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Snapshots of the Pandemic. Vulnerable Humanity in Deborah Levy's *August Blue*

Abstract: This article aims to address the apparent duality of Deborah Levy's literary take on the COVID-19 landscape in her latest novel, *August Blue* (2023). It demonstrates how fragility and the crisis of humanity and of the protagonist are depicted through the lens of the global event of the pandemic. The methodology combines photography theory, with a special emphasis on Roland Barthes's and Susan Sontag's diagnoses, and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis supplemented with Bracha L. Ettinger's theory of the matrix. This approach makes it possible to capture Levy's photographic portrayals of post-lockdown society – people who are still afraid, but also weary and disappointed – and the complexity of the protagonist's struggle with her past, her conflicting emotions, and a mysterious double who haunts her across the Europe of the early 2020s.
Keywords: Deborah Levy, COVID-19, literature and the pandemic, literature and crisis, doppelgänger.

> I let the stars enter my body and realized I had become porous. Everything that I was had started to unravel. I was living precariously in my own body [...]. The stars and the Seine were inside me. I was living in a very strange way, but I knew there were people in the world who were also living like this.[1]

[1] Deborah Levy, *August Blue* (Dublin: Hamish Hamilton, 2023), 96–97.

Fragility and Crisis

Deborah Levy's latest novel, *August Blue* (2023), is a close study of fragility and crisis. Its protagonist, Elsa M. Anderson, is a world-famous pianist in her thirties, who walked off the stage mid-performance in the Golden Hall in Vienna; we meet her a month later, in Athens, where she thinks she has seen her *doppelgänger*. Elsa finds herself unable to deal with her past, with her career and inspiration, and with her conflicting emotions. Levy, however, ventures beyond the personal crisis; set in the post-lockdown – yet not post-pandemic – Europe, the book depicts society after the initial shock: still afraid, but also weary and disappointed. The descriptions of the COVID-19 pandemic hit uncannily close to home: we observe people wearing two masks in a way that lets them drink iced coffee through straws, children who cannot stand their parents working from home, and millennials whose "identity is so fragile it depends on a flat white to keep it together",[2] to name a few examples. The aim of this article is to treat the pandemic as an interpretative key to *August Blue* and to investigate how the social crisis develops along the protagonist's personal struggle.

August Blue explores some of Levy's signature motifs. At its centre we have a protagonist in crisis – here, it is a young woman, which is common in Levy's prose.[3] The novel provides us with a cosmopolitan setting – Greece, England, France, Italy – for an intimate story.[4] This story features absent or insufficient parent-figures, (childhood) trauma and return of the repressed, and a sense of displacement.[5] Importantly, we can also observe a tension be-

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2 Levy, *August Blue*, 75.

3 See, for instance, Deborah Levy, *Billy & Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), featuring a teenage girl; and Deborah Levy, *Hot Milk* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), featuring a woman in her mid-twenties. For a study of the interplay of illness and monstrosity in the portrayal of *Hot Milk*'s protagonist, see: Anna Kisiel, "Monstrosity – Illness – Wound: Uncanny Interconnections in Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*," *ER(R)GO: Theory – Literature – Culture*, no. 47 (2023): 199–214, https://journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/ERRGO/article/view/14934.

4 For novels set in sites of historical significance, such as London and Berlin, see: Deborah Levy, *Beautiful Mutants*, in *Early Levy* (London: Penguin Books, 2014); and Deborah Levy, *The Man Who Saw Everything* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019). For novels set in holiday locations, see: Deborah Levy, *The Unloved* (London: Penguin Books, 2014); Deborah Levy, *Swimming Home* (High Wycombe: And Other Stories, 2011); and Levy, *Hot Milk*.

5 These three motifs are often related. See, for instance, Levy, *Beautiful Mutants*; Levy, *Billy & Girl*; Levy, *Swimming Home*; Levy, *Hot Milk*; and Levy, *The Man Who Saw Everything*. For a study of childhood traumas and a sense of displacement of the protagonist of *Swimming Home*, see: Anna Kisiel, "Bezdomność i wiedza. O ranach dzieciństwa w *Płynąc do domu* Deborah Levy" [Homelessness and Knowledge. On Childhood Wounds in *Swimming Home* by Deborah Levy], *Rana: Literatura – Doświadczenie – Tożsamość*, no. 1 (5) (2022): 1–18,

tween the protagonist's indeliberate metamorphosis and conscious attempt at reinvention.[6]

Levy's "wistful, fabular new novel"[7] offers us a combination of contemporary and universal themes. Starting with the contemporary ones, first, it portrays millennials with their generational quirks; special attention in this regard is paid to the protagonist and her friend Rajesh. Second, patriarchy and toxic masculinity are depicted as part of the western cultural landscape. Third, *August Blue* features members of the LGBTQ+ community and discusses – albeit perfunctorily – the issue of gender identity. Finally, it is set during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is highly period-specific as this crisis seems to have defined humanity at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. At the same time, this theme also fits into the long-standing tradition of (post-)plague literature. Similarly, the *doppelgänger*, Elsa's "gothic double looking over her shoulder",[8] is another universal theme found in Levy's novel. The last two themes – the plague and the double – along with that of fragile (millennial?) identity will be of key importance to this paper.

