

“Crowds confined into phalansteries built from their own data, human mass regressed into a hedonistic infant body.”

Isolation and Crowd in László Garaczi’s Novel *Weszteg*

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Abstract. The article examines how László Garaczi’s *Weszteg* portrays isolation and mass formation in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. In the first part of my essay, I investigate the representation of the “quarantine state.” I argue that in the novel, technology deepens isolation instead of helping to connect with others. In the next section, I examine how the novel depicts the transformation of our relationship with “live” presence, physical proximity, and mass situations due to the pandemic and increasing technological mediation. As I show, physical contact with others and being in a crowd appear exclusively as inconvenient, frustrating, or threatening experiences in the novel. Thereafter, I analyze the dystopian images of violent, barbaric crowds in the text. I claim that they condense collective fears arising from the pandemic, and the novel sensitively points out the mechanisms of scapegoating in times of crisis. Finally, I argue that the novel also vividly portrays a mass experience that is not connected to physical presence. The “virtual crowd,” organized with the facilitation of mass media, is depicted as a multitude of lonely, isolated individuals. I scrutinize the characteristics of this crowd, as well as the role of biopolitical power and mass media—especially aggressive news streams—in organizing the masses and maintaining isolation.

Keywords: László Garaczi, Hungarian literature, crowd, isolation, pandemic, COVID-19

Introduction

In accordance with international trends, Hungarian literature also reacted almost immediately and very vividly to the coronavirus pandemic. Since 2020, a large number of fiction and non-fiction works have explored the impact of the pandemic on individual lives, as well as reflected on broader societal issues raised by the global crisis. Authors across genres have sought to process the experience of lockdowns and social distancing measures, the radical transformation of our daily lives, the

isolation and the heightened role of technology in human interaction, and the complicated emotional states that come with these events.¹ One of the most complex and original of these literary reflections is László Garaczi's latest novel, *Weszteg*.² It is a love story set during the coronavirus pandemic, or more precisely, the chronicle of the dissolution of a relationship. The fragmented, intertwining narratives of the two protagonists, Brúnó (an IT professional struggling with family traumas, social anxiety, and various dependencies) and Hajni (a teacher who is paranoid about becoming infected), tell us about the most important episodes of their acquaintance, shared life and break up, as well as their lonely, quarantined days and the development of their relationship, which is stuck in an in-between state. These two are joined by a third narrative voice, that of the “ecofeminist poet” Sybille Koch, who—although also an actor in the romantic drama that shapes the novel's plot—reflects on the crisis caused by the pandemic on a more general and impersonal level.

As Eszter Ureczky points out, every epidemic “holds up a distorting mirror to prevailing social institutions, modes of exercising power, and crisis management protocols. [...]n the different epochs of Western culture, there can be identified a ‘period illness,’ which reveals the most pressing social tensions of that era.”³ In my view, Garaczi's novel presents the coronavirus as a “period illness”: the epidemic is not portrayed as a rupture that introduces a radically new order, but as something that reflects, amplifies and condenses certain definitive tendencies of

1 An exciting collection of “COVID-19 literature” is *A teremtés koronája – Karanténantológia* [The Crown of Creation – A Quarantine Anthology], which includes short stories from twenty-three prominent Hungarian authors, as well as the essay collection *Vírus után a világ* [The World After the Virus], in which, besides writers, historians, political scientists, philosophers, and economists reflect on the quarantine situation and the short- and long-term effects of the epidemic. It is also worth mentioning the “pandemic” issues of the prestigious literary journals *Prae*, *Apokrif*, and *Apertúra*, which include essays, short stories, and poems.

2 László Garaczi, born in 1956 in Budapest, is a distinguished Hungarian writer, poet, playwright, and screenwriter known for his pioneering contributions to contemporary Hungarian literature. Garaczi's most notable work is the Lemur series, a collection of autobiographical novels that delve into themes of identity and memory, employing fragmented and non-linear storytelling techniques. Throughout his career, Garaczi has received critical acclaim for his unique voice and narrative experimentation. His literary achievements have been recognized by numerous awards, including the prestigious Attila József Prize. Some of his works have been translated into German, English, and Italian as well. *Weszteg* is his latest novel, which was published in 2022. Prior to this, he also reflected on the pandemic situation in several of his works. Besides his poems, his notable quarantine drama *Veszteg (21 hangkép)* [Weszteg (21 soundscapes)] and the monologue *Weszteg (avagy hogy kezeljük helyén a világvégét)* [Weszteg (or How to Deal with the End of the World Properly)] may be mentioned. The latter two, as the titles also indicate, may be interpreted as preparatory studies for the novel.

