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A *Visiodemic*:
COVID-19, Contagion Media, and the British Press

1. Introduction

"No one is immune against images" (Franzen 2020) – their power stems from their immediacy, their lingering claim for truth, authenticity, and objectivity, from their role as a witness; but also from their ability to capture attention, to convey large amounts of information in a short time, and from their high emotional appeal (Cassinger and Thelander 2015; cf. Flynn 2019). This is also what makes them dangerous: even in our post-truth society (see e.g. McIntyre 2018), images continue to be taken at face value by a majority of the population. Still, images perform complex argumentative and rhetorical work. Since they can spread fast, especially in times of Web 4.0 and convergence culture (cf. Jenkins 2006), their rhetorical force should be taken into consideration, especially in the context of the recent pandemic. The corona pandemic is the most (medially) visible of all the pandemics so far. Indeed, in mid-February 2020, the character of reporting on the unfolding crisis changed: sparse, mainly verbal reports that speckled the 'pages' of the British press transformed into a visual deluge – a *visiodemic* – almost overnight. Highly affective imageries began to dominate online (and offline) spaces.

As the pandemic has made perfectly clear, images gain in force when they visualize invisible entities. The invisible – e.g. a virus – is strikingly powerful. It nourishes our imagination through the compelling network of frameworks that it activates: frameworks of reference (be they discursive, visual or narrative) that are historical as well as culture- and medium-specific. Through this activation of multiple frames of reference (how viruses spread, who is [made] responsible for the outbreak and the transmission, what illnesses look like, etc.), the invisible spurs an overproduction of images that promise to fill out the central void. The power and the peril of images, then, stems from their alleged transparency, their 'clandestine' argumentative and rhetorical work, and the affect economy that they participate in. Considering this, it is rather surprising that the visual production that has come in the wake of the pandemic has received so little attention.

Although governments, press agencies and NGOs recognized the importance of crisis communication early on in the pandemic and published a number of guidelines, the visual aspects of this communication appear to be of less interest (cf. PAHO 2020; WHO Regional Office for Europe 2020). What is more, the COVID-19 iconography (its media representation) seems to be a bone of contention for scholars, various stakeholders, and the general public alike. [1] For instance, an alleged secret

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1   While I am fully aware of the historical and disciplinary contiguities of such terms as 'visualization,' 'iconography,' 'visual storytelling,' and 'representation,' I have chosen to use them interchangeably. What I mean in all of these cases are particular *communicative*

governmental document leaked to the German media advised the use of drastic images as a way of shocking the population into compliance during the first lockdown (cf. Buss and Müller 2020). Patients, doctors and humanities scholars issued similar appeals. In "Where are the photos of people dying of Covid?" art historian Sarah Elizabeth Lewis demanded in May 2020 that we be shown the images of the dying: images of what happens behind closed doors; images that would counteract the ubiquitous sanitization of death, that would make us see "the human cost" of the pandemic; images that would humanize the 'cold' graphs and statistics that have saturated the media coverage; images, finally, that would help us "comprehend the gravitas" of the pandemic:

> For society to respond in ways commensurate with the importance of this pandemic, we have to see it. For us to be transformed by it, it has to penetrate our hearts as well as our minds. Images force us to contend with the unspeakable. They help humanize clinical statistics, to make them comprehensible. (Lewis 2020)

Irrespective of the rhetorical force of such images, I argue that, at the core of the infodemic (cf. WHO 2021b) lies what I would term a *visiodemic* – an overproduction of visual information that spreads rapidly and therefore is difficult to assess critically. The visiodemic has had far-reaching impact on the public imagination: it has helped create particular 'realities' of the pandemic and provided a series of orientation points, along with maintaining, supporting, and disseminating a number of arguments as to the spread of the virus. Unsurprisingly, it has carried with itself the burden of binarisms and dichotomies, ostracizing chosen groups, and providing instant categorizations, thus participating in an on-going medial and political blame allocation.

Against this background, I would like to ask what visual stories we have been exposed to during the pandemic, what arguments they have carried with themselves and *how* they did so. More specifically: who has been shown to be responsible for the spread of the pandemic and what 'human cost' has it brought in its wake? Drawing on Cultural and Media Studies as well as extant work on the iconographies of illness, epidemics and their cultural and media signification (cf. Buss and Müller 2020; Gilman 1988; Ostherr 2020a; Squiers 2005; Wald 2008), I will explore these questions with reference to, mainly, the 'static' images that accompanied the reporting on the Corona pandemic in the UK online press (*The Sun*, *Metro*, *DailyMail* and *The Guardian*) from late January 2020 to late January 2021.[2] I argue that, while the visual reporting on the

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practices used to divulge information about the pandemic. They include, but are not restricted to, multimodal (online) reporting, graphic visualization of health information, pathographics, filmic depictions, etc. While, due to space constraints, I have to confine myself to various (online) newspaper venues, I see them as part of larger multi-media strategies characteristic of a particular (digital) media landscape, underlined by specific affordances, representative/constitutive of a particular structure of feeling as well as rhetorically, performatively, and culturally significant.

