

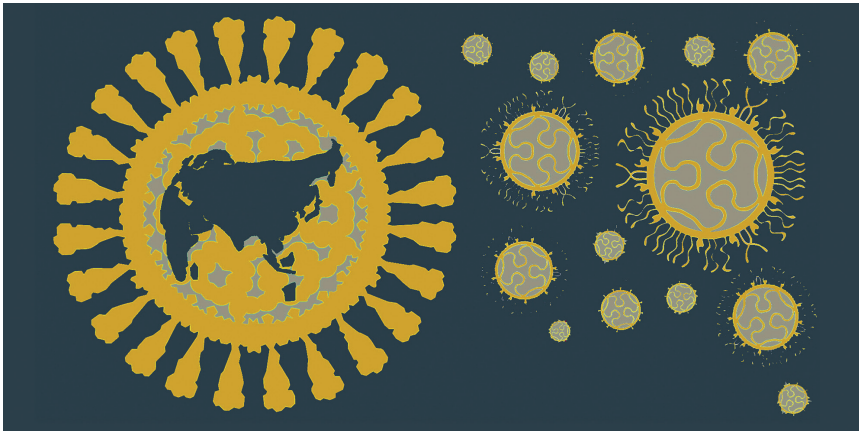
# The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa

Societal Implications, Narratives  
on Media, Political Issues

edited by

Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

VOLUME I – CULTURE, ART, MEDIA





Collana Studi e Ricerche 142

STUDI UMANISTICI  
Serie Ricerche sull'Oriente

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SAPIENZA  
UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE

2023

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**Sapienza Università Editrice**

Piazzale Aldo Moro 5 – 00185 Roma

[www.editricesapienza.it](http://www.editricesapienza.it)

[editrice.sapienza@uniroma1.it](mailto:editrice.sapienza@uniroma1.it)

Iscrizione Registro Operatori Comunicazione n. 11420

*Registry of Communication Workers registration n. 11420*

ISBN: 978-88-9377-299-0

DOI: 10.13133/9788893772990

Publicato nel mese di novembre 2023 | *Published in November 2023*



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# 1. Tell a Story to End the Pandemic. COVID-19 and the Remedy of Narration: Instances from India and Italy

*Giorgio Milanetti*

## **Abstract**

This paper argues that narration represents an essential tool for dealing with the visible and invisible damages produced by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. To support this argument, the paper briefly examines the concept of narrative structure, suggesting that pandemics also fall under the same pattern (Rosenberg 1989; Steel 1981), and analyses a few well-known fictional and non-fictional accounts of past epidemics. It then concentrates on narrative materials drawn from Indian and Western classical traditions, making evident how narration enacts dynamics that help overcome crises by inducing awareness and proposing alternative points of view. The second part of the study analyses a few stories produced during the recent health emergency in two of the most affected countries – India and Italy – bringing to light the healing and transforming power of narrative also in the event of epidemics. Converted into stories, the adversities experienced during the pandemic can in fact demonstrate “that hard times don’t just break a person; they also can make a person” (Basu 2021), which is particularly true in the case of autobiographical narratives and collective articulations of the experiences lived during the crisis. At the societal level, these elaborations of the pandemic conflict with the mainstream narrative constructed by restricted groups of actors, characterized by a rigid conceptual framework and its dramatic vocabulary. This process of elaboration however is opposed by the tendency to forget, since “humans seem to forget about these tragic events quickly” (Perrino 2021, p. 7). It is between these two opposite tendencies, then – the temptation, or the need, to forget, and the duty to narrate in order to remember and to heal – that a way

out of the crisis must be found. We still have to ask ourselves what lessons – if any – have been learned: “Have the dead died in vain? Has a heedless society reverted to its accustomed ways of doing things as soon as denial became once more a plausible option?” (Rosenberg 1989, p. 9).

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; Narratology; Healing power of narration; Narration of health emergency in India; Narration of health emergency in Italy.

## 1.1. Narration and Pandemics

The health crisis produced by COVID-19 profoundly affected our public and private life for two long years. Images of death, suffering, despair, misery that were never seen before, except in times of war, were reproduced and multiplied by the media. They have filled the eyes and hearts of people all over the world for what felt like endless months. The unpredictable and exceptional nature of the pandemic, characterized by worldwide diffusion, a succession of recurring waves, and the continuous mutation of the infectious agents, undermined the ability to rationally cope with the difficulties, both at the public and the private level. Three years after the beginning of the pandemic the worst seems to be over in spite of local recurrences of the infection. Yet even today, while it is perhaps possible to put those memories aside, it is not possible to forget. The burden of pain stays on, unchanged.