3 Ureczky, *Kultúra és kontamináció*, 10.

the current era. Through the portrayal of the coronavirus pandemic, *Weszteg* discusses various phenomena, such as social atomization, the transformation of our relationship with “live” presence and physical closeness to others, the pivotal role of technological interfaces in shaping our relationships, the vulnerability to biopolitical power, as well as various dependencies and psychological issues—anxiety, psychosis, paranoia, and different phobias. Related to the topics mentioned above, different types of crowd experiences and images also emerge in the novel. My paper aims to examine how *Weszteg* portrays isolation and mass formation in the context of the pandemic.

Isolation

The plot of the novel unfolds during a period of coronavirus-induced lockdown. However, Brúnó and Hajni do not begin social distancing due to the officially mandated quarantine; they just reconnect following a painful breakup. After failed attempts to revive their relationship, they ultimately give up on personal meetings. From that point on, they communicate exclusively through various digital platforms.

“Email. Viber. Messenger. We’ve transposed ourselves into virtuality. We started social distancing even before the stricter measures. I thought it wouldn’t work, but it does, a balance has been established.”⁴

The novel sensitively portrays the characteristics of mediated communication and the process by which these mediums become intertwined in their relationship. The couple prefers communication forms that bear the least resemblance to live interaction and leave no room for dialogue.

“Online theatre plays, links to movies and music programs, brief status updates, a snippet of an overheard conversation. Photos, paintings, poems. In urgent cases, phone calls, video chat excluded. Lately, voice messages. Dreams, memories, comments.”⁵

In terms of the development of the relationship and from a narrative standpoint, the most crucial elements are the long voice messages they exchange, primarily sharing childhood memories and family traumas with each other. In these cases, the ambivalent nature of the medium stands out the most, as through this format—precisely due to the absence of the other person—they are capable of a level of honesty that was less characteristic of their previous “live” relationship. However, the monologic form places the other in the position of a passive audience and helps to avoid

4 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 31.

5 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 31.

addressing the problems in their relationship. So, it is unclear whether these voice messages function as a means of breaking out of isolation and facilitating a more profound connection—that is, if they genuinely mediate—or if they only reinforce the protagonists' lonely withdrawal into their “private quarantines.” The text is ultimately pessimistic about this issue. Garaczi brilliantly reveals the uncanny nature of technological interfaces, the way the voice recordings generate asynchronous situations instead of conditions for simultaneous presence, dialogue, and encounter. The novel also conveys the experience of asynchronicity through its compositional technique: we often read about the circumstances of listening to a particular voice message before finding out the content of the recordings. By ‘splitting’ the communication, Garaczi emphasizes the distance between the two people and evokes the feeling of failure in establishing a connection. Instead of the concrete voice message, we typically read its subjective interpretation, blending with the circumstances of recording and listening. So much so that it is often challenging to identify whether the same message is being discussed. Similarly elusive is the reconstruction of what is said in a particular voice message and what is the projection of the listener's memory, imagination, and desires.

One of the most brilliant techniques of the novel is the continuous blending of the planes of reality and fantasy, in which the gradually blurring boundary between the virtual and the “offline” world plays a crucial role. The text, particularly in the narrative of Brúnó, a system administrator addicted to computer games, often uses metaphors from the IT world to describe events. Brúnó outlines his social anxiety in the following way: “I have the skills, but I freeze in the field, the system crashes. [...] Being with someone is a continuous standby mode [...].”⁶ For him, the virtual world seems freer and safer than the external world, which he perceives as threatening and “claustrophobic”:

“The violent world of offline communication, power games, repetitive resentment monologues, lamentation-arias, displays of culture. The haunting memory of the nonsense slipping out of your mouth for days. Online, you are freer and more vulnerable; the humaneness of the digital gamer overrides the rigid singularity of the analog. Happiness is a matter of imagination [...].”⁷

By interpreting reality through the language of information technology and mapping reality linguistically as a derivative of the digital world, the text unsettles the usual hierarchy among levels of reality. It challenges the conventional notion that the plane of virtuality is inherently secondary and derived from live presence. Simultaneously,

6 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 22.