This article aims to address the apparent duality of Levy's take on the pandemic and to demonstrate how fragility and the crisis of humanity and of the protagonist are depicted through the lens of this global event. The methodology I propose also follows the logic of duality. An approach grounded upon photography theory, with a special emphasis on Roland Barthes's and Susan Sontag's diagnoses, will be employed to capture Levy's portrayals of post-lockdown society. These, as I argue, are photographic; they are constructed as literary "snapshots" – brief, casual, decontextualised, and highly visual. As we move on to the more intimate account of the protagonist's crisis, the methodology will be based on Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, including Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's conceptualisations of duplicity (the uncanny and the *doppelgänger*, and the mirror stage and otherness, respectively). Classical psychoanalysis will be supplemented with

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https://journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/rana/article/view/13239 [in Polish]. For a study of home(liness), belonging, and identity in Levy's prose, see: Robert Kusek, "'Niesamowite dziecko' Europy Środkowej. Deborah Levy i oduczanie się 'swojości'" [Central Europe's "Eerie child": Deborah Levy and unlearning "the homely"], *Teksty Drugie*, no. 5 (2021): 113–130, DOI: 10.18318/td.2021.5.7 [in Polish].

6 See, especially, Levy, *Hot Milk*.

7 Olivia Laing, "*August Blue* by Deborah Levy Review – Double Trouble in Greece," *The Guardian*, 24.04.2023, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/24/august-blue-by-deborah-levy-review-double-trouble-in-greece.

8 Noah Berlatsky, "A Doppelgänger Personifies Broadly Painted Possibilities in Deborah Levy's *August Blue*," *The Observer*, 31.05.2023, https://observer.com/2023/05/deborah-levys-august-blue-book-review/.

selected notions of Bracha L. Ettinger's feminist psychoanalysis, namely, her suggestion to introduce mother phantasies into the psychoanalytic canon, and her theorisation of fragility, informed by her notion of the matrix – the prenatal signifier of originary, feminine, non-Oedipal, non-phallic difference, rooted in encounter instead of separation.[9] These will allow me to grasp the complexity of Elsa's predicament.

Snapshots of the Pandemic

August Blue exploits a striking paradox of the pandemic landscape. On the one hand, nature seems to be regaining strength. Levy, in the words of her characters, mentions results of reduced human activity, such as increased water clarity[10] and unexpected appearances of animals; we read, for instance, that "during the various lockdowns the whole world was busy *rewilding* itself. Wasn't there a herd of giraffes rampaging through Kilburn, North-west London? And what about the ostriches on Peckham Common?"[11] On the other hand, even if this act of "rewilding" was commonly observed during the peak of the pandemic, people's impact on their surroundings was by no means nullified then. The condition of the streets of London is described as follows: "There were also clinical masks, blue, black, pink, lying discarded by lamp posts and the locked-up bicycles. […] The masks were soaked through with *spit* and *snot*".[12] The garbage flooding the city comprises the most emblematic item of the pandemic. That which is supposed to keep individuals and communities healthy, reduce the risk of contagion, and improve hygiene standards might instead evoke the imagery of the abject. Julia Kristeva portrays abjection as

> [a] massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. […] Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. […] The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck.[13]

[9] For a comprehensive study of Ettinger's notion of the matrix and its position with regard to Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic paradigms, see: Griselda Pollock, "Introduction. Femininity: Aporia or Sexual Difference?," in Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 12–21.

[10] Levy, *August Blue*, 41.

[11] Levy, *August Blue*, 122–123. Emphasis mine.

[12] Levy, *August Blue*, 71–72. Emphasis mine.

[13] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

In a similar vein, expected cleanliness and sanitation give way to precarity and revulsion when one faces the overwhelming mass of used masks, containing bodily fluids of other people. What is also worth noting is that the references to the natural world are human-centred here; after all, the clean sea makes it easier for the protagonist to harvest sea urchins whilst the animals engaged in the "rewilding" are zoo escapees.