2 Although I use such terms as 'representation,' 'iconography,' and 'visualization,' what I mean here are, strictly speaking, multimodal strategies characteristic of contemporary culture in general and press reporting in particular. In other words, whenever I speak about these, I also take into consideration the layout, headings, etc. of the articles, i.e. the paratextual elements that have an effect on how we read the newspapers in question.

pandemic has made it abundantly clear that the spread of the virus has, from the start, been out of control, it has also identified and systematically put blame on particular groups, thus shifting attention away from global structural inequalities that have been central to the pandemic. Before uncovering some of the strategies characteristic of such crisis reporting, it is important to draw attention to the iconography of the pandemic first.

2. Imagining COVID-19: A *Visiodemic*

Historically, pandemics have always been a multimodal business: from broadsides and bills of mortality in the sixteenth century (Heitman 2018) to memes in the twenty-first (cf. Dynel 2021; Glăveanu and de Saint Laurent 2021; Pauliks 2020). Such, "contagion media" has played a major role in heightening populations' awareness of diseases and epidemics along with focusing on the ways of avoiding contagion (Ostherr 2020a, 707). Contagion media has thus conflated scientific facts with moralistic views whilst following myriad ideologies and providing various types of social commentary (Ostherr 2020a, 708; see also Fleck 1935; Latour, Woolgar, and Salk 1986; Daston and Galison 2010; Pietrzak-Franger 2017). The repertoire of visualizations that they have used has been fairly consistent: from disease vectors and maps of contagion to microscopic images (from the mid-nineteenth century onwards), to health workers and ill patients. The recent pandemic has also covered images of empty urban sites (re-conquered by wildlife), martial (post-apocalyptic) scenes (of war and terror) and acts of solidarity.[3]

Although the process of visualization itself, especially the visualization of the invisible (in parallel to the narrativization of a disease), has been associated with gaining control and, thus, agency (see e.g. Gilman 1988), the visual storytelling that has accompanied the corona pandemic has repeatedly asserted that the pandemic is *out of control*; it will not be stopped. Instead, as the virus spread across the globe, it also invaded digital spaces and our imagination. The tantalizing icon of COVID-19, its "beauty shot" showing a greyish sphere with red clove-shaped pegs (Moreno Lozano 2020) – whilst it gave form to the virus itself – went viral and mutated almost overnight, producing ever growing virtual hotspots: alluring galaxies, alien objects of fascination. With their inherent causalities, tentative geographies of blame, and alleged solutions,[4] the global maps of the pandemic, which initially "encouraged a false sense of security" (Ostherr 2020a, 714), soon turned into pulsating maps of crawling, unstoppable cataclysm, well known from disaster films. Empty urban spaces, which stood both for

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3   For an overview of the various tendencies of visualization, see: Engelmann (2020) on the multi-media response to the pandemic; Ostherr (2005 and 2020a) on the visualization of epidemics in the English-speaking world in general, and, Moreno Lozano (2020), Pietrzak-Franger and Griesser (2020) and Sonnevand (2000), on seeing/showing COVID-19 in particular; Lynteris (2016 and 2018) on epidemic photography and masks; Buss and Müller (2020) on the general tendencies in the German media; Boodman and Walker (2020) on the strategies of representing the COVID-19 wards.

4   On the importance of maps and practices of mapping in public disease management, see Gilbert (2004); Pietrzak-Franger (2018), Wald (2008).

the scale with which the pandemic had invaded our everyday lives but also for the measures undertaken against it, soon turned into martial battlegrounds and morgues.

No *cordon sanitaires* we have erected, no borders we have closed, no walls we have built, no technologies we have used, no confinements we have ordered, have been efficient. No defences held. The virus has found its way out and forwards. And the visual storytelling that has accompanied the pandemic makes this perfectly clear. The images of frontline workers around the globe – exhausted, in makeshift DIY gear made of ski goggles and rubbish bags (cf. Buss and Müller 2020; Livingston, Desai, and Berkwits 2020; Ostherr 2020a) – have also been a testimony to the unpreparedness of the extant health provision structures for a pandemic of this scale. While they can be read as signs of the "desperate ingenuity of healthcare providers," such images of frontline workers have lost the "talismanic properties of security and defense" (Ostherr 2020a, 715; see also Lynteris 2018). Technoscientific security, usually embodied by the hazmat suit, has failed (Ostherr 2020a, 715). The result of this multi-scalar failure has been counted in bodies: anonymous bodies turned into numbers.