7 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 20–21.

it points out that the two reality planes cannot be definitively separated because they continuously contaminate each other in both experience and language.

The novel includes several episodes when it is indistinguishable whether actual events are occurring or merely fantasies of fear and desire playing out in the characters' minds. In Brúnó's narrative thread, images of an escalating violent conflict repeatedly emerge. The fragmented scenes can be pieced together into a story in which Brúnó is attacked by a homeless person in a park, whom he kills in the unfolding fight. However, the status of this scene is quite uncertain. It is unknowable whether this actually occurred or if it is only Brúnó's paranoid delusion (who constantly fears attacks) or perhaps pieces of a real but less severe confrontation blended into the fantasy of a violent showdown. By using various destabilizing effects, the text detaches the scene from reality: the episodes at different points in the novel do not align perfectly, and contradictory information is provided about the attacker's identity. He appears at times as a homeless person and at other times as a community service worker, and the character also overlaps with the figure of Brúnó's father. Furthermore, the dispassionate description and the expressions borrowed from the digital world create the impression that we are reading about a fight unfolding in the virtual world:

“I switch to autopilot, I hit, he regains his balance, assumes a boxer's stance, bounces on his feet. We circle each other, he lunges, and with a scything motion, he kicks. There's a knife in my mouth, but I still have lives left. He swings the stick, water droplets flying in all directions. The clawed metal clamp approaches my thigh, a jaw opening for a bite, realistic graphics, vivid colors.”⁸

It is indistinguishable whether Brúnó, who is deeply addicted to playing fighting computer games, perceives reality according to the patterns he learned from the latter or this is a fight scene from a highly realistic video game. The counterpart scene in Hajni's narrative thread presents a similarly uncertain series of images depicting the murder of her neighbor. First, the violent visions invade Hajni's restless mind when she is unable to sleep:

“Apple peel sticks to the hammer's head, I lean closer, see hair strands, a bloody bit of skin. I slip on the greasy stone, crawl on all fours into the room [...]”⁹

Later in the chapter, the confusion intensifies:

“Notification arrives that I have an animated memory. I don't remember taking photos. I want to delete it, then I look into it. Moving spots, swirling

8 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 118.

9 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 112.

twilight in the hallway in Sopron. The crunching of the breaking skull.
Dropped hammer.”¹⁰

However, this description, which emphasizes the blurriness of the recording, also leaves open the possibility that it might be the product of Hajni’s imagination, for she is in a state of tension due to the breakup and the pandemic. Therefore, technological recording does not necessarily anchor reality in the novel but may also be the source of false memories.

Nevertheless, two almost different relationship stories emerge from the narratives of Hajni and Brúnó, and despite the continuous online communication, they do not get closer to each other. In the present of the story, Hajni also seems to live in a different reality than Brúnó: she believes that Brúnó still lives with the girl for whom he left her and obsessively fantasizes about their everyday life. At the same time, the novel draws the reader into the realm of collective psychosis by placing signs in the text indicating that the entire love story is unfolding in Brúnó’s consciousness.

“We talked at an exhibition opening, I dreamt about her in the next few days. I didn’t even know who she was or what her name was. I invented stories about her, and I lived my life with her.”¹¹

Then, in another part of the novel, Garaczi writes: “You don’t know her, you have no idea who she is, what her name is, where she lives, what she does. You only talked for a few minutes at an exhibition opening.”¹² These references allow an interpretation in which Brúnó is the primary narrator of the story, and both Hajni’s and Sybillé’s narratives are products of his mind – a notion reinforced by the references to Brúnó’s ambition of becoming a writer.¹³ According to the diagnosis of the novel, isolation—also induced by the pandemic—leads to a psychotic mental state, where the connection with reality weakens, and private realities start to drift apart. The uncertainty of the boundary between the virtual and the “offline” world contributes significantly to this, as do the technological interfaces specifically. The latter, by generating asynchrony, hindering dialogue, and offering illusory substitutes of presence, instead of aiding in the escape from isolation and fostering connection, operates in the novel as a tool for creating and maintaining parallel realities, further deepening the state of the mental and emotional quarantine.

10 Garaczi, *Wesztég*, 116.

11 Garaczi, *Wesztég*, 22.

12 Garaczi, *Wesztég*, 121.

13 Gábor Szabó explores the implications of this possibility in greater depth, see Szabó, “A legvidámabb bolygó: Brúnó tudata.”