In the novel, people find themselves affected by the pandemic in various ways. Levy puts it bluntly: "[E]veryone looked dazed and battered".[14] The aura of being tired is related to not only illness itself, but also restrictions and lifestyle changes. The sense of weariness becomes more localised when family issues are concerned. One of the characters in the book is Marcus, a teenager who identifies as nonbinary, which their parents either are not aware of or do not accept. Marcus struggles with the fact that their overbearing father works from home, inadvertently reducing the safe space of the teenager.[15] Moving on, when it comes to people having precarious jobs, during the pandemic they seem to have become noticed. The protagonist reports her conversation with a woman providing additional cleaning services in the time of the lockdown: "There were wealthy people telling her how the pandemic had made everyone aware how people like her were truly valuable. It had never occurred to her, she said, that she wasn't valuable".[16] The woman's account shows that she is fully conscious of – and discontented with – undertones of this kind of attention. The fact that her work and her value are recognised only because of the circumstances the "wealthy people" have found themselves in is indeed symptomatic of class dynamics in the modern world. Another leitmotif of life during the pandemic is that of small rituals. Some of *August Blue*'s characters notice how they have fallen into certain habits, which were intended to keep them sane, but at times turned out to be detrimental. Simultaneously, we might also witness a desperate longing for the seemingly unimportant rituals of the past. Rajesh, for one, has developed an unhealthy relationship with food. We learn that during the pandemic he consumed excessive amounts of it, and that "[h]is big moments in the major lockdown were cooking the evening meal and eating it in the bath".[17] Overeating has affected Rajesh's weight, appearance, confidence, and self-perception. Interestingly, Rajesh also makes a confession about pre-pandemic rituals he lacks most, identifying his craving for them as rather pathetic. We read:

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[14] Levy, *August Blue*, 82.

[15] See: Levy, *August Blue*, 51, 56.

[16] Levy, *August Blue*, 132.

[17] Levy, *August Blue*, 74.

> [W]hat I really missed in the lockdowns was buying a coffee. Sipping a flat white. If my identity is so fragile it depends on a flat white to keep it together, I can't see the point of those years I've spent reading difficult theory and philosophy. Capitalism sold a flat white to me as if it were a cup of freedom.[18]

The superficiality and mundaneness of purchasing a coffee testifies to the newfound, uncalled-for vulnerability of Rajesh and, perhaps more broadly, of the generation he represents. A man in his thirties, he seems to embody a common stereotype of a confused, immature millennial, who, separated from his routines, loses a sense of stable identity. What these brief portraits of people in the times of the pandemic strike us with is their bluntness – if not banality – and yet they appear to be disturbingly familiar.

A related issue is that of end-of-the-world narratives, which combine fatalism with detachment. Rajesh's contribution turns out to be invaluable here as he announces that humanity is on the verge of extinction due to such seemingly dissimilar problems as inflation and rising sea levels.[19] The protagonist, however, realises that Rajesh and his peers are not the first ones to have such apocalyptic anxieties; we read: "Some days he thought it was the end of the world, but haven't generations before us always thought that?"[20] This intuition testifies to a larger truth: that the COVID-19-oriented narratives of the end are by no means unique. They do not provide us with a new language or perspective on the world, and they seem special to us because we witness and experience the changes firsthand. It is by the end of the book that the most comprehensive prognosis, made by Elsa, can be found. She argues:

> [W]hatever happened next in the world, we would still rub conditioner into our hair after we washed it and comb it through to the ends, we would soften our lips with rose, strawberry and cherry scented balm, and though we would be interested to see a wolf perched on a lonely mountain, we liked our household animals to betray their savage nature and live with us in our reality, which was not theirs. They would lie in our laps and let us stroke them through waves of virus, wars, drought and floods and we would try not to transmit our fear to them.[21]

Indeed, while the impact of the pandemic on people's lives is undeniable, it is perhaps less dramatic than expected. On one occasion, after she receives the COVID-19 vaccine and misidentifies its side-effects as symptoms of the actual virus, Elsa herself becomes genuinely worried about her condition. It is then that she "prepare[s] to become breathless, and die".[22] On an everyday

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18 Levy, *August Blue*, 75.

19 Levy, *August Blue*, 154.

20 Levy, *August Blue*, 76–77.

21 Levy, *August Blue*, 244.

22 Levy, *August Blue*, 133. Simultaneously, Elsa's fear resonates with Achille Mbembe's observation on the COVID-19 pandemic: "It is one thing to worry about the death of others in

basis, however, the tiny things, the routines and habits, the minute components of our everyday existence, do not change that significantly, and they will remain so, regardless of the current apocalypse.

Those who refuse to abide by imposed regulations form a separate category in the novel. Let us begin with rogue mask wearers. Elsa describes a couple she saw using masks in an unorthodox manner: they were "wearing transparent plastic visors under which they wore not one but two clinical masks. They were sipping iced coffee through straws and they had pierced their masks to get the straws into their mouths".[23] On another occasion, the protagonist mentions her agent, who tried to convince her that, in terms of hygiene and protection against germs, a more traditional combination of soap and water is superior to a hand sanitiser "as if he'd had a medical training".[24] The list of people who feel they know better than specialists also features denialists – people who decided against wearing masks and openly voiced their discontent.[25] What the above depictions share is a sense of hastiness and detachment. While these people are not described in a judgemental way, we do not learn about their motivations; in fact, it is only their existence that is somewhat confirmed here.

