CAPONEU

The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Workshop programme

Dystopian Narratives and Stories about Illness

3-4 April 2025

Co-funded by the European Union

UK Research and Innovation

3 April, Thursday - Room M114

Welcome addresses	
09:30 · 10:00	**PROF. ROSSIE ARTEMIS** ON BEHALF OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NICOSIA TEAM IN THE CAPONEU PROJECT **PROF. KLIMIS MASTORIDIS** DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF NICOSIA
Session 1: Literature and/as Illness	
10:00 · 10:30	**NENAD IVIĆ:** Between Uncertainty and Metaphor: Illness, Novel and Language
10:30 · 11:00	**ANDREA MILANKO AND ANA TOMLJENOVIĆ:** Misplaced Individuals and Displaced Remedies: Modernity and the Novel
11:00 · 11:30	Coffee break
Session 2: COVID-19 – Reminders/Remainders	
11:30 · 12:00	**MERVE ALTIN (ONLINE):** Biopolitics and the Value of Life: Analysing P. D. James' *The Children of Men* in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic
12:00 · 12:30	**AURORE PAYROLES (ONLINE):** Camus' *The Plague* in the Time of Covid or the Depoliticisation of a Political Novel?
12:30 · 14:30	Lunch at the Block restaurant (main building, floor -1)
Session 3: Pathologizing Power	
14:30 · 15:00	**MAGDA POTOK:** Writing from Precarity: Illness and Politics in Two Spanish Women's Novels
15:00 · 15:30	**CHALO ÜA WAYA:** Renegotiating Elite Spaces: Afropolitanism as Epistemic Self-assertion in Natasha Brown's *Assembly*
15:30 · 16:00	**ALEXANDRA IRIMIA (ONLINE):** Archive Fever and Other Symptoms of Bureaucratic Malaise: Pathologies of Public Office in 20th and 21st Century Dystopian Novels
16:00 · 16:30	Coffee break

Sesson 4: Social and Political *Dis*-ease	
16:30 · 17:00	KARLO DRŽAIĆ: The Socialist Disease and *Fin de Siècle* Literature in Croatia
17:00 · 17:30	MARINA PROTRKA ŠTIMEC: The Diseases of Politics and the Pharmakon of Literature
19:00	Dinner

4 April, Friday - Room M114

Session 5: Gender and Dystopia	
09:30 · 10:00	BŁAŻEJ WARKOCKI: Witold Gombrowicz and Male Homosocial Dystopia
10:00 · 10:30	ALMUDENA MACHADO-JIMÉNEZ (ONLINE): Upcycling Waste: About the Pathologisation, Stigmatisation and Strategic Empowerment of Women in Post-transition Patriarchal Utopias
10:30 · 11:00	Coffee break
Session 6: The Virus Which Asks Questions	
11:00 · 11:30	IREN BOYARKINA (ONLINE): Virus and Diseases in the Works by Olaf Stapledon
11:30 · 12:00	ZRINKA BOŽIĆ: Rethinking the Political in Metafiction: Rereading Borislav Pekić's *Rabies*
12:00 · 14:00	Lunch at the Block restaurant (main building, floor -1)
Session 7: Reading Illness and Literature, Reading Society	
14:00 ·14:30	ERIC BERGMAN: A Methodology for Reading 'Inaccessible' Texts in World Literature (Case Study: Illness in Miroslav Krleža's *On the Edge of Reason*)
14:30 · 15:00	ANTE ANDABARAK: Literature as Illness
15:00 · 15:30	Closing remarks
19:00	Dinner