Social Phobia, Dread of the Crowd, Threatening Mass Images

In the first chapter of his book *Die Verachtung der Massen*, Peter Sloterdijk emphasizes that in the “postmodern era,” we mostly experience the misery of crowds instead of the euphoria of togetherness. Paradigmatic examples include overcrowded shopping centers or being stuck in traffic, where the physical presence of others is perceived as an obstacle and a source of irritation.¹⁴ In *Weszteg*, this experience is articulated in an even more radical form. Having physical contact with others usually seems to be an inconvenient and stressful, sometimes even threatening experience; moreover, mass situations are typically associated with negative connotations. The socially phobic Brúnó feels uncomfortable in any kind of intersubjective situation: “Dread of the crowd. Okay with one person, but best alone.”¹⁵ He tries to minimize contact with others. Working as an IT professional, he only takes on jobs that can be done with “remote access,” and he avoids crowded situations at all costs:

“I don’t get on crowded vehicles, I don’t go to the cinema [...]. [...] last saw *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in the theatre. I couldn’t focus because of the squirming, wheezing, slurping audience around me, falling from one artificial admiration to another. The theatre bases its impact on vulnerability, on the masochistic self-loathing of the audience.”¹⁶

As the description of the spectators reveals, the proximity of other people fills him with disgust, and he looks with contempt upon the suggestibility of “the others” who surrender themselves to the experience without any critical distance. He perceives the crowd on the streets as downright threatening, referring to stepping into public space as “going into battle,” and sees everyone as an enemy, a potential attacker:

“I leave home and my posture changes, I straighten up, squeeze invisible melons under my arms. Hajni calls it the strongman-walk. I abandon the safe hiding place, and head into battle. [...] Waiters and salespeople, scaffolding workers, tourists, pedestrians, begging homeless people, drivers, and passengers, I can imagine all kinds of horrors about them.”¹⁷

In the novel, however, the “dread of the crowd” is prominently linked to the pandemic. Garaczi vividly portrays how COVID-19 has transformed our relationship with the physical presence of others and with mass situations, and he also reveals the dehumanizing and alienating effects that come with the pandemic. Being fearful

14 Sloterdijk, *Die Verachtung der Massen*, 19–20.

15 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 22.

16 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 22–23.

17 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 23.

of getting sick, Hajni perceives people on the street merely as potential sources of infection and does everything to avoid having contact with them:

“Not talking to anyone, not touching anything, avoiding everyone. A city of two million possible contacts.”¹⁸

The text amusingly yet distressingly depicts how, under such circumstances, a simple train journey becomes a complex strategic operation requiring precise planning and constant vigilance. Hajni instinctively monitors her surroundings on the train, automatically registering potential sources of danger:

“I look for a seat far from others. I lay a napkin under myself, disinfect my hands. The conductor will scan the QR code of my ticket from my phone. Two rows in front of me, a bearded man has no mask.”¹⁹

Thus, through Hajni’s perspective, the novel shows that the pandemic has injected a fear of physical proximity even into those who previously did not suffer from “crowd phobia.” In examining the portrayal of the epidemic in William Owen Roberts’ *Pestilence*, Eszter Ureczky notes that the text captures the transition from unrestricted contact to the protection and compulsive cleaning of the body due to the plague. According to the novel’s depiction, the pandemic has redrawn “the boundaries of [...] collective and individual bodies,” playing a significant role in the transformation of the relationship with others’ and one’s own body, contributing to the formation of the modern experience of the body.²⁰ *Weszteg* sensitively portrays a similar transformation: due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the paranoidly protected body emerges, for which any association with the external world—especially having contact with other people—poses a threat to the self.

In Sybille’s internal monologue, which accumulates dystopian images, visions of violent crowds emerge, in several instances, related to the pandemic situation.

“The earth froths from the voices singing in the window, the sky grinds. New raptures, new ecstasies, mental contagion, spiritual epidemic, the paroxysm of the Zeitgeist. [...] Destitution and blind violence, the marching columns break down, hitting and slashing each other, tearing out the other’s tongue, and eating it so he can’t lie.”²¹

In the vision-like text segment, the depiction of the mass mirrors clichés originating from Gustave Le Bon: the crowd, portrayed as aggressive and irrational, plunges civilization back into a state of barbaric violence.²² The metaphors of “mental contagion”

18 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 5.