However, notwithstanding the enormous upheaval that the pandemic has caused for individuals and for entire societies, institutions, and economies, the public discourse about the two long years of the health crisis remains surprisingly deficient. Once the most dramatic period of the emergency has passed, with all the public and private debates and the controversies it stimulated regarding lockdowns, border patrols, vaccination, travel limitations, green pass etc., a deafening silence has taken over. This paper argues that narration represents an essential tool for dealing with the visible and invisible damages produced by the recent pandemic by COVID-19, in that it alone can make sense of the experiences lived in that period and contribute to finding a way out of the emergency. To support this hypothesis, I will first briefly explore the nature of narration and its relationship with the processes of giving sense, soothing, and healing.

According to structuralist criticism, from Barthes (1982 [1966], p. 7) onward, narrative represents a specific object of knowledge, distinguished by its discursive character. In fact:

[w]hile composing a narrative may or may not involve inventing the sequence of events represented, it will always involve fabricating the discourse through which those events are represented, the act of narration being inseparable from the selection, organization, and verbalization of information. Moreover, since real events do not themselves take the form of a ready-made “untold story” (Mink 1978: 134), narrative production must involve turning events into a story by “cutting out” a coherent sequence with a beginning, middle, and end structure from the “evenemential” continuum. (Rigney 1992, p. 265)

This conception of a tripartite structure – with a beginning, middle and end part – has its roots in the deepest layers of philosophical investigation on narrative. As Aristotle puts it, referring to the connection of actions as represented in tragedy, “now a whole is that which has beginning, middle and end” (Aristotle 1966, 1450b, 26)<sup>1</sup>. Establishing a parallel between Aristotle’s analysis and the fact that structuralism has made narrative a primary concern, Barthes and Duisit (1975) highlight the difficulty of identifying a common structure among the “infinite number of narratives and the many standpoints from which they can be considered (historical, psychological, sociological, ethnological, aesthetic, etc.)” (Ibid., p. 238). This notwithstanding, they convincingly concluded that any narrative “shares with other narratives a common structure, open to analysis, however delicate it is to formulate” (Ibid.). More recently, building on Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) concept of narrative structure, Habermas (2018) proposed a more detailed tripartite sequence, where the middle part of the story – the one that makes things change – is characterized as a “complication” or a “complicating event”. For Habermas, it is this complication that arouses the listener’s interest, making the story tellable (Ibid., pp. 28-29). Yet, since the narration needs also to be credible to keep the listener interested, the exceptionality of the complicating element, which increases its attractiveness, must always come to terms with its credibility. It is keeping in mind this normative structure and applying to it the basic dynamics above described, then, that narrative production can be

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<sup>1</sup> Greek text: ὅλον δέ ἐστιν τὸ ἔχον ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσον καὶ τελευτήν.

analysed, particularly as regards its process of “turning events into a story by ‘cutting out’ a coherent sequence [...] from the ‘evenemential’ continuum” (Rigney 1992, p. 265). As we have seen above, this pattern can be applied to any narrative, however delicate the analysis: interestingly, pandemics can be included as well.

Scholars such as Steel (1981) and Rosenberg (1989 etc.) have famously noted that epidemics have a structure that “mirrors literary conventions” (Hays 2007, p. 52): as a social phenomenon, they have in fact a dramaturgic form, since they “start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, follow a plot line of increasing and revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift toward closure” (Rosenberg 1989, p. 2). The various literary descriptions of the epidemics of the past show many elements in common, which in turn fall within the normative framework described above. It can be assumed, for instance, that the causes to which the insurgence of the epidemic can be ascribed represent the trigger of the “complicating event” – the complication of which is further enhanced by the uncertainty and the disagreement that typically characterize the very etiology of the disease: “Etiological ambiguities have been the rule, not the exception, and those ambiguities have been reflected in the diverse and apparently contradictory responses of societies faced by epidemic” (Hays 2007, p. 34).

## 1.2. Narrations of Pandemics

The narrations of epidemics and pandemics of the past can be broadly divided in two categories – the fictional and the non-fictional – which however in many cases may overlap. Instances of the first kind are well known works such as Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722)<sup>2</sup>, Manzoni’s *I Promessi Sposi* (1827, 1842) Ainsworth’s *Old Saint Paul’s* (1841), and Camus’ *La Peste* (1947). Non-fictional narratives of pandemics have their highest examples in the relevant passages of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Both accounts effectively highlight the condition of despair and helplessness engendered by the outbreak of the plague, describing an atmosphere of uncertainty and tragedy that closely reminds us of the recent pandemic. In Thucydides’ words:

<sup>2</sup> The classification of Defoe’s novel has been variously disputed. On the “nexus” between fiction and history in *A Journal of the Plague Year* see e.g. Mayer (1990).