ABSTRACTS

ALTIN, MERVE
ÇANAKKALE ONSEKIZ MART UNIVERSITY, TÜRKIYE

Biopolitics and the Value of Life:
Analysing P. D. James' The Children of Men in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The concept of biopolitics, as conceptualised by philosophers like Michel Foucault, refers to the ways in which governments manage and regulate populations by controlling bodies and biological processes. P. D. James' novel *The Children of Men* (1992) depicts a dystopian future where humanity is on the verge of extinction due to infertility on a global scale, with no children having been born for nearly two decades. In this setting, where a global phenomenon is threatening to wipe off civilisation, the state exerts control over the population's reproductive capacity through strict measurements and medical procedures. It can be argued that this biopolitical dynamic is reminiscent of the mechanisms that were in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, where governments made critical decisions regarding vaccine distribution, healthcare allocation, and public safety measures. In that sense, both *The Children of Men* and the COVID-19 pandemic expose the complexities of state intervention in managing human life during crises. The novel's portrayal of a society where reproductive rights are tightly controlled and life is subject to state regulation resonates with how the governments have navigated the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the moral and political conundrums that occur when governments assert biopolitical authority over their populations through an analysis of both fictional and real-world responses to crises. Thus, it seeks to discuss how these dynamics shape the value and meaning of life in times of profound uncertainty and crisis.

ANDABARAK, ANTE
UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB, CROATIA

Literature as Illness

Alberto Spaini, who translated Franz Kafka's *The Trial* into Italian in 1933, proposed a reading of the novel where Josef K. standing accused before a tribunal speaks to another situation, that of a man facing an onset of incurable disease and awaiting death. The formula of 'sickness as the key' may well turn out to be a particularly felicitous and fruitful approach to literary oeuvre famous for enthusiastically inviting, while simultaneously sending up, all manner of interpretations. However, even more interesting than finding plentiful traces of illnesses all over the body of work mostly made up of disjecta membra, would be to follow Kafka's thinking to its logical conclusion – literature itself is sickness. In 1912, Kafka wrote in his diary: 'When it had become clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction of my being, everything thronged there and left empty all the abilities that were directed toward the pleasures of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection music first and foremost. I wasted away in all these directions.' This impoverishment, integral to and indispensable for writing literature would find its full-bodied expression in some of Kafka's very last pieces of writing, the short stories "A Starvation Artist" and "Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse People," the print proofs of which he was correcting in throes of tuberculosis on his deathbed.

BERGMAN, ERIC
UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB, CROATIA

A Methodology for Reading 'Inaccessible' Texts in World Literature
(Case Study: Illness in Miroslav Krleža's *On the Edge of Reason*)

This paper sets out to trace the methods by which we, as scholars, may access texts written in languages we don't master, thereby widening our world literature frame. By inverting Franco Moretti's (2000) 'distant reading' to singular texts, the aim is to participate in literary discussions in these languages.

As a non-Croatian reader, I document my experiences developing the method while researching illness in Miroslav Krleža's novel *On the Edge of Reason*. The novel itself has been translated into English, but the premise is

that much of the scholarly discussion, as well as the sociocultural, historical, political, and economic context in which it is situated, will be written in Croatian. The secondary sources are accessed via machine translation (e.g., Google Translate). Croatia is currently my home so, at the same time, this paper documents the experience of being a transnational scholar.

The motivations for the method are: curiosity is a driver of knowledge production and this method gives us access to topics we may be curious about; it is inherently anti-ethnocentric and expands one's knowledge of other cultures; it gives the transnational scholar knowledge about the professional milieu in which she is situated, thereby developing belonging; and the research itself becomes a cultural artefact between the studied culture and the home culture of the researcher.

The outcome is that Krleža uses Rabelaisian lists—grotesque, overabundant, humorous—to formally represent the sickness that is feudal capitalism or, in other words, capitalism implemented on top of feudal class structures.