19 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 57–58.

20 Ureczky, *Kultúra és kontamináció*, 57–58.

21 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 111.

22 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, xix–xx.

and “spiritual epidemic” can also be traced back to the work of Le Bon, who was one of the firsts to speak about the “infection-like” spread of thoughts and emotions in the crowd and explained the suggestibility of individuals in mass situations with the phenomenon of “psychic contagion.”²³ However, it is crucial to emphasize that these passages display collective fears and fantasies related to the pandemic, thus the novel keeps a critical distance from approaches that stigmatize and devalue the crowd in an elitist manner. Furthermore, it maintains a reflexive relationship with them, emphasizing that in times of crisis, an enemy image often emerges, onto which fears can be projected. As the novel also reveals, ‘the crowd’ is a particularly suitable subject for this procedure because, due to the lack of fixed meaning, it can function as a rhetorical figure that can be filled with content in accordance with the prevailing ideology.²⁴ The text also emphasizes the connection between scapegoating and violence and highlights that the poorest and most vulnerable groups often become scapegoats:

“They beat a homeless person to death in the public park, migrants bring in the gamma variant, the mob heads towards refugee shelters with baseball bats and Molotov cocktails.”²⁵

In these visions, the phantasms of a mass grave and “heap of dead” also appear, which, similar to the mechanism of scapegoating, can be considered a common trope in plague narratives:²⁶

“Marking and collecting of the bodies, the lime cart roams the streets in the morning, in the afternoon, the backhoe. [...] They drag the driver out of the cab and start beating him.”²⁷

In Sybille’s narrative, the threatening character of the crowd depictions is amplified by the “facelessness” of the masses—the text does not specify which groups it refers to—as well as the indeterminacy of the speaker’s position and the fragmented and contextless nature of the images.

Virtual mass, biopower, infodemic

As I showed earlier, the novel addresses how the pandemic has transformed our relationship with the physical presence of others and mass situations. Furthermore, in various instances, the image of the crowd serves as a focal point in the text, condensing the fears arising from the pandemic. However, a more central role is played by a

23 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 10–11.

24 K. Horváth, “Félelmetes tömegjárványok és járványos félelmetömegek,” 42.

25 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 90.

26 Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 272–75; Ureczky, *Kultúra és kontamináció*, 33.

27 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 110.

type of mass experience that is not connected to physical presence. Peter Sloterdijk argues that new forms of mass(es) have become dominant in the individualistic, atomized, technologically mediated lifeworld of postmodern society. While the gathering, physically present, marching, and protesting crowd “belonged to the key scenes of modern psychopolitical space,” the mass now can be conceived much more as a multitude of lonely individuals surrounded by media bubbles organized into a crowd by participating in the programs of mass culture. “In the age of mass individualism—as Sloterdijk refers to the present—, a person is mass as an individual. A person is mass without seeing the others.” As part of this non-gathering, atomized multitude, the ambivalent bodily experience—the “impulsive, contagiously simmering, and panic-inducingly captivating” feeling of togetherness—that can be felt in physical mass situations does not appear. According to Sloterdijk, without the physical experiences of belonging together and shared strength facilitated by gathering and physical contact, masses increasingly lose awareness of their political agency. Therefore, the postmodern mass is inherently apolitical, “a sum of microanarchies and solitudes,” where everyone is interested only in having fun, and this bears little resemblance to the revolutionary collective that was once envisioned as the agent shaping history.²⁸

Weszteg also suggests that isolation—the absence of physical contact—does not necessarily preclude the formation of a mass, as crowd organization can still occur through various digital platforms, with the facilitation of mass media. In this way, in the novel unfolding in physical and emotional “quarantines,” prominently and somewhat surprisingly, the overwhelming experience of being in a mass also appears. This aspect is primarily captured by Sybille’s text, portraying the image of a simultaneously fragmented and homogenized, politically passive crowd, vulnerable to the control of biopolitical power. With its metaphorical density, the following sentence encapsulates the complexity of the mass configuration depicted in the novel:

“Crowds confined into phalansteries built from their own data, human mass regressed into a hedonistic infant body.”²⁹

While the image of merging into a single body highlights the aspect of homogeneity and the process of crowd formation, the metaphor of the phalanstery emphasizes the separation of the individuals. Furthermore, the dystopian image of the phalanstery presents lockdown as a biopolitical laboratory where people are deprived of their individuality and reduced to mere statistical data. The depiction of the crowd as a child is a recurring rhetorical figure in mass theories. José Ortega y Gasset follows a similar approach in his classic treatise on the masses: he compares the “mass-man”