All the above descriptions of post-lockdown society are in their nature photographic. We are provided with "snapshots" of reality, instalments of the Barthesian "That-has-been".[26] Barthes explicates "That-has-been," or "Photography's *noeme*," as follows:

> [I]n Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. […] [W]hat I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator* or *spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred.[27]

"That-has-been" becomes the guiding principle of Levy's portrayals of the pandemic. First, they document the everyday reality of this period – its prevalent landscapes, images, people, and anxieties. Hardly a realist novel, *Au-*

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a distant land and quite another to suddenly become aware of one's own putrescence, to be forced to live intimately with one's own death, contemplating it as a real possibility." Achille Mbembe, "The Universal Right to Breathe," trans. Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry* 47 (Winter 2021): S58.

23 Levy, *August Blue*, 26.

24 Levy, *August Blue*, 30.

25 Levy, *August Blue*, 72.

26 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 77.

27 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76–77. Emphasis original.

gust Blue explores the absurd[28]; however, when tackling the pandemic, it seems to "satisfy […] our obsession with realism",[29] just like photography does according to André Bazin. Second, the focus is often placed on the visual aspect of these moments – the way they appear to a bystander. As Edward Weston argues, the camera offers "a means of looking deeply into the nature of things, and presenting […] subjects in terms of their basic reality";[30] in a similar vein, Levy's descriptions tend to be brief, but they strike us with precision and clarity. Finally, in most of these cases there is no deeper insight into the circumstances of the people depicted or the contexts of the given situations. Due to that, "that-has-been" becomes the only "truth" available to us, the readers, a truth verifiable by our own experiences and memories of the early 2020s.

At the same time, we already seem to be desensitised by the abundance of images of the pandemic. While discussing war photographs, Susan Sontag famously proclaims that "[i]mages anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs […]. But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real".[31] In *August Blue*, no pandemic-related atrocities comparable to the photographs of the war are depicted; still, the images flooding the narrative structure of the novel might resemble the media coverage of the pandemic, which seems to have made us even more indifferent. Some of the characters depicted here also seem so; Rajesh, for instance, says dispassionately that "[i]t's very soothing to play [the clarinet – A.K.] when people are dying in your street".[32] The number of references to the pandemic in the book certainly does not aim at shock value; rather, it helps capture the dissonance of a specific timeframe.

Elsa's Shadows

These literary snapshots of the pandemic may also be interpreted as *doppelgängers* of everyday life. They bear a close resemblance to what we all witnessed in the early 2020s. Historical circumstances become relatable here, as if appealing to the arguable universality of the experience. However,

[28] See, for instance, a passage about four llamas in the back of a car in Paris: Levy, *August Blue*, 152–153.

[29] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 240.

[30] Edward Weston, "Seeing Photographically," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, 174.

[31] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 21.

[32] Levy, *August Blue*, 74.

what we seem to be lacking is a sense of depth that would reach beyond the mere actuality of these depictions, or their "that-has-been" value. Elsa M. Anderson also faces her *doppelgänger* – a mysterious woman who comes to stand for everything that the protagonist desires and yet remains oddly similar to her. What is the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in the protagonist's narrative? In contrast to the above examples, when we focus on Elsa's account, we are provided with a more precise and intimate study of crisis.[33]

Elsa's first encounter with her double is already marked by the pandemic. The protagonist does not see the other woman's face as she wears a blue clinical mask;[34] she is accompanied by an older man, possibly in his eighties, which makes Elsa think about Arthur Goldstein, her adoptive father. The mysterious woman buys the mechanical dancing horses that Elsa also wishes to have. Thus, they share the same desire, but there are, indeed, more correspondences between them: they are of similar age, wear almost identical clothes, and have an older father-figure companion who does not have a penchant for such mundane items as toys. At the time of the encounter, the other woman seems to be energetic, in contrast to the man, but also – to the protagonist herself. As she walks away, she loses her felt trilby hat, which the protagonist decides to keep, perhaps to exchange it for the horses if the women happen to meet again.[35] During the encounter, Elsa immediately identifies the woman as her *doppelgänger*: "My startling thought at that moment was that she and I were the same person. She was me and I was her. Perhaps she was a little more than I was".[36] According to Freud, the notion

[33] However, this is not always the case. An example of a "snapshot," rather than a more detailed study of the impact of the pandemic, is a scene when Bella, her long-standing friend, kisses her spontaneously on the cheek. This act reveals Elsa's intimacy issues; she reacts as follows: "To touch my cheek with her lips was quite a dangerous thing to do. I had lost track of where we were in the various waves of the virus. The big lockdowns were over, but everyone was still afraid." Levy, *August Blue*, 14. Hesitation towards a basic gesture of intimacy coming from a close friend is only seemingly awkward, given the aura of the early stages of the pandemic, when people lived with the knowledge that anyone could be a carrier, even unknowingly, as at its early stage the disease has no symptoms, but is contagious nevertheless. In the passage Elsa distances herself – she refers to the collective "we" and "everyone" – because it puts an emphasis on an anxiety that is shared by greater numbers of people. This universality, thus, legitimises her uneasiness with her friend's public display of affection.