[T]here is no record of such a pestilence occurring elsewhere, or of so great a destruction of human life. For a while physicians, in ignorance of the nature of the disease, sought to apply remedies; but it was in vain, and they themselves were among the first victims, because they oftenest came into contact with it. [...] I was myself attacked, and witnessed the sufferings of others. [...] The general character of the malady no words can describe, and the fury with which it fastened upon each sufferer was too much for human nature to endure. (Thucydides 1881, II.48-50)

In the *Introduction* to the *Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio uses expressions that convey the same sense of extraordinariness and devastation:

Almost at the beginning of springtime of the year in question [1348], the plague began to show its sorrowful effects in an extraordinary manner. [...] Many ended their lives in the public streets, during the day or at night, while many others who died in their homes were discovered dead by their neighbors only by the smell of their decomposing bodies. The city was full of corpses... [...] [M]ore than one hundred thousand human beings are believed to have lost their lives for certain inside the walls of the city of Florence – whereas before the deadly plague, one would not even have estimated there were actually that many people dwelling in the city. (Boccaccio 1982, pp. 3-4)

Interestingly, fictional accounts of the disease often highlight aspects that historical sources neglect or downsize. Manzoni, who based his masterful description of the great plague that ravaged Milan and Northern Italy after the passage of the Lansquenet army in 1630 on a rich collection of coeval sources, is explicit in denouncing the approximation, the reticence, and the uncertainty of those accounts. He therefore dedicates many pages of his novel to describing the disbelief and skepticism which accompanied the first alarms, as well as the negligence of the Spanish political authorities and the impatience of common people with doctors. Other authors of fictional narrations delve deep into the context within which the disease makes its first appearances, often lingering on apparently minor details that only in a later stage come to light as triggers of the tragedy. This is the case with the famous *La Peste* (The Plague), by Albert Camus, the initial pages of which highlight the failure to understand apparently insignificant clues in their gravity: epidemics always begin silently, as something that does not disturb too much our daily routine – due also to our unconscious desire to preserve it from change.

When leaving his surgery on the morning of April 16, Dr. Bernard Rieux felt something soft under his foot. It was a dead rat lying in the middle of the landing. On the spur of the moment he kicked it to one side and, without giving it a further thought, continued on his way downstairs. [...] That evening, when Dr. Rieux was standing in the entrance, feeling for the latchkey in his pocket before starting up the stairs to his apartment, he saw a big rat coming toward him from the dark end of the passage. It moved uncertainly, and its fur was sopping wet. The animal stopped and seemed to be trying to get its balance, moved forward again toward the doctor, halted again, then spun round on itself with a little squeal and fell on its side. Its mouth was slightly open and blood was spurting from it. After gazing at it for a moment, the doctor went upstairs. (Camus 1962, p. 3)

For Rosenberg, Camus' "narrative follows closely the archetypal pattern of historical plague epidemics", the events of which "succeed each other in predictable narrative sequence" (Rosenberg 1989, p. 3). And yet, despite the predictability of the sequence, "most communities are slow to accept and acknowledge an epidemic". The reason for this is both "a failure of imagination" and the will to protect "specific economic and institutional interests" together with "the emotional assurance and complacency of ordinary men and women" (Ibid., pp. 3-4).

Rosenberg's remarks point to the same need for a more detailed analysis than that which emerges from Manzoni's fictional account of the epidemic, since both highlight how in any health crisis there is much more than a natural agent at play. In fact, the very purely natural origin of the disease can be objected to, since – as the recent pandemic by COVID-19 has shown – the dramaturgy of epidemics must in turn be placed within a complex network of relations not only between humans, animals, and the environment, but also between the political and economic forces acting within a certain society. All this shifts the focus of research from the pandemic event in itself to its "prehistory and long aftermath" – to use the words by J. Livingston on COVID-19: "Any dramaturgy that begins in Wuhan", she argues, "takes the epidemic out of the larger flow of historical time" (Langstaff 2020). Indeed – going back to Camus – if "the plague might originate in a bacterium", it must be admitted that "its causes and effects are human" (Smith 2016, p. 194). This however does not necessarily support the opposite conclusion. Although we must agree with Smith about the French writer's ability "to see epidemic in its sociopolitical dimension"