28 Sloterdijk, *Die Verachtung der Massen*, 15–18.

29 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 89.

to a selfish, greedy, ungrateful and spoiled child who believes that he is only responsible for satisfying his desires.³⁰ With the addition of the term “hedonism,” the imagery of “regressing into an infant body” evokes similar associations. It also summons the image of the “postmodern mass” envisioned by Sloterdijk, which is only capable of consumption and entertainment and unable to self-organize. Furthermore, the passive, entertainment-oriented crowd consisting of isolated individuals evokes Guy Debord’s vision of “the spectacular society.” Just like in the dystopia of the novel, maintaining the passivity of the masses is linked to the functioning of power. According to Debord, spectacular power isolates and reunites people in such a way that they are no longer connected to each other:

“Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very centre that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only *in its separateness*.”³¹

The outlines of such a vision of power emerge from the novel, although in Garaczi’s work, the latter does not categorically fit into an anti-capitalist narrative. The novel’s conception of technology also evokes Debord’s notions. In *Weszteg*—much like in *The Society of the Spectacle*—, technology and particularly mass media—as will be discussed in the next part of my study—play a central role in forming the masses, the process of passivization and isolation.

As Márió Nemes Z. calls attention to, the quarantine imposed on us by the coronavirus pandemic is not an unprecedented phenomenon but rather can be conceived as “a virtual mutation of an already existing way of life.” “Internal emigration,” “the withdrawal from the social-cultural spheres occupied by power towards a private «interior»” has long been a strategy that helped to preserve the intimacy of the private life at the cost of depoliticization. Moreover, withdrawal can function as a kind of “antipolitical” gesture, serving as “the individualist program of the critical-political emancipation of the Self.” According to Nemes, however, the isolation resulting from the pandemic differs significantly from “internal emigration,” for in this case, it is power itself that calls for staying at home. “Quarantine discipline” is imposed by the authorities as “a community obligation and a requirement of humanist morality”: we contribute to the community by withdrawing into non-action. Just like in wartime, this behavior is dictated by the authorities. However, unlike war, which aims at the mobilization and organization of the population, the goal is to create total “dissolution.” Unlike “internal emigration,” quarantine can never become a political gesture because isolation also dismantles the politically active community. Withdrawal into

30 Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, 58–59.

31 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 22.

the private sphere does not offer an escape route for evading authority.³² Similarly, *Weszteg* gives voice to the distressing experience that the retreat into the home space due to the pandemic does not provide refuge against biopolitical power that increasingly controls and directs life while it invades the private sphere, eroding its homeliness and shelter-like nature. Furthermore, it outlines the fear that the pandemic provides tools and opportunities for the expansion of control and dominance for biopower, whose important operational field is the health condition of the population.³³

“Control over contingency. Surveillance and prescriptive state, data extracting and monitoring potential, free norm-following, golden strait-jacket. Ethnically-based social cybernetics, meta-data search engines of the Schnabel Center. Digital vigilance, digital Leninism [...]”³⁴

The dystopian, unsettling images of Sybille’s monologue emphasize the role of technology in this process, as in other parts of the text:

“Chirping smart masks, buildings, bridges, sidewalks, cars made of intelligent living tissue. Mandatory transmitters on phones, face recognition entry systems in the malls, and sensor algorithms monitoring the emotions of the crowd listening to a political speech. Walking recognition software of the police, attached link in the passport application to the personal health database. Nanoblades, QR code genome map reader, immunity quantum tattoo.”³⁵

The novel expresses the fear that the tools designed to support our health and safety expose us to the gaze of biopower while also maintaining and deepening isolation:

“In environments endangering your mental, moral or physical integrity, the bubble protection app sends a warning message to your phone based on cellular data. Doctor Schnabel’s broad shoulders, beaked mask on a military transport’s platform. Counter-terrorism units patrol in dark vans, they detect the potentially infected individuals with thermal cameras and isolate them.”³⁶

The figure of Doctor Schnabel, the plague doctor, who appears repeatedly in Sybille’s text, can also be interpreted as the allegory of biopower. The medieval plague doctors played an ambivalent role in managing the epidemic: often untrained amateurs or inexperienced young doctors took on the task, contributing more to the spread

32 Nemes Z., “Digitális emigráció.”

33 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, 139–40.