[34] Later on, in London, the woman also wears a mask; she takes it off to breathe, but this does not lead to any recognition of sameness; her face is not commented upon. See: Levy, *August Blue*, 69.

[35] See: Levy, *August Blue*, 2–8.

[36] Levy, *August Blue*, 4.

of the double is connected to *Unheimlich*, the uncanny,[37] which, interestingly, is "secretly familiar".[38] To be more precise, the uncanny disturbs us not because it is unknown to us, but because it used to be known and then was repressed; it "ought to have remained hidden but has come to light",[39] becoming, as Bracha L. Ettinger writes, "the anxiety of *homely strangeness*".[40] What seems to have come to light when Elsa sees her double buying the horses is a childhood memory of her first piano, originally belonging to her birth mother, that was pulled to Elsa's foster-parents' home by horses – but this is something Elsa comes to realise months later.[41] Both the sense of lack and the recognition of the double, occasioned by the pandemic-related restrictions, accompany – if not drive – the protagonist throughout the novel.

The two women's relationship develops as a result of not only their further encounters, but also Elsa's obsessive thoughts about her *doppelgänger*. Elsa starts to hear her double's voice inside her head and has spectral conversations with her; the protagonist admits to herself that she is the source of all these reflections, but maintains the conversation regardless.[42] It is through this duplicated voice that Elsa is able to learn her deeper fears and anxieties; it is also thanks to these conversations that she "feel[s] less alone".[43] Elsa sees the woman again in London; she notices a striking contrast between them then, which leads her to doubt their connection. This encounter is the reverse of their first meeting in Athens. As the protagonist engages in another fictional conversation with the woman, she notices that she sounds apathetic and lifeless; she sums it up bluntly: "Perhaps she wasn't my double after all. She had no energy in her body".[44] Later, in Paris, they actually interact – the woman throws her cigar in Elsa's glass and runs away[45]; Elsa finds her provocative, confident, "[s]elf-composed",[46] and as surprised by the encounter as she is. Then the protagonist aspires to emulate her: "I was walking as she had walked. With purpose and composure. […] An im-

37 See: Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17: *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (1917–1919)*, trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: Vintage Books, The Hogarth Press, and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 2001), 234.

38 Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," 245.

39 Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," 241.

40 Bracha L. Ettinger, "Fragilization and Resistance," *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 2 (2009): 2, https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.141. Emphasis mine.

41 Levy, *August Blue*, 220–221.

42 Levy, *August Blue*, 32, *passim*.

43 Levy, *August Blue*, 32.

44 Levy, *August Blue*, 72.

45 Levy, *August Blue*, 110–112.

46 Levy, *August Blue*, 111.

personation of self-composure".[47] Inspired by her double, she also begins to compose music:

> There were weeks when I played fragments of my score through the night, which is when I felt most in communion with the woman who had bought the horses. I projected myself into her and she became music. The air was electric between us as we transmitted our feelings to each other across three countries. When she emerged from the shadows of my imagination into minims and quavers, it was almost like being in love.[48]

These behaviours and the way Elsa describes them connote Lacan's theorisation of the mirror stage. This key moment of infantile subjectivity formation is based on the infant's narcissistic fascination with the idealised image it observes in the looking glass: the gestalt.[49] The infant identifies with its image, which gives it a promise of wholeness and a sense of motivation, but the very same act is also inextricably linked with alienation, misrecognition, and duplicity.[50] "*Thou art that*",[51] in a sense, introduces the image of the double to human subjectivity. In a similar fashion, Elsa identifies with her *doppelgänger*. She tries to mirror the behaviour of the other woman as she is enthralled by her clear-headedness and poise; Elsa's double also motivates her to be creative. This fascination turns into affection, but it is – first and foremost – inherently narcissistic; Elsa falls in love with her ideal-I and strives to transform into this superior version of herself.[52] What is more, as Freud remarks, the notion of the double is grounded upon not only physical resemblance and identification with someone else, but also "mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another – by what we should call telepathy –, so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other".[53] In the case of Elsa's *doppelgänger*, she embodies all three qualities. First, the two women look alike; second, Elsa chooses to identify with the woman; and, third, the protagonist believes they exchange thoughts and feelings as if telepathically.

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47 Levy, *August Blue*, 114.

48 Levy, *August Blue*, 174.

49 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russel Grigg (New York–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 76.

