invasive and infectious respiratory illness. English writer and novelist D.H. Lawrence is known for his morally complex stories tackling themes such as social alienation, mechanisation, nature, war, and sexuality. Set in Berkshire, England – during the final phase of WWI – *The Fox* is a narrative about two women – Jill Banford and Ellen March – who live on an isolated farm. Their goal is to "make a living by poultry…keeping a cow…raising one or two young beast," but the reader is immediately informed that "things did not turn out well" (Lawrence 7). March – described as more "robust" than Banford (Lawrence 7) – does most of the outdoor work, and despite her best efforts, the farm "did not flourish" (Lawrence 8). Due to War conditions, food is scarce for the animals, and an evasive fox – labelled "the demon" – has a habit of stealthily sneaking into the wooden barn and carrying "off the hens under the very noses of March and Banford" (Lawrence 9). The implication here is that both women – near thirty and unmarried – are out of their depth.

This focus on their gender is critically important. The narrator's continuous emphasis on March's traditionally masculine mannerisms (Lawrence 11) is juxtaposed with her failure to competently execute so-called manly tasks such as building proper fences and killing invasive animals. The more feminine Banford – who is mostly in charge of house chores – grows increasingly despondent about their predicament, and the narrator bluntly states: "They seemed to be losing ground" (Lawrence 9). March's inability to perform the masculine role introduces a gender binary discourse. Because of the biological reality of her sex – the story insinuates – she lacks the fundamental tools necessary to accomplish manly tasks on the farm. This argument is supported by the arrival of Henry, a young soldier seeking accommodation. To March's discomfort, he handles the affairs of the farm more competently and restores a sense of calm by killing the evasive fox (Lawrence 40). His successful attempt at restoring normalcy reinforces the rigidity of gender roles because – unlike March – he is biologically a "real" man and can thus perform the manly role of protector and provider with more ease. The union between March and Banford – with its lesbian subtext – is ultimately depicted as unnatural because without the male figure, it exists in a state of disarray.

Although the novella never explicitly unpacks why March and Banford attempt to defy the rigidity of gender roles on their isolated farm, there are few but credible clues that point to the Flu Pandemic and the ominous War as the reasons for this defiance. Besides a few references to Henry's life as a solider, not much is said about the Great War (WW1) in *The Fox*. Similarly, the Flu contagion is only mentioned approximately twice. "They've got all of this influenza," Banford says about the nearby town, reinforcing the looming threat of contamination (Lawrence 19). Despite these limited references, it is obvious that at the genesis of the novella, March and Banford are only able to challenge gender norms on their isolated farm – without external intrusion – because of the Flu. The infectious virus made individuals bed-ridden and isolated communities

from each other (Lawrence 19), which in turn gives March the liberty to explore different forms of her gender identity on a remote farm without criticism from the outside world. Moreover, the Great War indirectly encourages March's effort to adopt a traditionally masculine persona because with most men recruited to fight the belligerent forces, the masculine role in society is now vacant. By making the Flu – an infectious disease that impairs the body by damaging or even altering its cells – the backdrop of a story about a woman's negatively perceived efforts to become a man, *The Fox* can be read as a metaphor for contagion-related anxieties about biological abnormality.

People feared plagues or pandemics in the ancient world because not only were they harbingers of death, but they also disfigured the human body in grotesque and unrecognisable ways. For example, in the second century – during the Antonine plague – infected Roman emperor Marcus suffered "halitosis…burning in the eyes, gangrene, great thirst and internal bleeding, delusions and coughing" (Rodríguez Ceberio 3). March's biological transformation from female to male in *The Fox* – a transformation occurring during the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic – arguably metaphorises this tendency of contagion to radically alter the human body. Most importantly, her transformation provokes a profound sense of paranoia in the novella because it is depicted as abnormal or unnatural. This depiction echoes gender anxieties during the Edwardian era (1901–1910), a time period when English women were asserting greater agency by challenging restrictive gender roles (Dawson 37). As WWI began and intensified, women continued to ruffle "gender norms" by performing traditionally masculine roles in wartime organisations like Women's Land Army, Women's Royal Navy Service, and Women's Royal Air Force (Rowbotham). Henry's superior competence at performing manly tasks on the farm and his decision to marry March (Lawrence 70) – an act that firmly defines her as the subordinate wife – thus represent an attempt to quell these early twentieth-century gender anxieties by restoring the "natural" order of things.