and to lift the theme of his novel, beyond a single disease, “to a more fundamental kind of sickness” (Ibid., p. 195), we cannot conclude that this “more fundamental” kind of sickness would be distinct from its “natural” causes. Rather, this is one of the main points that Camus’ (and other authors’) narrative on epidemic brings to light: it makes us realize the hidden nature of the epidemic as something that equally affects human bodies and institutions. In fact, all major health crises, revealing the fragility of the entities affected, highlight the same need – and offer the same opportunity, both to individuals and societies – for a relentless review of established choices and habits and, in a word, for a radical change. And it is there that narrative, with its inherent transformative power, once more steps in.

### 1.3. The Healing Properties of Narrative

In fact, expanding the horizon beyond the narrations of diseases and epidemics, we can observe several examples of stories that clarify how narration enacts dynamics which effectively bring about change and overcome crises. In this perspective, its function is not limited to describing and accounting; rather, inducing awareness and proposing different points of view, it unlocks, soothes, and heals. To limit the analysis to the cultural domains that I have chosen to examine here, I will briefly refer to some passages from two texts belonging to Western and Indian classic literatures – Homer’s *Odyssey* and Valmiki’s *Rāmāyana* – which I find particularly significant also because they are both placed in key moments of the plot development. At the end of Book VIII, Odysseus, disguised as an *unnamed* stranger, in the palace of the Phaeacian king Alcinous, invites the bard Demodocus to sing the making of the wooden horse and the sack of Troy. The bard, inspired by the god, describes the conquest of the city and how in that circumstance “Odysseus braved the most terrible fight” (Homer 1919, VIII.520). At this point Odysseus’ heart melts, and “pitiful tears” fall “from beneath his brows” (Ibid., 532). Alcinous then invites Demodocus to stop singing, and requests Odysseus to reveal his *name*: “Tell me the name by which they were wont to call thee in thy home, even thy mother and thy father. [...] And tell me thy country, thy people, and thy city, that our ships may convey thee thither” (Ibid., 551-556). It is now, and only now, that the proper narration of the *Odyssey* can begin – when Odysseus reveals his name and identity, at the beginning



of the book IX. A long flashback narrative then takes place, offering the reader two main clues: it is narration that gives sense and identity to our life; it is narration that puts an end to a state of crisis and immobility. Only after the long account of his own experiences, which spans more than four Books of the epic and highlights the liberating power of words, Odysseus may take leave from Alcinous and take the sea route to Ithaca.

A passage with similar content can be found in the last Book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Sanskrit epic attributed to the ṛṣi Valmiki that sings the deeds of the king-god Rama. Rama finally realizes the identity of his twin sons Kusha and Lava<sup>3</sup> during a sacrificial rite, when he hears them singing his own deeds, enacting a sort of *Rāmāyaṇa* within the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is a narrative artifice that strictly resembles the one outlined in the *Odyssey*, also in its consequences, since it is this episode that unlocks further major developments of the plot: “Rama listened during many days to the sublime and wonderful epic, and while the two sons of Sita, Kusha and Lava, were singing, he recognized them” (Valmiki 1952, VII.95.1). Soon after, he decides to summon Sita for the following day, asking her to come back from her exile and to swear on her own purity. For the first time in the poem, the family of Rama can thus reunite, like Odysseus with his wife and son in the last Books of Homer’s epic. The heart of Rama is now open to reconciliation and tenderness: he is finally convinced of the faithfulness of his wife, to whom he even asks for forgiveness, and publicly announces that he recognizes the two boys as his sons: “I acknowledge these twins, Kusha and Lava, to be my sons! I desire to make my peace with the chaste Maithili [Sita] amidst the assembly” (Valmiki 1952, VII.97.5). The will of the gods will not allow Rama to live with his bride, since Sita will descend into the depth of her mother, the Earth, sitting on a “marvelous celestial throne” in recognition of her purity. Nevertheless, the narrative turn engendered by the song that mirrors Rama’s “entire life with its vicissitudes” (Ibid., VII.94.27) remains as a vivid testimony of the power of storytelling on human soul: the love for Sita that has taken possession of Rama’s heart is something entirely new in the poem. He is visibly shocked by the pain of her disappearance and explicitly

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<sup>3</sup> According to the narration, Rama had never met them, since he had previously banished his pregnant wife Sita because of people’s rumors about her behavior (Valmiki 1952, VII.45-46).



declares that “[b]eholding Sita [...] vanish in my presence, my soul experiences an agony *hitherto unknown* (Ibid., VII.98.4, emphasis added). This is a point that perhaps has not received the proper attention by commentators and scholars alike: in fact, after hearing the masterful narration of his own life from his two sons, Rama undergoes a radical change, involving the entirety of his feelings and behavior.