What is more, the visiodemic has not only emphasized that the virus is out of control, it has, according to Ostherr, also buttressed "racist and xenophobic discourses" (2020a, 707). Following Wald (2008), Ostherr has argued that the contagion media has produced a certain logic of causality in which the personified virus is cast as hostile actor with agency and evil intentions. Thus anthropomorphized, it becomes easily identifiable with its human carriers. Such identifications are based on age-old disease geographies that stylize the global South as the cradle of disease. The virus, its birthplace, and ultimately, the region's inhabitants are conflated in a construct that sees both the virus and its racially distinct carriers as contagious agents with malicious aims (Ostherr 2020a, 710).

After humans were identified as the hosts of the virus, which happened fairly early (cf. Ostherr 2020a, 712), the human body – infected or not – became the centre stage both in the geopolitical and social management of the pandemic and in its visualization. It has become the "major persuasive device" in the politics, economy, and media responses to the spread of the virus (c.f. u bruce texx 2020). And whilst the popular press in the UK has reported on both the increased acts of (micro)racism in the wake of the pandemic as well as on the structural health inequalities in the NHS in particular and the UK in general, what is undeniable is the *visual racialization* of the pandemic (see also Sirleaf 2020a and 2020b). Although the answer appears obvious, let me ask: what is the face of the virus?

3. Hypervisibility: The Face of the Virus

Studies have shown a decrease in the overall consumption of information on COVID-19 throughout the pandemic. At the same time, concerns have been raised as to the increase of infodemically vulnerable groups (Nielsen et al. 2020; Scherer 2020). Furthermore, even though the popularity of particular (online) newspapers has changed during the pandemic, it has been estimated that both broadsheets such as *The Guardian* as well as "mid-market tabloids" such as *The Daily Mail* constitute sources of

information for about seven percent of the population, scoring evenly with WHO and "official scientists" (OfCom 2021).[5] While most newspaper venues have largely remained committed to their particular political positions and aesthetics, overall, it is possible to identify three general strategies characteristic of early Corona reporting: a fusion of the virus with Asian facial features, a xenophobic representation of Chinese culture, and an emphasis on the dangerously transformative properties of the virus.

Firstly, the invisible virus has been, from the start, fused with facial features conceived of as Asian. In mid-January, *The Sun* 'illustrated' a series of articles with snapshots of innocent-looking, symptom-free, though potentially ill, travellers from – presumably – China arriving in Britain. Irrespective of whether they are UK citizens or tourists; the image, accompanying an article entitled "BRITAIN ON EDGE" (Kindred 2020a), has clear implications: possibly infected travellers are bringing the virus to the UK. The procession of passengers, the dramatic dynamism of the airport sign and the perspectival suggestion of its endlessness stress the potential danger. In fact, the whole sequence of images accompanying the article highlights a particular causality: if read in a linear manner, it suggests a link between alarming martial scenes, China's politics, and global mobility. It begins with and culminates in a zooming in on a young Asian-looking passenger. Seemingly depicting an ordinary day at the airport, such snapshots are unquestionably steeped in the visual rhetorics of centuries-old imaginaries of contagious otherness. The initial photograph inserted after the first few lines of the article captures a man passing a Heathrow information pole depicting the (then known) symptoms of COVID-19. The caption reads, "Coronavirus UK - A man wearing a face mask arrives at Heathrow Airport in London on Friday." It makes two issues salient: the mask – a potential sign of infection (because why else wear a mask?) and the concrete temporality (Friday) – as though suggesting that the moment of this 'invasion' has been captured with precision. The red lettering, the icons of the symptoms and the read/black jacket of the passenger conflate the virus and the person. Walking from right to left, as he passes the information pole, he becomes an icon of the viral agent that – born/unleashed in the global East – now invades the global West. In this, the image visually takes up and perpetuates the 'outbreak narratives' that have been part and parcel of scientific and popular communication strategies in times of epidemics (cf. Wald 2008).

A serialization of this motif has strengthened the fusion of the virus with symptom-free, presumably, Asian faces. The availability of this particular snapshot, or its variation (e.g. EPA, PA, Reuters, Getty Images), led to its overuse in initial reporting. It is interesting that, out of all the available variants, which include white people as well as those of ethnic minorities, the Asian face has been the overwhelming choice across venues as divergent as *Financial Times* or *The Sun* (cf. Shen-Berro and Yam, 2020 for NBC News). In an article announcing a search for dispersed Wuhan passengers, *The Guardian* opted for a photograph showing two women (black and white) worriedly or

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5   During week eleven of the pandemic, according to the same survey, local authorities offered a source of information for eight percent of the population, while Instagram lead with nine percent. The numbers changed only minimally during week 55, with tabloids scoring eight and official scientists nine percent (OfCom 2021).