34 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 89.

35 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 109.

36 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 109.

of the contagion than providing real assistance. Since they were unfamiliar with the mechanisms of the transmission of the disease and lacked effective treatments, their task was often limited to registering the number of deaths.³⁷ In this sense, their activity anticipated the functioning of modern biopolitical power that statistically surveys and governs the population itself and “standardize[s] the quantity of total happiness and total suffering.”³⁸ Similarly, Doctor Schnabel is an ambivalent character in the novel: despite his medical role, he appears less as a healer and more as a sinister, faceless authority figure whose activity, as indicated in the quote above, is intertwined with political-military power.

In *Weszteg*, power primarily infiltrates the private sphere with the mediation of mass media in the form of news. As Márió Nemes Z. notes, invoking the Italian philosopher Franco Berardi,

“the real danger of the coronavirus lies in its functioning as an info-virus that causes psychotic reactions. The biological virus is a «living» entity that emits «non-living» entities (info-viruses) activated in the psychosphere.”³⁹

The novel strongly emphasizes this aspect of COVID-19, which is often referred to as an “infodemic.” Throughout the novel, Hajni’s and Brúnó’s narratives contain several montages of short news fragments. These snippets of news, combining both pandemic-related and entirely unrelated information, do not connect to each other in a coherent manner, and they are typically integrated into the internal monologue without added interpretation:

“The police are searching for escaped patients, autistics don’t need to wear masks. Its toilet brush-shaped imprint has been used to identify the virgin-fertilizing shrimp from the Miocene age. Fiona, the hippo baby, has gone online.”⁴⁰

As the text indicates, the truth value of news is often indeterminable:

“I watch the news, people in ski masks press a half-naked woman to the ground so that the down with the fossil corporations sign doesn’t show on her chest. The surgeon who burned his monogram into the internal organs of his patients for decades has fled abroad, the fact-checking index is fifty, it is either true or not.”⁴¹

37 “Plague doctor. Plague, Middle Ages, Facts and Description.”

38 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, 139–40.

39 Nemes Z., “Vírussá-válás.”

40 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 25.

41 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 112–13.

The news fragments form an inexorable flow, and—as emphasized in certain passages—they often “ambush” the recipient without being asked, so their consumption is not necessarily a matter of choice:

“The windows of Google News pop up, a bonfire made of cheap Chinese masks blazes in front of the prime minister’s favorite oligarch’s fortress on Svábhegy. The second arson this week, the ultras of District 8 burned selective trash cans on Tuesday at dawn.”⁴²

Although the absurd kaleidoscope of news sometimes creates a comical effect, the text overall emphasizes that the aggressive flood of information forms an indecipherable and incomprehensible noise, radiating a disturbing atmosphere of vague threat:

“[...A] woman with a fringe stands at the pulpit, with a pious grimace on her face. Her facial expression is threatening as she informs the audience about public affairs. I don’t understand what she is saying, the words don’t connect. Beating around the bush, circumlocution, lecturing, veiled incitement, but it is not clear what she is explaining, perhaps she is talking about the private, popular possibilities of prevention, I hear things like directed nose-sucking and conscious snot swallowing.”⁴³

In this way, the news is less capable of fulfilling its informative function, but it operates on an affective level, greatly contributing to the panic-induced seclusion and psychotic mental states that I have discussed at the beginning of the essay.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the poetics of Sybille’s narrative, which significantly distinguish it from the language of the rest of the text. Considering the previously discussed aspects, it is noticeable that the text here employs a similar montage technique to the news inserts. The loosely connected sentences and paragraphs do not create a coherent narrative that would enable the interpretation of the pandemic situation but rather form thematic blocks based on loose associative logic. This technique results in a condensed, almost poetically dense text, which is at the same time frequently saturated with concepts. The text mobilizes the conceptual framework of various theoretical approaches, engaging in the interpretation of the situation from multiple directions. However, none of the theoretical frameworks becomes exclusive: the different sections of the text formulate contradictory explanations and predictions regarding the situation. One of the paragraphs speculates about the potential positive consequences of the pandemic:

“Self-limitation, resilient structures, new evolution. Flexible social arrangements transforming catastrophe into their own energy, crisis prediction

42 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 14.

