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INTRODUCTION

Tereza Walsbergerová

THE present double-issue of *Theory and Practice in English Studies* is concerned with two topics: “Secrets, codes, and puzzles” and “Isolation, solitude, distance and communication in times of epidemic.” Incredibly, the former topic had been selected prior to all of the events that unfolded in 2020. Nevertheless, given how many conspiracy theories about COVID-19 have emerged globally, it can be said that secrets, codes, and puzzles have become an important aspect of the year. The latter topic is, therefore, organically tied to the former, mainly through the tropes of isolation and communication. As such, the present double-issue contains a collection of articles, reports, and other contributions that all share these common denominators. Although compiling this collection was admittedly a herculean task due to the issues associated with the pandemic, we are happy to present the following content to the wider academic public.

1. Secrets, codes, and puzzles

As people all over the world became confined to their homes due to the coronavirus pandemic and all communication suddenly shifted to cyberspace, we have become dependent on technology more than ever before. Every dependency comes attached with its issues and fears, however. On the one hand, existing predominantly in cyberspace has its advantages; not only is it safer to stay at home and thus prevent the virus from spreading faster amongst the population, but many actions – such as voting in elections – can be performed faster and cheaper. On the other hand, however, all of these advantages are automatically accompanied by fears and paranoias, including the fears concerning the potential loss of one’s privacy, one’s identity, and one’s agency.

Conspiracy theories and hoaxes have always been a part of the society – particularly in the United States. Yet, the advent of new technology and media – spearheaded by the internet – in the new millennium made it much easier for disinformation to spread and negatively affect the society. Moreover, the technology and the media itself have often become the object of paranoia – specifically

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also known as cyber-paranoia. The first article of this issue by Klára Feikusová looks at the intersection of media, technology and fear. In “There’s a demon in the internet: Haunted media, globalization, and televisual horror,” Feikusová focuses on the demonization of media and new technologies and their portrayal in television horror shows. She argues that new media have a tendency to be demonized within a society in that they become objects of phobia. Even as technology keeps advancing and every such medium is replaced by a new version, this fear remains attached – one way or another – to all of them. As Feikusová discusses in her article, the horror genre depicts these lingering phobias by essentially personifying them – by putting actual demons into the media. Exploring the haunted media in shows like *Supernatural* (2005–2020) and *Evil* (2019-), Feikusová demonstrates how they are depicted as the ultimate threat in the era of globalization.

The following article by Tereza Walsbergerová then takes us back to the late 1960s and early 1970s when conspiracy theories did not necessarily need the help of new technology and new media to be disseminated and spread around the world, especially not if they pertained to international celebrities. In “‘Another clue for you all’: The hysterical realism of the ‘Paul is dead’ conspiracy in the golden age of paranoia,” Walsbergerová focuses on celebrity death conspiracy theories and their role within our society. In particular, this article explores the conspiracy theory known as ‘Paul is dead’ according to which the Beatle Paul McCartney had died in 1969 and been replaced by a perfect double. Building on several theories from the paranoia studies discourse and maintaining the notion of the late 1960s and early 1970s as an era of the condition of postmodernity, Walsbergerová ultimately argues that our tendency to bury celebrities and create alternate (paranoid) narratives about them stems not only from our rejection of consensus reality but also from our simultaneous desire to mythologize our idols to seek comfort in eras of social uncertainty.

Moving into the present, Miroslav Vrzal’s overview titled “QAnon as a variation of a satanic conspiracy theory” explores the far-right conspiracy theory known as ‘QAnon.’ This theory has lately received a lot of attention in the media, especially in connection with Donald Trump and some of the conspiracy theories involving the spread of COVID-19, and so this text is extremely timely. Vrzal draws significant parallels between the QAnon conspiracy theory and the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 1990s in his text, highlighting their common tropes – and especially the trope of a fight against the forces of evil. As Vrzal points out, these notions have always been an inherent part of American society and are thus likely to emerge over and over in times of social unrest. As such, it makes sense that they have also re-emerged in 2020 in connection with the pandemic and the Presidential Election.