vigilantly scanning the surroundings (Parveen et al. 2020). Overall, considering the frequency of its reproduction, it would appear that it is an (Asian) woman's face, rather than a man's, that has been used in the popular media to stand for the pandemic.[6]

Strikingly, the WHO website on Coronavirus features an anonymous Asian-looking woman facing the camera, cell phone in her hand, standing in a crowd of unidentifiable people walking in the opposite direction (WHO 2021a). Is there a reason why the WHO, devoted as it is to, amongst others, appropriate health communication, has chosen to insert such an image next to the "Coronavirus" heading? Such choices activate historical iconographies of infectious diseases, and employ particular strategies of blame allocation. What gains particular resonance here is the identification of women as transmitters of the disease, also characteristic of, for instance, syphilis iconography in nineteenth-century European culture, mid-twentieth century war propaganda, or twenty-first century edutainment formats such as *Grey's Anatomy* (cf. Pietrzak-Franger 2017, 23). This apparent *feminization* and racialization of COVID-19 reactivates long-lasting culpability scripts and concomitant strategies of disempowerment.

Secondly, and irrespective of the gendering of these ethnically marked faces, the hypervisibility of this portrayal in the initial newspaper coverage went hand in hand with highly xenophobic visualizations of Chinese culture. The imagery that accompanied the UK press reports on the outbreak of the virus has maintained a vision of the country as home to 'barbaric' customs. In *MailOnline*, for instance, two representations were dominant: the blurred footage of a bat-eating travel reporter and multiple images of wildlife markets that – through their rhythms, their choice of colour, their tight framing – are suggestive of squalor and inhumane working and living conditions. Visually striking, such imagery signals the existence of a China that is far removed from the technological and economic giant it is reported to be. Fahey and Wood's article (2020) is exemplary in this respect. The first image shows two work(wo)men – their faces cropped as they flank a pile of pinkish-grey cadavers – in red gear, squatting on a dirty floor, "working their way through a pile of skinned birds" (Fahey and Wood 2020). This same article features a man "holding up a rat destined to be served as someone's dinner," caged beavers, deer, snakes and porcupines, and two photographs of confiscated animal cadavers. The article finishes with repeated screenshots of a YouTube clip in which a young female influencer eats a bat (Fahey and Wood 2020). Indeed, interpreted in the sequence in which they appear, those photographs cleverly link the unsightly (unhygienic) vending sites (first) to the fashions popular among the young generations (the series of images and a video of a bat-eating woman concluding the series), thus allegedly revealing the grim reality of an unchanging China that remains committed to such practices.

In this context, *MailOnline* has perfected the strategy of telling one thing and showing another. The convoluted heading "Chinese travel presenter who ripped apart a BAT with her hands before eating the 'nutritious' dish in her show begs the public for forgiveness after being blasted amid coronavirus outbreak" pairs this apology with

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6   Some images have been purposely cropped to depict this moving female figure only, see Getty Images 2021.

three (looped) videos of her eating a bat, a variety of stills from these videos, the iconic hand-shot footage of Chinese people in lockdown, shouting out of skyscraper windows, and with other images of the new pandemic realities (You 2020b). In effect, it thus perpetuates a xenophobic iconography even in articles reporting on corrective behaviours. The tensions that arise from such discrepancies between telling and showing have appeared across a number of venues. Even *The Guardian*, generally committed to less visually sensationalist accounts, published a photo of a butcher at a wet market in Kuala Lumpur with overexposed animal carcasses as an illustration to an article entitled: "Halt destruction of nature or suffer even worse pandemics, say world's top scientists" (Carrington 2020). Such imagery establishes a straightforward causal relation and allocates blame not only with respect to the present but also to future pandemics. Considering the processing time of visual information and attention economies today, it is likely that the discrepancies between the visual and the verbal will be ignored in favour of the visual. As a result, the lingering, blatant message that remains from this reading may be that Asian eating practices will cause future cataclysms.

The tendency to juxtapose the West and the East has been especially clear in news reports about wet markets; it is taken to the extreme by the *Daily Mail*. Rebecca Davidson's article (2020) pairs two photographs of UK comedian and avid animal-rights advocate Ricky Gervais – well-known for his crude humour and an anti-PC attitude – playing with his pets with images of wet markets and dog carcasses (and a video of a bat-eating woman). The stark difference between a man lovingly attending to his dogs and a heap of canine carcasses mounting on a filthy market provide a stunning (and telling) contrast between the 'West' and the 'East': attentive and affectionate vs. barbaric and brutal. Thus framed, Chinese culture stands out as the epitome of inhumanity (cf. Pietrzak-Franger, Lange, and Söregi, forthcoming).