BOYARKINA, IREN
UNIVERSITY OF ROME LA SAPIENZA, ITALY

Virus and Diseases in the Works by Olaf Stapledon

It seems that virus, diseases, plagues and epidemics occupy an important place in the narratives by Olaf Stapledon. One of the possible reasons for that is that disease plays an important role in the evolution of the human species, in *Last and First Men* Stapledon narrates the evolution of eighteen different human species. In the novel, one of the human species appeared as a result of an epidemic of biological variations, some civilizations, on the contrary, were destroyed by epidemics; a lot of attention is also dedicated to viruses and bacteria threatening human existence. The paper focuses on the theme of diseases and epidemics in *Last and First Men* (1930) by William Olaf Stapledon, analyses their functions in the narration and their role in the evolution of the human species. The paper studies dystopian trends in *Last and First Men* and its role in critiquing political regimes.

BOŽIĆ, ZRINKA
UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB, CROATIA

Rethinking the Political in Metafiction: Rereading Borislav Pekić's *Rabies*

Since the term "metafiction" (coined by William H. Gass) was first introduced to describe a new form of storytelling — fictions about fictions characterised by self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-knowledge and ironic self-distancing — a substantial body of literary criticism and theory has emerged. This includes contributions by John Barth, Linda Hutcheon, Robert Sholes, Gerald Prince, Patricia Waugh and others. Based on the idea that metafiction is a "borderline discourse"," a form of writing that crosses the boundary between fiction and criticism and makes this boundary its subject (Mark Currie), this article will explore the political implications of this particular literary form.

As the boundary between fiction and criticism has become a point of convergence where each side absorbs the insights of the other, this has led to a self-conscious and productive energy on both fronts. The paper will focus on a specific example of genre literature: *Rabies* (*Besnilo*, 1983), a thriller novel by the eminent Serbian author Borislav Pekić. At London's Heathrow Airport in midsummer, a biological catastrophe occurs that has never been seen before in modern history. The mutation of the rabies virus in a scientific laboratory leads to an epidemic that spreads at an alarming rate, as no vaccine proves effective. Tens of thousands of passengers and airport staff are quarantined in a huge complex. A rereading of this novel is warranted not only because of its politically charged subject matter — especially in the current context of the post-pandemic era — but also because of the consideration of the political within the literary form of metafiction itself.

DRŽAIĆ, KARLO
UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB, CROATIA

The Socialist Disease and *Fin de Siècle* Literature in Croatia

On July 24, 1919, the main newspapers in Varaždin, a small town and industrial centre in northern Croatia, ran a large headline: "The Bolshevik Movement Has Infected Our Town!" A day earlier, Varaždin's communists had initiated an uprising—a revolution that established a republic of workers,

peasants, and soldiers. Revolutionary republic lasted less than a day before being crushed by the troops loyal to the government.

This uprising was just one of many similar events occurring in Croatia and across Europe at the time. As much as it was symptomatic of the socio-political turmoil of the postwar period, it also reflected the dominant bourgeois discourse, in which the Bolshevik or communist movement—and previously the socialist one—was framed as an infection, a social disease. The origins of this discourse can be traced back to the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, when socialists first emerged as a significant social and political force.

The narrative of socialism as a disease arose in the context of the modernist and modernization challenges faced by the fin de siècle society. As such, it also entered literature, which was heavily influenced by ideas of degeneration and decline. In this paper, I will analyse and contextualize the emergence, within the Croatian context, of the narrative of socialism as a disease—something that corrodes and destroys the healthy fabric of the nation. To do so, I will examine two novels, Majstor Adam and Pobjeda krijeposti, works that are today rightfully forgotten but were widely read at the time.