43 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 35–36.

protocols, supply system, alert level, network optimization. New perspectives instead of growth, alternative globalization, situational responses and joys, local competencies. The liberating diversity of contingency and unpredictability.”⁴⁴

The next one, however, envisions the insignificance of humanity and the impending catastrophe:

“To awaken from the dream of existing without technology, the human is the other of the artificial intelligence [...]. A fragile, vulnerable risk society, the uncontrollable, chain reaction-like effects of deceasing vibrational points. Drift, loss of balance, wrong answers, capricious dramaturgies, uncontrolled dynamics, systems tipping into unbearable states, accelerating, explosive processes. [...] The smallest mistake leads to complete collapse.”⁴⁵

The texts contain both fragments anchored in different theoretical approaches similar to the previous ones and paragraphs constructed from conspiracy theories and superstitious convictions:

“Vaccines disguised as vegan [...] containing chitin powder cause autism, spinal cord withering from wearing masks. From a cup of nylon-filtered tea, four billion nano shards enter the body, extracting the injected vaccine with a tied-up radish. Doctor Schnabel, in hopes of big profits, decimates humanity and starves to death with two kilograms of cinnamon under his pillow.”⁴⁶

The fact that this part operates by juxtaposing various theoretical explanations and superstitious approaches without any evaluation indicates that neither interpretation can provide a comprehensive and convincing narrative of the situation. This structure ultimately renders Sybille’s texts non-processable information masses, just as the text segments are composed of news. Consequently, Sybille’s monologue can be read as an emanation of a “collective consciousness” in which incoherent thoughts relentlessly race on. The characteristics of this “collective stream of consciousness” show surprising similarities to Gustave Le Bon’s description of the thinking of the masses, governed by a “collective mind.” According to Le Bon, in crowd situations, individuals lose their ability to think rationally and engage in critical reflection; they think in incoherent images without any logical connections between them. The cessation of reflexive thinking is the reason why the crowd is highly vulnerable to

44 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 88.

45 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 88–89.

46 Garaczi, *Weszteg*, 62.

external stimuli and can easily be influenced or manipulated.⁴⁷ Accordingly, it is striking that in the novel, this “collective stream of consciousness,” incorporating various fantasy images, news fragments, and theoretical snippets without reflection, is greatly influenced by the contents of mass media. The novel vividly captures the pandemic-induced state of mind, marked by anxiety and paranoia, in which, despite attempts, it is impossible to construct a narrative that would make the fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic manageable.

Conclusion

Finally, I wish to highlight the most important characteristics of the different crowd experiences and images emerging from the novel. 1) In *Weszteg*, physical contact with others or being in a crowd appears as inconvenient, frustrating, or threatening, while the experience of joyful or euphoric togetherness and the sense of community are completely absent. The novel vividly depicts how COVID-19 transformed the relationship with “live” presence, physical proximity, and mass situation, but it also connects these changes to the alienating and isolating tendencies of the contemporary lifeworld and especially to increasing technological mediation. 2) In the novel, the dystopian images of violent, destructive, barbaric masses appear, which has been a common trope in depictions of crowds since the emergence of mass psychology at the turn of the century. As I have shown, these images can be seen as mirrors of collective fears due to the pandemic, thus the novel keeps a critical distance from the approaches that stigmatize and devalue the crowd. Furthermore, it sensitively reflects on the mechanisms of scapegoating that emerge in crises and points out that “the crowd” is particularly suitable for use in creating enemy images since it functions as a rhetorical figure that can be filled with content according to the given ideology or power interests. 3) From the novel, the insight emerges that even separated individuals can become a mass, as crowd organization can also occur through various digital platforms with the facilitation of mass media. Still, crowd formation does not necessarily dissolve isolation. Accordingly, the “virtual crowd” portrayed in the novel appears as an atomized multitude consisting of lonely, isolated individuals. It is depicted as entertainment-oriented, politically passive, and unable of self-organization, and—due to the lack of community and awareness of political agency—vulnerable to the control of biopolitical power. The novel sensitively portrays how biopower, with the facilitation of mass media, organizes crowds and maintains isolation at the same time. The main factor in this process is the aggressive flood of information, often called an “infodemic.” According to the novel, in the

47 Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 18–25.

time of the coronavirus crisis, the news was not capable of fulfilling its informative function – instead, it operated on an affective level, greatly contributing to the paranoid-psychotic collective state of mind and panic-induced seclusion.

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