Thirdly, from the start, images accompanying popular press reports have also signalled the cruel transformation that the virus wreaks on human bodies: both the bodies of people infected by the virus and those that may come in contact with it. The early images of Wuhan doctors and cleaning crews in hazmat suits (e.g. Boyd, Chalmers and Thomson 2020) show them sealed and taped so much that they no longer appear human. The patients as well are turned into hybrids of lifeless flesh and buzzing machines. Cocooned in plastic, and/or loaded onto vehicles, they appear to be fantastic creatures (cf. Matthews and Blanchard 2020; You 2020a; 2020c). Captured on thermal cameras, airport screens and in drone transmissions, they become mutants and aliens: technologized amalgams of flesh and plastic.

The co-presence of these three tendencies in the early stages of the pandemic – iconic, albeit de-individualized, masked Asian (female) faces, barbaric cultural practices, and bodies transformed into grotesque mutants – have conflated the virus with an alien-like foreignness that insidiously invades the Western world. Of course, as the pandemic has progressed, the faces of the virus have changed from the mask-like, symptom-free, potentially dangerous faces of the virus carriers to faces – and bodies – of COVID-19 patients. The latter, though, have also been shrouded by centuries-old strategies of veiling and whitewashing.

4. Invisibility: The Colour of the 'Human Cost'

Veiling and whitewashing have been two strategies criticized in the aforementioned calls for unabashed depictions of patients dying of COVID-19. Official media channels, especially in the USA, have – according to the critics – been sanitizing the tall of the pandemic. The USA, Ostherr has argued, is "suffering from an epidemic of absent signification," with images of the dead almost absent, and 'uncomfortable' footage either confiscated or censored (2020a, 716). The footage provided by photojournalists granted direct access to COVID-19 wards carries an imprint of hospitals' legal and PR staff approval (Boodman and Walker 2020). Such iconography helps to cover-up various infrastructural failures by shifting attention away from these and towards heroic frontline workers instead (Ostherr 2020a, 716). If we were given access to the images of COVID-19 patients and dead, she argues, we would see black and brown bodies (2020a, 717). Both for Ostherr (2020a) and Lewis (2020), such manoeuvres make it difficult for the public to comprehend the (scale of the) pandemic: to realize its gravity – its 'human cost' – and to recognize the systemic structures – be they local, national or global – that provide the actual contexts for the pandemic (also see Wald 2008).

Has the situation been similar in Great Britain? Have its COVID-19 dead been erased from the popular imagination? What colour are these bodies, considering the multi-cultural make-up of British society today and its long and convoluted imperial history, along with its tumultuous international relationships? According to the Office of National Statistics, both the risk of contracting and dying of Coronavirus (or related causes) is "significantly higher" among ethnic groups other than White (Office for National Statistics 2020). More specifically, depending on the types of analysis, members of the Black community are judged 1.9 times as likely to die of COVID-19, while those of the Asian population approximate 1.8 times.[7] In their assessment of the reasons for this higher morbidity, and for the necessity of more intensive care and ventilation, Razai et al. cite not only various social determinants (socioeconomic status, geographies of deprivation, higher-risk jobs, comorbidities, etc.), but also entrenched cultural and structural racism along with discrimination – all of which apply both to the recent pandemic in particular and to the UK health provision system in general (2021, box 1; for further information, see Byrne et al. 2020; Marmot et al. 2020; McManus et al. 2021; Rao and Adebowale 2020). On a number of levels, the UK health-care system, like health-care systems and medicine worldwide, is colour-blind, rather than colour-conscious (cf. Adebowale and Rao 2020; Mukwende, Tamony and Turner 2020; Salway et al. 2020).

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7   The report states somewhat convolutely: "When taking into account age in the analysis, Black males are 4.2 times more likely to die from a COVID-19-related death and Black females are 4.3 times more likely than White ethnicity males and females," and "[a]fter taking account of age and other socio-demographic characteristics and measures of self-reported health and disability at the 2011 Census, the risk of a COVID-19-related death for males and females of Black ethnicity reduced to 1.9 times more likely than those of White ethnicity" (Office for National Statistics 2020).

Considering all this while also keeping in mind the strategies of representing the ill, and the ethics of such representation, it is not surprising that certain tendencies typically used in the US media, such as anonymization through fragmentation and blurring (cf. Ostherr 2020a, 716-717), are also characteristic of Britain. As in the case of potentially ill travellers, a variety of agencies, from Reuters to EPA and Getty Images provide a series of photographs of 'stock' images of COVID-19 patients. A quick search for "COVID-19 patient" (region United Kingdom) in the Reuters Pictures database has produced over 400 results of predominantly white staff and patients (Reuters Pictures 2021). Likewise, a Getty Images search for "patient COVID UK" yielded 78 pages of similar depictions (Getty Images 2021). While the sample is too small to substantiate a general availability of images for UK online news venues, it is clear that the press and photo agencies have an impact on what is seen and that, with their usual contracts with particular news venues and their provision of 'packages,' they often have a monopoly on what will be shown and how this will be done (Runge 2020).