IRIMIA, ALEXANDRA
UNIVERSITY OF BONN, GERMANY

Archive Fever and Other Symptoms of Bureaucratic Malaise: Pathologies of Public Office in 20th and 21st Century Dystopian Novels

Dystopian narratives set in administrative environments elicit a particular kind of unease, intensifying the proverbial anemic demeanor of record-keepers or data-entry clerks with the disquieting symptoms of more widespread “social pathologies” (Axel Honneth). Given that metaphors of disease seem to be – as I argue elsewhere – a general feature of bureaucratic fiction, including but not limited to “archive fever” (theorized by Jacques Derrida), pallor (foregrounded in David Foster Wallace’s Pale King), compulsive behavior (Bartleby), neurosis (Kafka’s K.), hallucinations (Brazil, Severance), paranoia (Memoirs Found in a Bathtub), madness (La muerte de un burócrata), or the tumor-like outgrowth of paperwork (Ikiru), illness is an inescapable trope in dystopian varieties of the genre. In novels such as Maurice Blanchot’s 1948 *The Most High [Le Très-Haut]* and Hellen Phillips’s 2015 The Beautiful Bureaucrat, the physical and mental wellbeing of the protagonists is marked by either a mysterious plague that state

administration fails to contain, or by long hours of isolating and mind-numbing office work in an unhealthy environment. In both cases, the figures of the two sickly civil servants stand as metonymies for a larger, diseased social body.

My paper takes a closer look at the symptoms of what I call “bureaucratic malaise” in these two novels. Furthermore, it aims to show the contagious nature of the systemic dysfunction that spreads from the bodies of office workers and of the administrative apparatuses they help maintain, to ultimately infect the meta-textual body of the dystopian writing and threaten its narrative integrity.

IVIĆ, NENAD
UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB, CROATIA

Between Uncertainty and Metaphor: Illness, Novel and Language

What is a relation of illness and language? Starting from Zygmunt Baumann's description of the difference between modern and postmodern attitude to death and illness, this paper analyzes the configuration of the discourse on illness in Pascal Quignard, Hervé Guibert and Jean-Luc Nancy as a specific poetic (novelistic, philosophical) strategy. Does metaphorization (considered in Antiquity as illness of language) represent an adequate poetic tool for making sense of the phenomenon of illness and its fundamental uncertainty and *Hilflosigkeit*? Can metaphorization of illness be seen as a contemporary life strategy of empowerment, as a diagnostic tool or as an apotropaic appeal to health, individual and social? Can illness or health of language be equated with illness or health of the speaking being? Beyond the difference between the normal and the pathological (Georges Canguilhem), this paper argues that the specific, poetic discourse on illness (novelistic, essayistic or philosophical) is always already a dystopian trope, creating, in the body of the language itself, two intertwined realms or styles of making sense: “modern,” “windowpane,” and transparent, unilateral, and “postmodern” opaque and dialogical.

MACHADO-JIMÉNEZ, ALMUDENA
UNIVERSITY OF JAEN, SPAIN

Upcycling Waste:
About the Pathologisation, Stigmatisation and Strategic Empowerment of Women in Post-transition Patriarchal Utopias

The present research expounds on the parallelisms between Bauman's modernisation and the conception of patriarchal utopias in our neoliberal era through the comparative analysis of feminist post-transition dystopias and their representation of women as human waste. Several novelists explore the use of the gender pandemic trope in dominant discourses to force the causality between the environmental crash and feminist revolutions and, in so doing, justify the declining birth rates. The correlation between woman and disease hence demonises the feminist movements while guaranteeing the foundation of a patriarchal regime in the process of order-building, unhinging a series of pseudoscientific social Darwinist measures that secure their narratives of the 'chosen people'. The newly-founded patriarchal utopia excuses the employment of sexual and obstetric violence as well as negative eugenics tactics, considering the pathologisation and stigmatisation of women—hence their dehumanisation and disposability.

I overview the coercive and hegemonic mechanisms employed for biopolitical administration through differential vulnerability and grievability (Butler 2009; Ciccone 2020; Lorenzini 2021), displaying thus how the stigma of dissenting beings is not only psycho-politically configured but also physically affixed on their bodies (Tyler 2020). Tyler's stigma politics, in what James (2014) calls our contemporary MRWaSP (Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchal) era—especially when pictured in dystopian representations—turn the stigmatization and commodification of those bodies as necessary for the common good and even as desirable among individuals in the promise of achieving perfection afterwards through their continual upcycling. The fallacy of perfectibility exposes that the strategic empowerment of the stigmatised effectively reinforces their instrumentalisation as human waste: It questions the very concept of wasted as 'useless' or 'unprofitable' while maintaining the semantic nuance of destruction.