The question to ask at this point is thus the following: can this healing and transforming power of narrative also manifest itself in the narration of epidemics? Anticipating the arguments that will be presented in the next paragraphs, my answer is: yes. And I would also add that narration is the *sole* remedy to the social and psychological (or public and private) crisis brought about by the pandemic, since it not only can give sense and perspective to the condition of utter uncertainty, danger, and suffering to which individual and societies are forced, but it also can help to find a way out of the emergency. Narration is the counter-offensive of the human genre.

#### 1.4. Stories from the Last Pandemic

To better clarify these statements, I propose a brief analysis of a few stories created during the last pandemic in various domains – feature films, diaries, reports, documentaries, and mockumentaries – in two of the most affected countries: India and Italy.

The feature film *Drought* (Siccità, 2022) by the Italian film director Paolo Virzi imagines the city of Rome, after three years of drought, facing the first manifestations of a new epidemic brought by cockroaches. The spectacular images of the river Tiber reduced to a bed of sand and debris will remain for a long time in the visual memory of the spectators. The added value that Virzi is capable of giving to his narration of a deadly epidemic, lies in its relationship with the environmental crisis and climate change – which from this point of view represent the mentioned “prehistory and the aftermath” of the health crisis as outlined by Livingston. Yet the movie does not insist on attributing the responsibility of the two combined crises (their “causes and effects”) to humankind or to specific dynamics of power or exploitation. All the characters are represented as equally affected by the unbearable difficulties produced by the new conditions of life and their consequences. What the spectators soon understand is that the temporal location of the story is not so much a dystopian future as a post-dystopian present. During the pandemic,

we have already experienced that feeling of strangeness that once familiar places transmit to us – deserted streets and squares, shops closed, parking places without any movements, even the elevator of our condominium that remains stationary. At the same time, we have experienced and in part are still experiencing the feeling of being close to strangers – those we met along the deserted streets or in faraway shops – due to facing the very same difficulties and restrictions. Estranged from our places and our time by the pandemic, we find ourselves strangely associated with strangers – which brings us closer to understanding how narration can give sense and name to inner unnamed dynamics.

*7 Star Dinosaur Entertainment* (2021) is a dramatic short movie by the Indian film director Vaishali Naik that can be defined as a “mockumentary” – a fake documentary depicting fictional events. It is about two impoverished brothers, Sudhir and Vinod, who make ends meet by wearing dinosaur costumes and performing at weddings and parties. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the suddenly imposed lockdown puts an abrupt end to their business. This leaves them blocked in their hut, without food and with the sole company of a cat and their dinosaur costumes. Their efforts to get something to eat are sometimes comical but result in nothing. A sense of impending tragedy lingers on until the final scene when the two starving brothers fight like dinosaurs for survival. As it has been written: “While this short may be difficult to digest, it serves as essential viewing; *it helps us understand the depth of the catastrophe the pandemic left in its wake*. This is particularly true for the working class who never received their due, even prior to the pandemic” (Dcosta 2022, emphasis added). Should we consider this story as a metaphor? In my opinion, metaphorizing always amount to subtracting a share of truth and impact to the story. Therefore, if on the one hand we can subscribe to the view that “[t]he movie also serves as a biting commentary on the migrant experience. It’s an homage to those who persevere against earth-shaking events, despite simultaneously losing their identity and their rights” (Ibid.), on the other we should keep in mind the first impression received from watching the film and take it most seriously: this short movie is talking about ourselves; the depth of the catastrophe has strongly impacted on our psychological balance, revealing the presence of primordial, dinosaur-like forces hidden in our being and ready to surface perhaps not only in the event of major disasters.