The Fox's biological abnormality discourse complements ongoing debates about the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel COVID-19 virus – before the introduction of effective medical remedies – generated an immense feeling of paranoia because it affected different people in vastly different ways. While some infected patients only experienced mild symptoms, others needed ventilators (Bansal 698), and the virus' ability to rapidly mutate – producing new infectious strains with unique symptoms and health concerns – heightened concerns about the biologically bizarre nature of the virus and its terrifying effects. Because scientists were still struggling to identify and eradicate the virus – a struggle demonstrated by the "unreliability of screening tests…false positives, false negatives" and reinfections (Bansal 698) – the infection felt like an almost alien life force, a biological abnormality invading and transforming the nature and function of our natural bodies. This dread has a profound existential dimension because, during the initial contagion period of uncertainty, the invasive virus is largely mysterious and unfamiliar. As psychology scholar Bansal points out, the dread of an unfamiliar but lethal assailant aggravates fears "of one's vulnerability and mortality" (697) and echoes what English psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion describes as the "'nameless dread'" (quoted in Bansal 697).

The nameless dread concept – Bansal explicates – occurs during emotional interactions between a mother and her infant. When the infant is unable to process emotional experiences due to the "rudimentary nature" of their mental capacity, they seek clarity by projecting their unresolved thoughts onto the mother (Bansal 697). The mother then proceeds to do the psychological task of "dreaming the infant's unbearable experience" and making "it available to him in a form that he is able to utilize in dreaming his own experience" (Bansal 697). However, if the mother is emotionally unavailable, the infant internalises "his mother's inability to contain his projected feeling….as a form of thinking (more accurately, reversal of thinking) characterized by attacks on the very process by which meaning is attributed to experience" Bansal (697). In other words, this breakdown in communication fundamentally undercuts the infant's ability to make sense of their thoughts. Their experiences thus become a nameless dread, an overwhelming feeling of existential anxiety sustained by uncertainty about the true nature of their reality.

Placing the burden of an infant's psychological maturation solely on the mother is both questionable and archaic and reflects the gender biases embedded in hegemonic psychoanalytic epistemologies. However, if we replace "mother" with "parent," the concept continues to hold tremendous significance because it speaks to the disorientation that occurs when the expected modes of communication and rationalisation collapse and attempts to make sense of our experiences result in a nameless dread, an unfamiliar state of being that

reveals our anxieties about mortality. This collapse materialised during the genesis of the COVID-19 pandemic when "parent" figures – authorities of knowledge – such as governments, medical institutions like the World Health Organisation, scientists and politicians struggled "to develop meaningful logic of and language around the virus," resulting in an "epidemic sense of helplessness, despair and panic" amongst the masses (Bansal 697), which in turn led to "irrational actions – like consuming disinfectants, hoarding toilet paper and drinking cow urine" (Bansal 700).

A similar iteration of this mental collapse is evident in *The Fox*. When Henry first meets March and Banford, he is morally disturbed by March's manliness. He is taken aback, for example, by her postwar plans of becoming a land worker, a traditionally masculine profession. "[T]here won't be any demand for women land-workers," he declares, revealing his intentions of reinstating the *status quo* (Lawrence 17). Set against the backdrop of the "Spanish" Flu pandemic, March's effort to ruffle gender norms by performing manly tasks is a metaphorical manifestation of the nameless dread experience because it represents the collapse of Henry's expected modes of rationalisation and morality. Henry is threatened by the so-called abnormality of March's actions throughout the narrative – actions that confound or undermine traditional authorities of knowledge – and he irrationally responds to his perceived loss of agency by murdering Banford and marrying March (Lawrence 70). With Banford gone and March now clearly defined as a woman – his subordinate wife – Henry's agency as the unchallenged male authority figure is seemingly restored.

This feeling of loss of agency during a pandemic is echoed in ongoing discourses about vaccine hesitancy. Just as people fear the invasive and infectious nature of a novel virus, they also fear the uncertainty associated with novel medical remedies. Despite the emergence and widespread availability of COVID-19 vaccines, many communities around the world are resisting the proliferation of COVID-19 vaccination campaigns (Ashwell et al. 11). The reasons for this resistance are culturally vast and varied, so I will not unpack all of them. However, a recurrent reason in multiple studies and scenarios is the fear of vaccines interfering with the body's natural immune system and transforming its host into something unnatural (Ashwell et al. 11). While this fear is valid in many instances – particularly in communities that have historically been subjected to the malpractices of pharmaceutical companies – it is also motivated by the nameless dread experience. For example, due to uncertainty about the nature of COVID-19 and the unusually expeditious production of COVID-19 vaccines, a series of unfounded but far-reaching reports assert that the vaccines were intentionally engineered to cause "mass male infertility" and – as a result – undercut the biological hierarchy of masculine authority (Lee). This rapid spread of weaponised disinformation arguably sows discord by enhancing the nameless dread phenomenon – the global state of panic and helplessness catalysed by the mysterious spread of an infectious disease (Bansal 698–700) – resulting in irrational actions such as uncritically believing reports that COVID-19 vaccines cause male infertility. Henry's irrational reaction to pandemic-related gender anxieties in *The Fox* thus parallels irrational reactions to the proliferation of COVID-19 and its medical remedies.

