



EDITORIAL:

**Dealing with the Past, the Pandemic, and the Future in
an Intercultural Context**

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Societies of today's world are deeply connected to each other through 'smart' communication and transport networks. Everyone can access any information, learn anything, contact anyone, carry out business transactions and all from the comfort of their home anywhere in the world. Whereas, stepping back to the 1800s or early 1900s, such privileges were not there, and human mobility among civilians was much more limited than now. Hence, pandemics such as the influenza of 1918 that killed over 50 million people worldwide was mostly transmitted by the movement of soldiers in the first world war (Martini et al., 2019, p. E65).

However, over the years, the interconnectedness of societies in the world has amplified global disease transmission with significant implication on intercultural encounters. For example, the advent of the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted human mobility as essential mechanism of the transmission of infectious disease globally. This was assessed with the help of airline and seaport data and travel information which confirmed mobility as significant determinant of the spread of coronavirus. As a consequence, countries adopted different strategies to control the spread of the pandemic, each according to each one's means and resources. The strategies included flight restrictions or total shutdown of international travel. On the other hand, the efforts to counter the spread of the pandemic had negative side-effects as it created what the United Nations Secretary General described as [...] "a tsunami of hate and xe-

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nophobia” (Pleyers, 2020, p. 306), alongside worsened financial and economic downturn (Alabdullah et al., 2020, p. 89).

Arguably, the Covid-19 pandemic has very significant long-lasting effects on world interconnectedness. This is based on the fact that the pandemic increased inter- and intra-state inequalities, and reversed trends in poverty reduction which has the ability to intensify sentiments of anti-global interconnectedness in future (Ciravegna and Michailova, 2022, p. 172). This is a result of the fact that the pandemic has fuelled populism, nationalism and the return of “interventionist state” in the economy, thus paving the way for the rise of protectionism. Especially as the responses of various governments to the Covid-19 pandemic undermined multilateral institutions that have facilitated world interconnectedness (Ciravegna and Michailova, 2022, p. 173). This created uncertainty regarding the interconnectedness of societies in the future as the costs of international transactions among societies increased (Ciravegna and Michailova, 2022, p. 173).

Therefore, in order for the interconnectedness of societies to survive post-the pandemic and beyond (in future), there is need for more intercultural conversations. Hence the theme of Interface Issue 18; “Memory, Pandemic and Transculturality - Dealing with the Past and the Pandemic, while Reaching for the Future in an Intercultural Context”. This theme is important because of the ongoing debates concerning global interconnectedness and its impact on society and interpersonal relations in a time of increasing mobility and pandemics. There is therefore the need to understand how we represent the past to ourselves and to others; and how these representations may shape our actions, identities, and understandings; and the ways in which we are ethically and politically obligated to remember, as well as the consequences of meeting, or failing to meet, these obligations.

INTERFACE Issue 18 is a contribution to exploring how experiences of suffering and pain relate to empowering memories of resistance; nostalgia for old times, values and social relations; or restorative memories of healing, recovering agency and constructive processes. This is height-

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ened by the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an indelible impact on the world's socio-political systems, transforming what was initially assumed as a public health crisis into a mechanism generating new architectures of social control. As the pandemic confirmed the primacy of life and biopolitics as structuring metanarratives of Western societies, metanarratives which transform bodies, movements, and molecularities into targets of a multiplicity of socio-political investments which include lockdowns, vaccines, PCR tests, and digital certifications.

Duncan McColl Chesney of National Taiwan University, opens our discussion with his paper “Saramago’s *Blindness* and Community”. The author explores what Saramago’s *Blindness* has to teach us, in a time of pandemic, about community and values. In order to do that the author includes in his/her analysis of the novel by Saramago, the film version by Fernando Meirelles of 2008, which is perhaps more popular than the novel itself. The author followed Saramago in his novelistic version of philosophical anthropology by looking to some key texts in precisely this discipline from the early- to mid-20th century (notably Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen) so as to elucidate Saramago’s view and contribution.

The next author, **Monika Leipelt-Tsai** of National Chengchi University, examines Franz Kafka’s parable *Before the law*, and the question of human rights in J. Bernlef’s novel *Out of mind*. The author argues that in the 21st century, one of the greatest health challenges “is a growing silent pandemic” (Project Alzheimer’s Value Europe [PAVE], 2021), i.e., the alarming rise of neurodegenerative dementing diseases of the elderly, including Alzheimer’s disease. The author claims this was formerly a tabooed topic in literature; one of the earliest modern literary novels that deals with dementia and implicitly touches the question of human rights is the bestseller *Hersenschimmen* by the Dutch author J. Bernlef, published in 1984 and translated into English as *Out of Mind*, which emphasizes just one side of the ambiguous Dutch title. The book provides one of the first narratives that describes the disease-related changes of a

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mentally ailing person connected to dementia from the point of view of an Alzheimer's sufferer himself. While experiencing states of delusion due to his illness, the protagonist misunderstands different situations and is confounded with former events from the time of the World War II. When he is finally transported to a nursing home, in his helplessness he suspects that he is being deported. This misjudgement opens up the interesting question of human rights in Bernlef. His novel problematizes the human rights for people with dementing diseases. In order to show the problematic position of people with dementing diseases, the text offers exemplarily analysed passages of Bernlef's novel concerning the issue of human rights.

Dario Altobelli of Università degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" Chieti – Pescara, questions the time of a state of exception and its specific temporality in his paper "After the state of exception? Temporality and historicity in the pandemic era"? The contribution explores the hypothesis that the pandemic era is characterized by a particular "regime of historicity" which has found, (not just at the present time, but especially in the present time of the Coronavirus crisis), a generalized clarification on a political-juridical and socio-cultural level in the paradigm of the "state of exception". With particular reference to the Italian case, the author reflected, in a philosophical, political-legal and historical sociological key, on the concept of the state of exception, which emerged in the process of affirmation of Modernity as theorized by Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben, in the perspective of the temporality and historicity involved in it and of which it appears to be a symptomatic expression.

Our issue gets completed by **Yu Min (Claire) Chen** of National Taipei University of Technology, reflections on "Eros, Existence, and Art in the Pandemic: Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*". The author argues that *Death in Venice* (1912), shows the predicament of a well-established and aged writer, similar to either Goethe's or Mann's *Dr Faust*. In one of Mann's later novels, *Doctor Faustus* (1947), the protagonist trades his soul and early death with the devil for artistic possibilities and achievement; in *Death in Venice* Aschenbach trades his life for the opportunity

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to continue his obsessive pursuit of Tazio as he ignores the advice to leave from a Venice that was experiencing an epidemic of cholera. As Chen focuses in examining the intertextual relationship between Mann's novella, on the one hand, and Nietzsche's and Plato's writings, on the other hand, she brings into attention the fact that the construction of values is a dialogue between different times and cultures.

The papers published in this issue of *INTERFACE* collectively both advocate that a more intercultural context is needed when dealing with the past, the pandemic and the future; and they emphasize our obligation to improve our understanding on issues related to interculturality in a global context. This is because the interconnectedness of societies from different parts of the world has opened up the opportunity for a global intercultural context to emerge, as people move more frequently across-cultural borders, build closer relationships with individuals from other cultures, and they encounter and overcome (or, are overcome by) barriers.

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