Another narration that focuses on the abrupt loss of any means of subsistence after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed a nationwide lockdown on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020, with only a four-hour notice, is entitled *1232km. Koronā kāl meṃ ek asambhav safar*, (literally: An Impossible Journey at the Time of Coronavirus, broadcasted with the English title of *The Long Journey Home*). This is both a documentary film and a reportage published as a book by the author Vinod Kapri. The film and the book do not entirely overlap in their communicative perspective – which offers abundant material for a comparative analysis. The present contribution is however limited to a brief illustration of the two works. With regard to the documentary, specific rules were laid down by Kapri to ensure the truth of the recording: “[N]othing would be created or staged for the camera, there would be no interference from his side unless an emergency, the ground reality would be filmed as a 10-minute spot recording every two hours” (Basu 2021). He thus joined a group of seven contract labourers and followed them while they pedaled back from Ghaziabad to their hometowns in Bihar on second-hand bicycles for seven days and seven nights, covering more than hundred kilometers each day, forced to do so by the loss of employment and the complete lack of food and money. That mass exodus of migrants, considered the largest displacement of people in India after the Partition of 1947, has been widely documented and has shown images of absolute despair and tragedy. Yet Kapri’s documentary has a place of its own for fact that “while many journalists risked the outdoors by accompanying the labourers for a few kilometres, asking them for their story, and handing them a food packet to ease their conscience, Kapri chose to stick around with the group of labourers till they reached their hometown in Saharsa, almost 8 days later” (Mukherjee 2021). In addition to that, what the documentary manages to highlight better than other narrations is the extraordinary resilience of human beings when they resort to their ordinary virtues, even in the face of extreme difficulties and interminable suffering. The amplifier of these human virtues is, again, solidarity. The images recorded by Kapri clearly show how being in a group helps with sharing the burden of fatigue and fear; and how being helped by strangers clears the way to a brighter future. Thus, even though other dramatic elements of the story grab the attention and touch the hearth of the viewers, inducing them to realize, together with the seven protagonists, that “the virus of hunger, poverty and mistrust was deadlier than the coronavirus”

(Basu 2021), the final message that this work communicates is “that hard times don’t just break a person; they also can make a person” (Ibid.). From this point of view, the message proposed by the documentary, though being apparently the opposite than that of *7 Star*, overlaps with the latter in that it confirms what most of the narrations of epidemics clearly show – and what the present contribution points to as well: no one can save oneself alone. There is no way out of the pandemic without a collective engagement and a shared narration.

In comparison to the documentary, the book is obviously richer in narrative details and less detailed in the rendering of the locations. At the same time, the presence of the author is more evident since the book often interprets, explains, and motivates actions and circumstances that the documentary merely shows. The author intersperses the dialogues of the protagonists with short comments and enriches the descriptions with a personal choice of verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. Thus, while the viewer is brought to follow less critically the story as it unfolds on the screen, the reader may want to stop reading and wonder why the “cut” of a scene should emphasize specific details regarding the social and economic conditions of the protagonists. Take for instance the conclusion of the sequence of the attempted robbery, when Rambabu, one of the seven cyclists, remarks: “*Ham garīb haiṃ, ye hamārā ap’rādh ho sak’tā hai. Lekin ham garīb haiṃ, is’liye ap’rādhī nahīṃ ho sak’tē*” (“We are poor, this may be our guilt. But we are poor, for this very reason we cannot be guilty”, Kapri 2021, p. 147). The scene ends there, leaving the reader with Rambabu’s words in mind, which amounts to an explicit paraphrase of the author’s political positions. The introduction to Kapri’s text by the former chief editor of “The Hindu”, N. Ram, adds further elements to the political identity of the work, emphasizing the human virtues of the protagonists, “ordinary labourers” capable of acting with sincerity, freedom and morality even when they are pushed to the limit of their physical and mental endurance. “This book”, concludes Ram, “fills us with a feeling of respect for the common sense, frankness, and lack of education of ordinary labourers. Those labourers who, despite their hardest efforts, never manage to free themselves from the eddy of poverty, debts, and all kinds of inequality handed down for generations and generations” (Kapri 2021, p. 18). Thus, despite the fabricated, perhaps biased character of this narrative inspired by a political stance, the reader of this book may prefer the consolatory remedy of a vaguely socialist happy

ending over the fabricated mainstream narratives on the pandemic elaborated by restricted groups of actors in power and imposed to the rest of the society.