The metaphorical foreshadowing of these ongoing COVID-19 discourses in *The Fox* – a novella published approximately 100 years before the emergence of the COVID-19 virus – makes a convincing case for the educational value of humanistic insights. The novella arguably provides tools to contextualise our current COVID-19 anxieties because it anticipates how societies respond to the existential dread of contagion by engaging in ideological debates about biological abnormality and the loss of agency. As previously stated, the humanities provide a broader cultural context for medical realities (Greenfield). Hence, if policy-makers and institutions – at the genesis of COVID-19 – also consulted literary memories of the "Spanish" Flu – a similarly experienced pandemic – perhaps they would have been equipped to respond to the nameless dread, which blanketed global responses to the pandemic.

The Ethics of Collective Amnesia

Catalan journalist Pla's *The Gray Notebook* is another critical piece of literature that foreshadows or complements ongoing debates about COVID-19. Published in 1966, the book is a literary journal about the everyday life of young Pla. The first journal entry begins on March 1918: The University of Barcelona – where Pla is studying law – is shut down due to the outbreak of the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic, and he is forced to return home to his

family in the coastal city of Palafrugell (Pla 3). His true passion is to become a writer and not a lawyer, so he decides to use this lockdown period to improve his writing skills.

The Gray Notebook is an epic poetic text filled with lush and visceral descriptions of family histories, regional customs, and geographic landscapes. There are detailed accounts, for example, of Esteve Casadevall i Pareres – the firstborn son of Pla's maternal grandfather – who "emigrated to Cuba and made a considerable fortune (for the time) from tobacco" (Pla 6). There are also vivid memories of a lunch table "blessed" with créme br û lée (Pla 3), the parish church of Palafrugell and its modest surroundings (Pla 5), "the acrid aroma of burnt cork," the "velvety smell of people's clothes" (Pla 10), and the pebbled streets of Palamós, a charming town with a "colonial air and a complex, warped sensuality" (Pla 45). In a book with over 500 pages – covering a period of almost 2 years – very little is said about the spread and impact of the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic. Pla vaguely mentions the Pandemic in only about four journal entries even though in 1918 alone, the Pandemic is estimated to have killed about 147,114 people in Spain (Mediavilla). Pla himself falls ill with the Flu when he returns to Barcelona, and on February 25, 1919, he writes: "My father, who has just arrived from Palafrugell, thinking he will find me on my sickbed, is shocked to see me reading when he walks into my bedroom. We talk at length" (Pla 368).

In *The Spanish Flu: Narrative and Cultural Identity in Spain, 1918*, scholar of Spanish history and literature Ryan A. Davis briefly discusses Pla's "nonchalance about the pandemic" (1). Although Davis identifies and evaluates several Spanish narratives about the spread and impact of the Flu, he acknowledges that there is a "general inability to remember" the contagion (1) and – like other aforementioned scholars – describes Pla's so-called nonchalance as perhaps "a narrative attempt to deflect the emotional and psychological brunt of the pandemic" (2). While Davis moves on from Pla and discusses larger cultural narratives such as Spain's so-called sanitary dictatorship – systemic efforts to project a modern image of Spain by intentionally and/or unintentionally suppressing memories associated with "the deplorable conditions of 'epidemic' Spain" (70) – my article uniquely argues that the intentional act of forgetting in *The Gray Notebook* is an attempt to suppress pandemic-related grief by profoundly yearning for the vitality of social life. Pla's mention of the Flu is a signal to the reader that he is aware of the Pandemic, and his decision to largely emphasise the vitality of everyday activities and family bonds is another signal to the reader that he is intentionally choosing to celebrate the vibrancy of social life, an existence unencumbered by the menacing virus. This act of intentionally forgetting conceptualises collective amnesia as a conscious effort – a deliberate choice – to combat the impact of contagion by upholding the social values of the community. Thus, in *The Gray Notebook*, collective amnesia – the intentional act of suppressing the grief and suffering caused by the experience of contagion – is a metaphor for how humans often cope with the existential dread of pandemics by extolling the virtues and vitality of social life.