This said, there are certain patterns and strategies of representation characteristic of the British newspapers, some of which I would like to point out here. There seems to be a readiness, throughout the pandemic, to show its human toll as long as it depicts scenes from elsewhere: Italian and Spanish patients lying on their backs or in oxygen bubbles, scattered, unattended, on ward corridors (Allen 2020; J. Roberts 2020b); military convoys and morgue trucks transporting and stocking dead bodies in Italy and New York (Corbishley 2020; J. Roberts 2020a); cardboard boxes and coffins with COVID-19 chalked on them (in Maryland and Germany) (Burke 2021; McCloskey 2020); plastic bags piling up in storage rooms, on refrigeration trucks, and in hospitals in New York, Italy and Iran, burial grounds in the USA (Brown 2020; Geanous 2020; Lockett 2020a).

Apart from the anonymization, then, UK contagion media participates in the visual *synechdochization* of COVID-19 patients and *metonymization* of the dead bodies. When alive, they are fragmented with their chosen body parts having to sustain the burden of identification and particularization. The bodies of the dead, on the other hand, signify through the metonymic spaces that wrap them up and cocoon them, even within the space of the articles. As though a highly contagious (digital) matter, they need plastic bags, cardboard boxes and coffins, morgues, refrigeration vehicles, and cemeteries to contain them and screen them from our view.

As we move closer to home, the reports focus more on individual fates. In April 2020, a series of personal accounts appear: Tamoor Tariq's tale of the onset of the symptoms and a warning for a broader public; death of Tim Galley, a 'healthy' banker (Vonov 2020); dad, Thomas Davies, 27 from Bangor, Wales (Duggan 2020), or Dean McKee, 28, from West London, who died within hours of being delivered to the hospital (A. Roberts 2020). What accompanies these accounts, stitched from interviews with family members and friends, are photographs from family albums, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook pages: important family events, smiling couples, vacation snapshots, selfies of the dead and of the family members who reminisce about them. The accompanying articles emphasize the loss. In Anna Roberts' report for *The Sun* (2020), "a heartbroken sister" retells a story of her "baby brother," who worked in a caring home in Shepherd's Bush: his stepping in to help in the crisis, his ever-longer

MONIKA PIETRZAK-FRANGER

working hours, his exhaustion, loss of appetite. What is emphasized here is his readiness to help, his sensibility (writes poetry) and his love of football. Interwoven with the story are accusations levelled at the government for the unclear communication (according to the narrator, "he took to bed but, as per government advice, didn't go to hospital;" A. Roberts 2020). Dean McKee is depicted as a non-complaining optimist who cared more for the wellbeing of his mother than his own and who, against all visible signs, was succumbing to "the virus [that] was [clearly] killing him inside" (A. Roberts 2020).

Highly emotionally charged, such reports and such images both domesticate and certainly particularize the pandemic: they show the variety of people who have died of (the effects of) the virus. Yet they do so, mainly, by reprinting family/social media photographs of smiling people. And although these photographs do signal the tremendous loss to the family, although they 'slot together' a kaleidoscopic mosaic of the portraits of the dead, thus suggesting the 'democratizing' character of the virus (the possibility of its killing every one of us), these individualized, singled-out cases both fashion the deceased into exceptional cases as well as entailing judgment about the value of life: Whose fate will be shown as especially tragic? Whose lives may be forgotten/are dispensable? Such accounts, written in an elegiac mode, praise the virtue and meaning of the deceased's life and death. Yet, by doing this, they conceal the fact that this is not just one tragic loss, but one amongst many, and that COVID-19 deaths are inherently meaningless and often random, even if certainly determined by long-standing structures of inequality. Very broadly, the effect of such representations is twofold. On the one hand, they allow us to draw boundaries around the fate of the sufferer and our own: boundaries that reassure our safety and our sense of self (cf. Gilman 1988, 2). On the other hand, such stories arouse pity for an individual fate, and, having provided a cathartic release, are emotionally rewarding rather than becoming an incentive to self-reflection and confrontation with the actual causes of the pandemic. Such accounts can then be safely bottled and stored away while the reader 'returns to normal.'