In fact, as observed before, narration inherently has a “communicative character that calls for an analysis of the actors and the dynamics of the narrative act itself: [...] We need to ask: Who is speaking? Who is seeing? Who is acting? But we also need to ask: Who is not speaking? Who does not have the right to speak in the text? [...] What is ‘naturally’ omitted from it? What kinds of opinions are expressed and to what extent are they consistent with other (expressed or silenced) opinions?” (Schipper 1993, pp. 46-47). These questions are particularly relevant in the narration of the recent pandemic. Mainstream narrative about the COVID-19 pandemic has been constructed by restricted groups of actors, who have laid out not only rules, policies, and principles of public and private behavior, but also a rigid conceptual framework and its vocabulary, made of terms mostly expressing conflict, anxiety, confinement, emergency. This framework and this vocabulary only partially correspond to the personal and private narrations of the pandemic, which are relatively abundant but usually lack a social dimension. Much less frequent are organic counter-narratives produced during the health crisis for an alternative reading of the dynamics at stake. However, it is possible that some time is still needed for that and that in a next future deeper and more exhaustive analyses will be proposed, in the form of stories, novels, accounts, narrations of the past events. In this regard, it is encouraging that the Nobel Prize recipient Orhan Pamuk has recently published the novel *Nights of Plague* (Pamuk 2022), where the narration of a deadly disease that spreads in the Near East is the backdrop for themes of broad social scope, which touch religion, communalism, power, superstition, rebellion: “The art of novel”, says one of Pamuk’s characters, “is based on the ability to tell our stories as if they belonged to others, and to tell the stories of others as if they were ours” (Fiori 2022).

### 1.5. The Duty to Narrate and the Need to Forget

It is this same reversal of perspective – “to tell our stories as if they belonged to others” – that characterizes also most of the private testimonies produced during the pandemic, e.g. in the form of a personal diary, or of messages posted on social media. The healing properties

of storytelling are well known, not only in traditional cultures, where they often overlap with local medical knowledge, but also in modern medical and psychological practice, where “storytelling is viewed as a form of communication that can help people to successfully cope with and reframe illnesses” (Sunwolf 2005, p. 2). A few studies have been conducted on the chemical response of the brain when listening to captivating stories, a process in which the production of the hormones oxytocin and cortisol seems to play a key role in generating almost intoxicating effects and in “regulating physiological and psychological functions” (Brockington et al. 2021, p. 1). Laboratory tests have shown that since human beings are “social creatures who regularly affiliate with strangers, stories are an effective way to transmit important information and values from one individual or community to the next” (Zak 2013, p. 2). In addition to it, “stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better *remembered*, than simply stating a set of facts” (Ibid., emphasis added). It is the transformation – we could even say: the transubstantiation – of facts into memory produced by storytelling that represents the key factor in the process of giving sense to the events. This decisive change in the very substance of events when they become the subject of a story takes place in the fullest way if those events are part of the narrator’s own life. In this case, the reversal of perspective not only enables the narrator to tell his/her stories “as if they belonged to others”, but also to look from a distance at the trauma produced by illnesses, distress, physical and psychological challenges. This is the reason why practices of autobiographical writing, such as diaries, letters, and even messages posted on social media, have so much importance for the elaboration of experiences of crises. To this, it can be added that if “storytelling practices are key tools to navigate recurring challenging times, such as pandemics of unprecedented proportion” (Perrino 2022, p. 2), in the specific domain of autoethnography narrative and storytelling these are used “to give meaning to identities, relationships, and experiences, and to create relationships between past and present, researchers and participants, writers and readers, tellers and audiences” (Ibid.). The private testimonies produced in the form of a personal diary and collected during the pandemic in a book titled *Scrivere di sé ai tempi del Coronavirus* (Writing about oneself at the time of the Coronavirus, Capellino, Degasperini 2021) represent a clear example of this. I would quote just a few passages from this book, the realization of

which is due to the initiatives of Libera Università dell'Autobiografia (LUA, "Free University of Autobiography") of Anghiari (in the region of Tuscany, Italy):

Both the soothing and reparative aspects of writing emerge here: in fact, by transferring the emotion to the page, I can see it outside of myself and objectify the emotion; I can reexamine a traumatic situation in a non-direct way, establishing a distance from it. (Capellino, Degaspero 2021, p. 21)

Common features in the diaries received are the documentary aspects of what happens, but also the attempt at emotional self-containment (especially by those who write in solitude), seeking serenity in the written version of events. (Ibid., p. 59)

"Everyone will remain what he/she is as a person but will carry within him/herself the traces of the elaboration of this harsh experience, as with a bereavement, a separation or, in any case, a significant change in life." (Ibid., p. 91)