With that said, the act of collective amnesia – a deliberate collective decision to forget – poses a series of significant ethical questions. Although the act of forgetting can function as an effective coping mechanism, it also has the potential to amplify pain by minimising the impact of death and bereavement. As Freedland remarks, second "only to the deaths themselves, perhaps the greatest pain of the coronavirus has inflicted has been its denial of the right to say goodbye." Because of the strict social distancing and quarantine measures enforced during the apex of COVID-19, many people never got a chance to bid farewell to their dying loved ones (Freedland). And because the dead have not been properly mourned, collective grief is paradoxically ignored and sustained by this institutional denial. *The New York Times* described this feeling as "grief purgatory," before pointing to a scientific study in the *Journal of Affective Studies*, which predicts severe COVID-19-related grief as the next "worldwide public health concern" (Medina).

Interior of a Hospital Tent – a 1918 painting by American artist John Singer Sargent – further complicates the pandemic practice of collective amnesia by problematising the concurrent nature of crises. Known for his lush oil paintings, dreamy watercolours, and elegant portraits of Edwardian society, Sargent was one of the few artists to overtly engage with the ethics of the "Spanish" Flu Pandemic. In 1918, Sargent – an American expatriate in Europe – was commissioned by the British War Memorials Committee to create sketches of American and British troops "in joint combat" (Goldstein 286). While sketching his artistic pieces in the North of France, he was infected by the "Spanish" Flu and spent a week convalescing in a hospital tent with "a mixture of some soldiers recovering from war wounds and others recovering from the flu" (Goldstein 286).

This scene creatively inspired *Interior of a Hospital Tent*, an artistic rendering of WW1 and the “Spanish” Flu, side by side. The painting – watercolour over pencil on paper and currently hanging in the Imperial War Museum, London (Goldstein 287) – is set in Northern France during the Great War, and it features bed-ridden soldiers in tent, wrapped in red and brown blankets, colour distinctions used to identify their infection status: red denotes contagious and brown denotes not contagious.

Sargent’s depiction of both global events in such close proximity – a metaphorisation of the interconnected nature of concurrent crises – undercuts the practice of collective amnesia by underscoring the looming threat of contagious patients infecting wounded soldiers and thus spreading awareness of the virus into memories of War. The implication here is because both crises are durably intertwined, embedded within commemorations of the WW1 is the pain of contagion, a grief purgatory that echoes a sense of unresolved collective sorrow. In other words, choosing to forget one of the world’s deadliest pandemics has consequential implications because its pain is etched into the fabric of everyday life. As linguistic anthropologist Perrino articulates in her article “Narrating Pandemics Across Time and Space,” COVID-19 unearthed the traumatic memories of a generation who still remember their parents’ stories about living through the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic.

Sargent’s metaphorisation of concurrent crises points to another consequence of forgetting: unpreparedness. Memory scholar Astrid Erll engages with the theme of pandemic unpreparedness by making a distinction between what German historian Reinhart Koselleck calls “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” (Erll 864). What a culture collectively remembers “constitutes the space of experience, which in turn shapes what can be imagined as possible futures, the ‘horizon of expectation’” (Erll 864). In other words, expectations about the future are shaped by memories and/or stories about collective experiences. Discussing the European context, Erll remarks that the “Spanish Flu was not a major item of the commemorative cycle or of school education,” so unlike “its mnemonic competitors, the world wars,” it was ignored by the collective consciousness (864). This explains why – she continues – Europeans were unprepared to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic: because the European space of experience had forgotten memories of the “Spanish” Flu, its horizon of expectation was unable to foresee the arrival of a global contagion at its doorsteps (Erll 864). Thus, the arrival of COVID-19 “quickly turned into an ‘imposition’, as chancellor Angela Merkel said in her governmental statement on 23 April 2020, not only ‘on democracy’, but also on many people’s everyday sense of time and rhythms of change” (Erll 864). The implication here is that when we choose to suppress pandemic grief, we inadvertently forget lessons learned during pandemic outbreaks. Thus, by suppressing memories of pandemics, we are also suppressing memories of how to deal with pandemics.

But is there a middle ground in this conversation about the ethics of collective amnesia? Can one acknowledge the reality of contagion while trying to live a life that is not oppressively burdened by the reality of contagion? The drawback of an overemphasis on pandemics is a profound sense of paranoia that motivates governments and individuals to make irrational decisions with devastating and long-term consequences. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision to keep schools closed “‘severely ruptured’ the social skills of the world’s poorest” pupils (Kirk), and – as global health scholar and economist Murray points out – it will also have a crushing impact on human capital because, in countries like India, many schools were shut for 2 years. Additionally – as previously stated – the strict social distancing regulation that prevented communities from saying goodbye to their dying friends and families is currently facilitating a global mental health crisis (Medina), and – according to a WHO report – China’s draconian lockdown measures led to over 40 million people experiencing severe episodes of depression and anxiety disorders (Fabbri).