Vrzal's text is followed by Anna Mikyšková's report on the 11th Brno International Conference of English, American and Canadian Studies, "Breaking the Boundaries," which took place on 12–14 February 2020 in Brno, Czech Republic. Unbeknownst to us, this was to be the last in-person conference to be organized by the Department of English and American Studies for a long time to come, as the doors of the university were closed soon thereafter.

Finally, the issue is concluded with Jiří Lukl's tribute to the late American linguist Wallace Chafe (1927–2019), titled "Wallace Chafe – a visionary pariah among linguists." Although Chafe did not originally set out to be a linguist, as Lukl mentions, he undoubtedly left his mark on the discipline. The text describes Chafe's contributions to science – including the field of cognitive linguistics and the study of indigenous languages of North America, and outlines his publications and the positions he held during his long and impressive career.

2. Isolation, solitude, distance and communication in times of epidemic

If there is anything that has spread faster around the globe than conspiracy theories – including the "Paul Is Dead" conspiracy theory and QAnon – it is the coronavirus itself. And with the pandemic came many problems. The latter topic of this double-issue focuses on the 2020 coronavirus pandemic and the issues and discussions attached to this crisis, including isolation, solitude, distance, and communication. Our lives have dramatically changed. From the way we conduct ourselves in the privacy of our homes to the way we run businesses or perform our work duties, we have had to adapt to new modes of communication to bridge the physical distance we have become forced to maintain. Similar crises litter history; be they natural or man-made. Regardless of the origin or era, it can be said that these kinds of crises force people into noteworthy modes of communication. These modes often find their way into literary and other cultural representations. This issue particularly reflects this by exploring how we can make sense of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic through literary expression.

The first article of this issue by Ivana Plevíková is titled "Reflections of Margaret Atwood's dystopias in the pandemic of 2020" and draws intriguing parallels between Atwood's dystopian worlds and the present COVID-19 pandemic. Plevíková specifically looks into two novels by Atwood – *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. While the former novel addresses the issues of power, exploitation, and the God complex; *The Year of the Flood*, with its two female characters, investigates dealing with the pandemic via the lens of ecofeminism, ecology, nature, and sustainability.

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Plevíková's article considers these two opposing viewpoints and points out their defamiliarized versions reflected in today's world. In addition, it highlights significant correlations between fictional and real-life dichotomies of masculine and feminine perspectives on handling the pandemic.

The second article of this issue focuses on the American cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead. In "The relevance of Margaret Mead's concepts in health and illness to the Era of COVID-19," Tagrid Morad aims to highlight Mead's contribution to illness behavior, and demonstrate how her legacy helps us understand the impact of the pandemic. Morad closely explores Mead's autobiography *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years* and her other works within the framework of COVID-19, emphasizing the importance of documentary literature by medical anthropologists to the overall scientific debate concerning the epidemic.

Morad's article is followed by another conference report, this time on a conference that took place online in accordance with the spirit of the pandemic. In "Opportunities in the eyes of a storm," Denisa Krásná, Tereza Šmilauerová, and Lenka Žárská reflect on the most recent edition of the "New pathways in anglophone literary and culture studies." This international conference was also organized by the Department of English and American Studies and took place on 20–21 November 2020. As the authors note at the end of their contribution, "several participants suggested in their presentations, the COVID-19 pandemic has opened doors to many new pathways in Anglophone studies." Though perhaps surprising, this statement perfectly underlines the double-edged nature of technology as it has also been explored in this double-issue – as both a friend and a foe.

Finally, this issue brings you a special feature reflecting last year's edition of the project "FILOVER." In "FILOVER: Public Lectures at the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University in Brno," Jiří Lukl, Ivona Vrzalová and Miroslav Vrzal explain the aims and goals of the project and briefly outline the lectures, including – amongst others – Jan Beneš's "USA Behind Bars," Aleš Chalupa's "How Christianity Came to Europe: A New View on the Circumstances of the Christianization of the Roman Empire," Filip Krajník's "William Shakespeare as a Film and TV Character," Dominika Kováčová's "#influencer: Social Media Celebrities and Their Linguistic Expression," and Marek Vlha's "Bohemians' or Czechs, Gypsies, Bohemians. The Story of One Name and the Birth of the Image of the Czech Ethnic Group in USA."



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