50 See: Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 75–81.

51 Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 81. Emphasis original.

52 See also the key study on the *doppelgänger* in the context of narcissism: Otto Rank, "Narcissism and the Double," in Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, trans. and ed. Harry Tucher, Jr. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 69–86.

53 Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," 234.

By the end of the book, the two women finally talk. The double tells Elsa that they could not have met in London and that the elderly man is her father; she also suggests that Arthur and her father are the same person, venturing to claim: "I have been walking him around for you".[54] Elsa gives the woman her hat back as she receives the mechanical horses. Elsa wonders: "If she was my double and I was hers, was it true that she was knowing, I was unknowing, she was sane, I was crazy, she was wise, I was foolish?"[55] As she looks the woman in the eyes, she realises, though, that she might have imagined more than was actually there. The other woman notices it and concludes: "We should never overestimate a person's strength just because it suits us to do so".[56] The ending is ambiguous. Elsa admits: "[O]n the night of that concert in Vienna, I had ceased to inhabit Rachmaninov's sadness, and dared for a moment to live in *our* own".[57] It is difficult to decide who the "our" refers to here and whether – in the context of the whole novel – the double actually exists or is merely a figment of Elsa's troubled psyche. Levy leaves it to the reader to decide. In his review, M John Harrison argues: "Who's real and who is not? Neither. Both. They're a dialogue pursued inside each other's heads, a mutual analysis of how long Elsa's breakdown has taken to develop, how slow-burning were the resentments and confusions that led to it."[58] Elsa's *doppelgänger* inhabits both planes of otherness that Lacan theorises: the "other which is the ego, or more precisely its image",[59] and the Other as "fundamental alterity",[60] from which one is severed "by the wall of language"[61] – the Other as a discourse. For the majority of the narrative, Elsa develops a phantasy about her double; she enters into an imaginary relationship with her and converses with her in her head, but the double's responses mirror her own thoughts and feelings. She chooses to see her double through the prism of sameness, and the shadow-image that she produces makes it possible for Elsa to learn something about her own issues. As they finally begin to have an actual conversation, Elsa's expectations regarding their un-

54 Levy, *August Blue*, 237.

55 Levy, *August Blue*, 243–244.

56 Levy, *August Blue*, 246.

57 Levy, *August Blue*, 246. Emphasis mine.

58 M John Harrison, "*August Blue* by Deborah Levy Review – How to Construct a Self," *The Guardian*, 27.04.2023, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/apr/27/august-blue-by-deborah-levy-review-how-to-construct-a-self.

59 Jacques Lacan, "Introduction of the Big Other," in Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 236.

60 Lacan, "Introduction of the Big Other," 236.

61 Lacan, "Introduction of the Big Other," 244.

canny similarity begin to crumble; she comes to realise that they are separate entities and that she must have exaggerated their "communion". Elsa's imaginary-to-symbolic *doppelgänger* – whose identification as such is facilitated by the pandemic – becomes a means to work through her personal issues. The *doppelgänger* becomes a return of the repressed in a form that is strange and un-homely, yet tolerable for the protagonist.

In his review, Harrison rightly observes that "[w]hile Elsa and Elsa drive the narrative, it's Arthur and the adoption papers that drive the plot".[62] The theme of parent-figures in *August Blue* deserves a separate study; however, it is the pandemic that makes questions about Elsa's biological mother resurface with great intensity. The pandemic becomes a pretext to reflect on their – forever unfulfilled – relationship. When in London, Elsa sees Tracey Emin's installation at St Pancras International station, *I Want My Time With You* (2018), and Paul Day's bronze sculpture of a couple in an embrace, *The Meeting Place* (2007). This juxtaposition makes her wonder:

> [I]t seemed to me that at any moment, reality could flip. Floods and droughts and wars would see us carrying our mattresses and blankets to the train station, maybe with one small object for luck. *If it was the end of the world, would my birth mother want to find me?* I gazed at the bronze statue and tried to work out if the embrace was a hello or a goodbye.[63]

Elsa's apocalyptic thoughts bring her back to her mother, who put her up for adoption when she was an infant. Her anonymous mother is a literary embodiment of Ettinger's category of a *ready-made mother-monster* figure. Ettinger observes that, in a clinical situation, the analyst tends to employ the *ready-made mother-monster* figure as a universal cause for the patient's suffering; she notes that this practice testifies to a hiatus in psychoanalysis and proposes an alternative approach, which recognises *three primal mother phantasies*. One of them is the *phantasy of the abandoning mother*.[64] In her daughter's eyes, Elsa's mother is indeed a monstrous absentee. She remains a mystery throughout the novel, and Elsa never learns exactly why she surrendered her parental rights. The protagonist has oneiric flashbacks about her and discovers that Arthur knew her, which is why he found and adopted

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62 Harrison, "*August Blue* by Deborah Levy Review."