In *The Gray Notebook*, Pla’s celebration of life during the “Spanish” Flu pandemic starkly contrasts the stringent and sometimes irrational COVID-19 era lockdowns. His (over) emphasis on the value of social interactions during the peak of contagion arguably metaphorises his era’s desire to suppress the trauma of living through a global pandemic by indulging in the exuberance of social life. When confronted with the threat of extinction during moments of severe health crises, Pla insinuates that the desire to live is often magnified, and we seek solace in our customs and traditions, social habits that define the human experience. The argument here is not that government-mandated restrictions to curb the spread and mortality rate of infectious diseases should not exist. Without restrictions, healthcare systems are overwhelmed, the most vulnerable members of society perish and the timeline for eradicating the illness or achieving herd immunity

is prolonged. However, because humanistic insights like Pla's *The Gray Notebook* reveal an amplified craving for social routines during periods of pandemics, resistance to these COVID-19 era restrictions should not be dismissed as entirely conspiratorial. While some elements of this resistance are certainly the by-product of politically weaponised disinformation, *The Gray Notebook* and findings by scholars like Murray complicate this narrative by demonstrating that people resist institutional encroachments into their personal lives for a variety of legitimate reasons.

In France, for example, during the apex of the reintroduced COVID-19 restrictions in 2021, "[a]round 100 leading figures in the French art scene…published an open letter calling on the culture minister…to lift Covid-19 restrictions on the country's galleries and museums, allowing them to reopen 'as widely and as soon as possible'" (McGivern). Museums – these figures argue – are an essential part of French culture and French life, and visitors "are at lower risk of contamination in museum spaces, which have developed 'rigorous health protocols' since France eased its first national lockdown on cultural venues in May 2020" (McGivern). People should thus be allowed to visit museums in a socially distanced and regimented manner because not only do museums play an educational role in the lives of French people, but they also promote mental well-being. They conclude their letter by saying "[w]e wish to be able to take care of visitors now. Art, like health, helps to heal the human soul" (McGivern). This description of the value of social routines to a people's well-being during the chronic isolation of lockdowns – a period that sparked widespread episodes of depression and loneliness – is reinforced by literary metaphors in texts like *The Gray Notebook* but was arguably ignored by the scientific messaging of policy-makers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the humanities can play a vital role in calibrating pandemic narratives by, first, foregrounding the healing abilities of culture and social routines and, second, emphasising the necessity to find a compromise between the necessity of lockdowns and the necessity of social life.

Conclusion

From Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1602) to Edvard Munch's *Self-Portrait After the Spanish Flu* (1919), works of literature and visual culture have a rich tradition of remembering and ethicising the experience of contagion, and in Sontag's seminal text *Illness as Metaphor*, she argues that artists have historically relied on the literary device of metaphors to characterise illnesses associated with plagues (39–40). This focus on metaphorical figurations – and not the solution-driven models of applied research – perhaps explains why governments and public health institutions did not typically prioritise humanistic insights when producing and curating initiatives to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shah). Sontag goes on to problematise this enduring metaphorisation of illnesses in the humanities, pointing out that metaphorical mythologies and mysteries tend to simplify and even dehumanise the layered lived experiences of patients. "My point is that illness is *not* a metaphor," Sontag decries. "[A]nd that the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (13). While Sontag's argument is both intellectually and experientially valid, my article makes a persuasive case for the humanistic value of metaphorising illnesses. Using the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic as my case study, I argue that because metaphorical depictions of the "Spanish" Flu in Lawrence's novella *The Fox*, Pla's literary nonfiction *The Gray Notebook* and Sargent's painting *The Interior of a Hospital Tent* complement, complicate and calibrate ongoing discourses about COVID-19, the trope of plague as metaphor endures because it is uniquely capable of foreshadowing, remembering and culturalising the experience of contagion. The ability of these metaphorical depictions to, first, anticipate how societies respond to pandemics by engaging in ideological debates about biology and agency (*The Fox*), second, explore the significance of forgetfulness and social life during the experience of contagion (*The Gray Notebook*) and, lastly, problematise the act of forgetting or suppressing pandemic-related grief (*The Interior of a Hospital Tent*) demonstrates that like science, the humanities should play a central role in shaping pandemic discourses.

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