The project "Writing about oneself at the time of the Coronavirus" was promoted by LUA in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown imposed on Italy due to the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. It intended to act as a tool to increase "trust in life and resilience" (Macario 2021, p. 16) during a period that for many people has been characterized by the most unfortunate circumstances of life, in the belief that autobiographical writing could help endure the hardships to which they were forced without succumbing to them. What I see as particularly remarkable in the conceptual framework of this project is its collective and intergenerational nature. As it is aptly highlighted in the *Introduction* by Macario, one of the main goals of this initiative has been to provide people with incentives not to feel alone (Ibid., p. 17) – which brings us back to one of the main themes of our analysis. Similar conclusions are reached by Anna Maria Selini, the author of a documentary and a book (Selini 2021) on her experiences in one of the most affected areas in Italy, the province of Bergamo. In an interview with the magazine "Altra economia" (Facchini 2021), questioned on what she thinks could be the remedy to the trauma, she observes: "I think the most effective response is the community, as psychologists also argue. Let's take Nembro [a small town in the province of Bergamo], the epicenter and the area most affected also for the effects on



mental health. It has a very strong and cohesive community tradition. Many people volunteer, there are many associations. Thanks to this strong social cohesion, the town has been able to react to the pandemic. Against the trauma, the sense of community has proved to be an effective protection" (Ibid.).

It is through dynamics similar to those described above, then, that a way out of the pandemic can be envisaged – provided that a convincing meaning of being “out of the pandemic” could be agreed upon. As the journalist and writer G. Kolata aptly summarizes, “[a]ccording to historians, pandemics typically have two types of endings: the medical, which occurs when the incidence and death rates plummet, and the social, when the epidemic of fear about the disease wanes” (Kolata 2020). To use the words of the historian Dora Vargha, endings “are very, very messy. [...] Looking back, *we have a weak narrative*. For whom does the epidemic end, and who gets to say?” (Ibid., emphasis added). In fact, the social ending of the pandemic can be due not only to the waning of fears but also to the “simple temptation to forget” (Modolo 2022); it can occur “not because a disease has been vanquished but because people grow tired of panic mode and learn to live with a disease” (Kolata 2020) – which however contrasts with the “duty to be witnesses of an era: not to let the memory of individuals – and therefore the collective memory of a people – be lost” (Modolo 2022). During the first months of the health emergency by COVID-19 several studies that thoroughly analysed narratives about past pandemics were published. Among these, particular attention has been given to the influenza pandemic at the beginning of the last century, since over time many private and public testimonies have been collected on this subject. In fact, “[n]arratives recounting the hardships and traumatic realities of past pandemics such as the 1918-1920 flu have become more palpable and believable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, humans seem to forget about these tragic events quickly. Many people don’t talk about them; they remove them from their memories; they don’t seem to remember death, trauma, and loss” (Perrino 2021, p. 7). It is between these two opposite tendencies, then – the temptation, or the need, to forget, declaring the emergency over, and the duty to narrate in order to remember and to heal – that a way out of the crisis must be found. If it is true that “[e]pidemics ordinarily end with a whimper, not a bang” (Rosenberg 1989, p. 8), we still have to ask ourselves what lessons – if any – have been



learned: “Have the dead died in vain? Has a heedless society reverted to its accustomed ways of doing things as soon as denial became once more a plausible option?” (Ibid., p. 9).

The answer that the narratives on epidemics help us to give is: no. We cannot waste the crisis we have lived. It is for this reason that we need stories: this is the most efficient tool to transform events into memories, to draw attention to the lessons to be learned; and, however paradoxical this may seem, to forget the loss by transforming it into new behavior. The stories on the health emergency, engendered and nurtured by personal and collective memories, will be recontextualized across time and space: “They will be reread; they will be recounted to children and grandchildren; they will become part of new tellings of dread and fear in other, future, uncertain times” (Perrino 2021, p. 7). Like all the other stories about the pandemics of the past, also these new narrations on COVID-19 will remind us both of micro- and macro-dynamics, will shed light on individual emotions and ultimate realities: “[H]uman beings will not so easily escape the immanence of evil and the anxiety of indeterminacy. Mortality is built into our bodies, into our modes of behavior, and into our place in the planet’s ecology” (Rosenberg 1989, p. 14). And they will make clear, once more, the need for a collective – albeit not necessarily public – elaboration of the critical experiences lived during the emergency. The lesson to learn from them is that there is no alternative to participating in this collective elaboration. This is the remedy that can restore health, both at the personal and the societal level.

In the darkest days of the pandemic, pope Francis proposed an enlightening narrative key, hinting at the necessity of rowing together and comforting each other. This is the only way to make sense – and to find a way out – of even the most difficult experiences:

We were caught off guard by an unexpected and raging storm. We realized that we were in the same boat – fragile and disoriented, but at the same time all important and necessary – called to row together, all in need of mutual comfort. We are all on this boat. Like those disciples, who speak with one voice and in anguish say: “We are lost”, so we too have realized that we cannot go forward each on his own, but only together. (Francis 2020)

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