MILANKO, ANDREA AND ANA TOMLJENOVIĆ
UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB, CROATIA

Misplaced Individuals and Displaced Remedies: Modernity and the Novel

According to Shoshana Felman, post-World War II literature has given voice to trauma that cultural knowledge and history were not yet able to grasp. However, every truly modernist work of art worthy of its name has been perceived or labelled "ahead of its time", effectively articulating what its contemporaries could not. It is precisely in this sense we would like to address the question of modernity and the novel: as opposed to a widespread misconception according to which novels represent reality, we will be analyzing novels as displaced remedies of cultural disease putting into words what remains unseen or repressed in society. Our aim is to pinpoint models and strategies below the surface reading, rather than compiling an extensive list of possible literary candidates. To this end, our presentation will include a novel *Isušena kaljuža* (1909) by Croatian writer Janko Polić Kamov, the novella *Death in Venice* (1912) by Thomas Mann and *The Plague* (1947), a novel by Albert Camus. Since all the listed titles take illness or a disease as a principal metaphor (or figure) of their fictional world, we will be relying on psychoanalysis as a primary theoretical tool for dis-figuring its foundations.

PAYROLES, AURORE
LEIBNIZ CENTRE FOR LITERARY AND CULTURAL RESEARCH (ZFL), GERMANY

Camus' *The Plague* in the Time of Covid – or the Depoliticisation of a Political Novel?

"Coronavirus boosts sales of Albert Camus' *The Plague*"; "The novel by France's most famous writer is spreading around the world almost as fast as Covid-19": these headlines summarise an editorial phenomenon that reached the media at a time when the most burning (and painful) reality of the pandemic seemed to combine with the fiction of this short allegorical novel written over 50 years ago. Already a classic of French literature, *The Plague* was read with renewed vigour when the containment measures and declarations of war against the virus came into force. The reasons for this are obvious: Camus sets the scene in the city of Oran, where an initially mysterious death affects a large number of rats and then people – it is the plague. The absurdities of government decisions, the courage of medical staff, the confusion of the population – many of the experiences of the world's population from March 2020 are echoed in this story.

Before the pandemic, however, this novel was read primarily as an allegory, as a political fable – the plague as a symbol of the spread of a totalitarian ideology, Oran, besieged by the epidemic, as a symbol of Nazi-occupied France. This paper aims to explore how the renewed interest in 2020 (including a series broadcast in 2024) in this 1947 novel has changed its interpretation and how it has transformed an anti-totalitarian novel into an epidemic narrative about contagion and immunity. The political dimension of the novel has been sidelined or even suppressed in favour of seeing it as a work of socio-medical foresight. Perhaps forgetting how *The Plague* could help us think politically about the government's decisions during and after the epidemic.

POTOK, MAGDA
ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY, POLAND

Writing from Precarity:
Illness and Politics in Two Spanish Women's Novels

This paper examines how contemporary Spanish women writers, particularly Elvira Navarro (*La trabajadora*, 2014) and Marta Sanz (*Clavícula*, 2017), use illness as both a political and literary device. Drawing on Foucault's concept of biopower and Butler's reflections on vulnerability, these novels reveal how physical and mental suffering is shaped by socioeconomic structures.

Rather than presenting illness as a personal struggle, *La trabajadora* links mental distress to precarious labor, while *Clavícula* exposes how financial insecurity and gendered exploitation inscribe themselves onto the female body. Both narratives challenge the idea of pain as an isolated experience, blurring the boundary between the personal and the political.

Ultimately, this paper situates *La trabajadora* and *Clavícula* within a new wave of Spanish fiction that redefines political literature through the materiality of suffering and bodily fragility.