63 Levy, *August Blue*, 84. Emphasis mine.

64 Bracha L. Ettinger, "From Proto-ethical Compassion to Responsibility: Besideness and the Three *Primal* Mother-phantasies of Not-enoughness, Devouring and Abandonment," *Athena*, no. 2 (2006): 106. The other two phantasies Ettinger identifies are *not-enoughness* and *devouring*. See: Ettinger, "From Proto-ethical Compassion to Responsibility," 100–135; Bracha L. Ettinger, "Demeter–Persephone Complex, Entangled Aerials of the Psyche, and Sylvia Plath," *English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (2014): 123–154, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2014.0010.

Elsa when she was little. In this passage, Elsa tries to make her mother's absence conditional. She asks herself what would need to happen for her mother to return and ventures to contemplate whether the apocalypse would be a sufficient reason to her to do so. This remains unanswered as Elsa and her mother never meet.

What Elsa learns as events around her and emotions within her unfold is to recognise and affirm her porosity and precarity. When in Paris, she has an unexpected experience of vulnerability:

> I let the stars enter my body and realized I had become porous. Everything that I was had started to unravel. I was living precariously in my own body; that is to say, I had not fallen into who I was, or who I was becoming. What I wanted for myself was a new composition. I had let the woman who bought the horses enter me, too. […] The stars and the Seine were inside me. I was living in a very strange way, but I knew there were people in the world who were also living like this. Someone in Tokyo or Eritrea or New York or Denmark at this very moment was living life precariously, too. This mood, with its ambience of low-level panic and hyper-alert connections to everything, would have its double or echo.[65]

Suddenly aware that her way of living is by no means unique, Elsa establishes a spectral relationship with other people experiencing a similar kind of precarity. The theme of the double returns here in a modified form; now, the protagonist is convinced that she is not the only person experiencing the, supposedly pandemic-induced, state of mind characterised by disquietude and interconnectedness, perhaps even *transcorporeality*, to use Stacy Alaimo's term.[66] Elsa's description of her mood also resonates with Ettinger's matrixial take on intimacy with otherness, and her notions of *self-fragilisation* and resistance. The matrixial potentiality operates on "openness of the I and non-I to the Self, to the Other and to the Cosmos".[67] This openness, as theorised by Ettinger, reaches beyond mere empathy, and instead relies on compassionate self-fragilisation, within which "the subject encounters the other, and realizes its vulnerability while resisting its own tendency to turn the other into an object and to return to its own paranoid abjectivity and narcissistic passive-aggressivity".[68] Self-fragilisation is then based on, on the one hand, extreme intimacy and shareability with the Other, and, on the other, a refusal to give in to objectification and abjection, (passive) aggression, separation, and narcissism – all of which are part of the subjectivity-formation paradigms of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. In the matrixial psychoan-

[65] Levy, *August Blue*, 96–97.

[66] See: Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

[67] Ettinger, "Fragilization and Resistance," 11.

[68] Ettinger, "Fragilization and Resistance," 4.

alytic paradigm, instead, "*resistance* is a working for, not against: a re-working for trust, again and again".[69] Ettinger specifies:

> In what I call proto-ethical resistance, I and non-I have to withdraw from their individual selves as they withdraw from the cultural-social surrounding. The individual subject is there in all its specificity, but it self-fragilizes itself, not to a given community, but in order to join different strings between several human entities, between some I(s) and some non-I(s) on a shareable level of infra-selves that transgresses its community.[70]

Elsa experiences a similar subjectivising encounter. As she ceases to focus solely on her individual experience and "become[s] porous",[71] she opens herself to radical Otherness, beyond the human community (indeed, she even welcomes "[t]he stars and the Seine" inside her body). Such openness renders the protagonist extremely fragile, but it also makes her realise vulnerability beyond her (mostly narcissistic) self. She becomes attentive and open to, as Ettinger calls it, "affective transmission of feel-knowledge".[72] Her intense interconnectedness, porosity, and fragility can be recognised as forms of affirmative resistance: resistance for the sake of togetherness.

Vulnerable Humanity

The way in which the reality of the pandemic blurs the familiar with the unfamiliar and the everyday with the deeply strange provides a possibility of introspection into the hard-wired anxieties of Deborah Levy's characters. The interplay of global concerns and personal traumas, in which they become mutually translated, offers a cartography that allows us to recognise, or at least sense, seemingly remote and concealed layers of the characters' psyches. Yet, as we investigate Levy's literary-photographic depictions of post-lockdown European society, we cannot fail to notice that they present a privileged and local viewpoint. The protagonist and narrator of the novel is not in direct danger – she is relatively young and healthy; this applies to

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69 Ettinger, "Fragilization and Resistance," 19. Emphasis mine.