The tenor in reporting about the 'heroic' deaths of 'BAME staff' is similar, although it is undeniable that the spaces devoted to their stories are much smaller. Most of the time, unlike the individual accounts I mentioned earlier, the reporting on individuals of ethnic minorities happens *en groupe*: with reference to the state-imposed one minute of silence for 'NHS heroes,' reports that ethnic minority staff may be ordered away from the frontlines, early accounts of disastrous infrastructural failings leading to unnecessary deaths of health care workers (Burrows 2020; Kindred 2020b; A. Roberts 2020; Winter 2020). In this context, the lives of individuals from ethnic minorities are, on average, clipped to a sentence, a caption, and a photograph: "Dr Alfa Saadu, who worked the NHS for nearly 40 years in different hospitals across London, died on Tuesday after fighting the disease for two weeks" (Kindred 2000b), "Rahima Bibi Sidhanee, a care home nurse, died from coronavirus as she vowed to look after her elderly residents to the point she fell ill […]. She was bubbly and much loved at the home" (Burrows 2020). In *The Guardian*, the ever-growing gallery of lives lost in the pandemic includes more individually-focussed accounts irrespective of the gender or

ethnicity of the deceased. The tenor here, too, though, is elegiac while the gallery – at least at first sight – offers distancing through the replacement of photographs by drawn portraits.

Next to the particularization of the COVID-19 dead, there is also a singularization of the hospitalized patients. Whilst the overall tendency is to fragmentize and anonymize the hospitalized bodies, another strand highlights their individuality, with pictures of them looking directly into the camera, or relating their hospitalization history. Still, there are differences in this representation that depend on the publication venue. In *The Guardian*, the few photo-essays single out patients and caregivers while at the same time shifting emphasis to courageous NHS workers (Weeks 2020a; 2020b). One of them finishes with an image of a medic shot against a background of children's thank-you drawings: colourful rainbows rather than exhausted nurses falling asleep in front of a computer (Weeks 2020a). Both *The Sun* and *The Guardian* use fragmented patients' bodies to draw up a gallery of long-COVID-19 symptoms. Importantly, despite the many articles on the effects of the pandemic on ethnic minorities in Britain, and some of the stories and faces of coloured UK citizens, *The Sun* shows predominantly white patients in its accounts of hospitalization and long-COVID.

Hence, while the UK newspapers acknowledge the toll of the pandemic on ethnic minorities to a higher degree than the US media, their visualization strategies still emphasize the effects of the virus on the white body. Here, again, the discrepancy between telling and showing is conspicuous: its effect is the disproportionate visibility of white flesh. Were we to read these developments in a linear sequence (from January 2020 to January 2021), we would discover a straightforward narrative of blame: from inhumane China's invasion to the victimized bodies of white UK citizens. While simplified, this interpretation does draw attention to the representational imbalance that, despite its somewhat alleviating multimodal contextualization, feeds the often unaware readers with particular visual realities that only become conspicuous after a comparative study. This year-long visual narrative clearly identifies the culprits and the victims, once again subscribing to extant outbreak narratives and cultural invisibilities.

Conspicuously, in contrast to other venues, *The Sun* has published a series of articles on the effects of COVID-19 on (almost exclusively white) children (Chalmers 2021; Fiorillo 2021; Gamp 2020; Lockett 2020b; Williams 2020). Compared to the actual number of child patients *vis-à-vis* other age groups, this emphasis is highly disproportionate. What is also striking in this context is the unabashed depiction of the children: sleeping, exhausted, with their bodies covered in rash, attached to machines. Only partly covered, they appear in their full vulnerability and innocence: a canvas on which the virus can show its presence. Amongst such articles, there is one that contains drastic imagery. Isolde Walters' "Gruesome scene" (2020) tells the story of Peyton Baumgarth, 13, who died of COVID-19 complications. Before we see him – as in previous accounts depicted through his family photographs – we are first confronted with a horrid scene: a yellowish hospital bedside (parts of the bed visible in the right corner of the photograph) with a variety of sockets, transfusion apparatus and, for lay people, unidentifiable hospital machinery, are covered with almost regular streaks of blood. Like rain, they run down the walls and the machinery and land in large, round drops on a greenish floor, next to a heap of white tissues. The caption, "The blood of a

13-year-old boy is seen sprayed over a hospital wall" (Walters 2020), leaves no doubts as to what must have happened earlier. The following picture focuses the excessive monitoring apparatus with Peyton's sleeping face (a ventilation tube in his mouth) cropped at the lower right-hand corner. Family photographs are crisscrossed with two other photographs of the scene. In a reversal we already know from films like *Irreversible* (2002, dir. Noé), this sequence of images makes Peyton's death palatable to the readers: from a gruesome snapshot of a 'crime-scene' to a holiday picture of him smiling – a *healthy visibility* at its finest (see also Pietrzak-Franger 2017, 118; 127).