PROTRKA ŠTIMEC, MARINA
UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB, CROATIA

The Diseases of Politics and the Pharmakon of Literature

Shortly before the end of the Second World War, the Yugoslav Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić published his novel *The Days of Consuls* (*Travnička*

hronika, 1945) and soon afterwards his novella *Letter from 1920* (*Pismo iz 1920*, 1946). In both narrative texts, he examines the foundations of the political – the conflicts surrounding collective perceptions and identifications – by locating them on the border between East and West, in Bosnia. For Andrić, this marginal space in dynamic times is an opportunity to uncover and analyse irrational drives, prejudices, fear and hatred, which – in the imagination of the Other – simultaneously create a marked space of poison, disease, backwardness, primitivism and/or decay. The "oriental poison" and "Bosnian hatred" in the perspective of the characters drawn in this narrative prose are presented both as a diagnosis of political mechanisms of identification and marginalisation in the production of the Other and as an opportunity to narrate the possibility of one's own writing or writing in general. In relation to the diseases of the political, where diagnosing others is a kind of diagnosis, literature thus finds itself in the ambivalent position of pharmakon, as simultaneously medicine and poison. By treating the subject of illness, medicine and treatment concretely, Andrić draws on the genre of the chronicle (as a record of time) and the friendly farewell letter in these texts and, at the same time, provides his own response to the fundamental crisis of politics, humanity and the possibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz.

ÕA WAYA, CHALO
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, UK

Renegotiating Elite Spaces:
Afropolitanism as Epistemic Self-assertion in Natasha Brown's *Assembly*

In this article, I will use a close reading of Natasha Brown's *Assembly* (2021) to show how African and Afrodescendiente writers are playing an important role in dismantling (post-)colonial epistemological genealogies and offering alternative visions of cosmopolitanism and globality to counter the monolithic conceptions proposed by Eurocentricism. Blending the concept of black refusal as it is presented in critical black feminist studies and what José Medina terms 'uncivil protest', I will show how *Assembly* subverts dominant and oppressive positionalities and forces a renegotiation of the terms and conditions of the African presence in elite spaces. I will provide a reading of *Assembly* as a project of epistemic resistance (again, to quote Medina) that draws on a subtle play on the pathologisation of African corporalities to mount a radical critique of the disempowerment of the racial subject and segregation in globality. I will argue that *Assembly* is an Afropolitan text—written in the context of what I call a becoming-one-again global oecumene and proposing a reinscription of African and

Afrodescentiente epistemologies, ontologies, relationalities and corporalities in shared and global spaces. I will argue that *Assembly* advances the objectives of the Afropolitan project by serving to pluralise the ways of knowing, being and relating in elite global spaces.

BŁAŻEJ WARKOCKI
ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY, POLAND

Witold Gombrowicz and Male Homosocial Dystopia

Gombrowicz, *Pamiętnik z okresu dojrzewania [Memoirs of a Time of Immaturity]* (1933), which was later published after the Second World War as Bakakaj [Bacacay, translated by Bill Johnston]. This collection consists of a series of interconnected short stories and is arguably one of the most fascinating queer works of Polish literature from the 20th century. I will conduct a close reading of the final short story in the collection, titled *Events on the Banbury*. It is a nautical narrative that reveals a kind of illness—paranoia—while also containing queer elements. Specifically, the story includes intertextual references to Oscar Wilde's 1895 comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as this play was the last one Wilde wrote and staged before his infamous trial, and Wilde's use of the name Bunbury, a riddle that subtly alluded to the hidden nature of homosexuality.

I will explore how Gombrowicz's all-male ship is transformed into a unique homosocial dystopia. To do so, I will draw on the methodological framework of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, particularly her work in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* and *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Additionally, I will provide historical context for the 1930s to highlight the political dimensions of this dystopian narrative.