70 Ettinger, "Fragilization and Resistance," 9.

71 The notion of porosity is tackled by Nancy Tuana, who, when discussing plastic pollution, argues that "[t]he boundaries between our flesh and the flesh of the world we are of and in is porous. While that porosity is what allows us to flourish—as we breathe in the oxygen we need to survive and metabolize the nutrients out of which our flesh emerges—this porosity often does not discriminate against that which can kill us." Nancy Tuana, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo, and Susan Hekman (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 198.

72 Ettinger, "Fragilization and Resistance," 22.

her friend Rajesh as well. Except for the side-effects of the vaccine, mentioned previously, Elsa does not feel ill or at risk. Moreover, Elsa's – and probably Rajesh's – relatives or close ones have not suffered or died as a result of COVID-19; people purportedly dying in their street do not seem to concern Levy's characters. Still, *August Blue* provides an account that readers may find relatable, albeit without the tragic outcomes of the pandemic – it is, after all, a collection of snapshots, aimed at an anaesthetised addressee. This non-unified form testifies to the random, hasty, and often unexpected reactions to the pandemic; these, notably, manifest subjective splits into various selves in the age of COVID-19 that encapsulate the inherent strangeness of this state of exception and personal reactions to it. That said, the *doppelgänger* might serve as a useful figure capable of tracing anxiety, loss, and change in the times of the pandemic. In the light of these remarks, the society depicted functions as a mirror to us, post-lockdown readers. Still, perhaps more importantly from the perspective of the novel itself, at times it is a mirror to Elsa: to her own weariness, confusion, and precarity. In the case of Elsa, however, the very realisation of her own precarity empowers her. The protagonist learns not only to open herself up to otherness, but also to accept her inherent duplicity and sense of lack related to the absence of the maternal figure. As part of vulnerable humanity, Elsa acknowledges her porousness and owns her blues.

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Kadry pandemii. Krucha ludzkość w *August Blue* Deborah Levy

Abstrakt: Niniejszy artykuł traktuje o dwojakim sposobie, w jaki Deborah Levy opisuje krajobraz ukształtowany przez pandemię COVID-19 w swojej najnowszej powieści *August Blue* (2023). Analizowane są w nim tropy kruchości i kryzysu: zarówno ludzkości, jak i tych właściwych głównej bohaterce, obserwowanych w kontekście światowej pandemii. Zastosowana w artykule metodologia łączy elementy teorii fotografii, ze szczególnym naciskiem na tezy Rolanda Barthes'a i Susan Sontag, oraz psychoanalizy Freudowsko-Lacanowskiej, poszerzonej o teorię macierzy proponowaną przez Brachę L. Ettinger. Tak poprowadzona lektura pozwala nam uchwycić fotograficzne portrety społeczeństwa po lockdownie, a zatem ludzi, którzy, choć dalej nękani przez dawne lęki, są teraz przeważnie znużeni i rozczarowani. W dalszej części eseju autorka omawia oraz analizuje zmagania głównej bohaterki z przeszłością, sprzecznymi emocjami i tajemniczą sobowtórką, która zdaje się ją nachodzić – a nawet prześladować – w różnych krajach Europy w trzeciej dekadzie XXI wieku.
Słowa kluczowe: Deborah Levy, COVID-19, literatura i pandemia, literatura i kryzys, sobowtór.

Die Bilder der Pandemie. Zerbrechliche Menschlichkeit in *August Blue* von Deborah Levy

Abstract: Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit der doppelten Art und Weise, in der Deborah Levy die von der COVID-19-Pandemie geprägte Landschaft in ihrem jüngsten Roman *August Blue* (2023) beschreibt. Er analysiert die Tropen der Zerbrechlichkeit und der Krise: sowohl die der Menschheit als auch die der Hauptfigur, wie sie im Kontext einer globalen Pandemie beobachtet wird. Die in diesem Beitrag angewandte Methodik vereint Elemente der Fototheorie, mit besonderem Schwerpunkt auf den Thesen von Roland Barthes und Susan Sontag, und der freudianisch-lakanischen Psychoanalyse, erweitert durch die Matrixtheorie von Bracha L. Ettinger. Auf diese Weise ermöglicht die Lektüre das fotografische Porträt einer Gesellschaft nach dem Lockdown, d.h. von Menschen, die zwar weiterhin von den Ängsten der Vergangenheit geplagt sind, aber nun meist müde und enttäuscht wirken. Im weiteren erörtert und analysiert die Autorin den Kampf der Hauptfigur mit ihrer Vergangenheit, ihren widersprüchlichen Gefühlen und einer mysteriösen Doppelgängerin, die sie in verschiedenen europäischen Ländern im dritten Jahrzehnt des 21. Jahrhunderts zu verfolgen scheint.
Schlüsselwörter: Deborah Levy, COVID-19, Literatur und Pandemie, Literatur und Krise, Doppelgänger.