Next to the tendencies also observed in the USA, the major patterns that are visible in the UK newspapers include: a greater readiness to show – metonymized and synechdochized – bodies of hospitalized and dead COVID-19 patients, if they are part of the 'foreignness.' When visualizing COVID-19 patients at home, all of the newspapers make use of witness accounts and personalized stories. Here, ethnic minorities are visible, yet their presence is disproportionate *vis-à-vis* the mortality figures. The COVID-19 dead – on the other hand – are indexed by their smiling faces in family photographs.

Even on the basis of these preliminary findings, it is clear that, as the pandemic has reached the UK, the highly discriminating collation of the virus and the Asian face has morphed into a kaleidoscope of (mostly white) smiling faces (with some overrepresentation of women and children). While I am anxious to articulate this, it would appear that, in those reports, Asians as a generic group with masks and without distinct features can be abstracted as disease carriers; clearly culpable, they are also always moving, always on the run, rarely confined to hospital beds (almost as if the virus could not harm them). They become disease carrier-mutants like the bats they eat: infected but unaffected. On the other hand, individual, mostly white Brits, in *The Sun* synechdochized by children, are the innocent victims, snatched away in their prime.

5. Conclusion: "50 Shades of COVID-19"?

On a metalevel, the tendencies mapped out here, together with the concurrent propensity to show anonymized, fragmented bodies or bodies behind window panes, of course signal the preoccupation with the difficulty of making the pandemic visible. How do those faces of the virus make us face the pandemic? Do they in any way contribute to "representational justice" and offer an "aesthetic force" (Lewis 2021) that would shake us into reflection? Last year, Bivens and Moeller's (2020) provocation in *BMJ* called for 'gross,' 'graphic,' and 'grotesque' depictions of COVID-19, similar to the ones on old STD cards or cigarette packages. Responding to this, Han Yu has quoted data on the ineffectiveness of fear in health communication and suggested innovative graphics instead: imaginative graphic representations that would paint an alternative future scenario and stir people into action (2020). The latter suggestion joins the chorus of voices that have called for novel narratives and representations of the pandemic as a way of imagining a different future for us and our planet. For all of those voices, the 'back to normal' is not only impossible but also undesirable:

> We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequality, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature. (Sonya Renee Taylor 2020, qtd. in Pratt 2020).

The overwhelming visiodemic has undeniably reactivated scripts that feminize and racialize the pandemic whilst masking its actual, material and structural, causes and effects.

How to counteract these tendencies? How to offer a nuanced take on the pandemic – its various shades? What media to activate in an attempt to offer hope and stimulus for a future that would recognize not only the disastrous systemic inequalities but also allow for the production of multi-scale responses and a diversity of pandemic iconographies? Clearly, various pathographic endeavours, life-writing initiatives, archives of experiential responses to the lockdowns, academic hubs that bring together a variety of resources (syllabi, texts, projects) are a start. Also, further (digital) humanities projects that aim to systematically map out both the scale and the complexity of this and other pandemics are necessary. But are they enough? Is it enough to reflect on our responsibilities as scholars, teachers, and storytellers? Is it enough to draw attention to the perennial problematics of such stories and iconographies, teach them to students and hope that they can be carried further? Is it enough, in this context, to try to improve (digital) media literacy? What else can we do *together* to provide new scenarios and infrastructures for the future?

While a vademecum that would help us deal with these questions is still to be written, multi-disciplinary, multi-scalar projects that also translationally involve the public and various stakeholders seem an obvious answer (see e.g., Ostherr 2020b on the necessity of "translational humanities"), particularly those that do not ignore the visual aspects of the pandemic. Also, and especially if we keep in mind a sustainable, long-term improvement, student projects are a valuable addition to the aforementioned initiatives. Exemplarily, the Instagram mini-initiative "50 Shades of COVID-19," which resulted from the course "Covid Cultures: Epidemics Past and Present" I devised at the University of Vienna (WiSe 2020/21), aimed to "reflect on the way we communicate about COVID-19 and inspire others to do the same" ("50 Shades of COVID-19" 2021).[8] Such undertakings may appear mundane, what they accomplish,

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8   While not explicitly focussed on the visiodemic, the posts, addressed at students, use multimodal means (films, photographs, graphs, etc.) to point out the variety of problems and dangers brought about and exacerbated by the rhetoric that has appeared in the wake of the pandemic. They also suggest direct, easy-to-follow solutions. For instance, one of the major thematic foci – blame allocation strategies characteristic of many news reports of the pandemic – includes posts which invite reflection ("Pointing fingers at others while keeping distance is easy. But if we're busy pointing fingers … Who is reaching out a hand to help those in need? #NOMOREBLAME"), explanation (blame as a coping mechanism) and action (strategies to open an inter-generational dialogue).

though, is that we learn, together with our students, to find a practical outlet for our findings and better integrate them in public discussions.[9]

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