Healthcare workers Vs. Coronavirus: A semiotic study of the Hero-Villain narrative articulation of the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article examines one of the hegemonic narratives social actors worldwide have used since 2020 to make sense of the Covid-19 pandemic: the one articulated around the hero-villain dichotomy. We can find this standard adversative structure in various narratives such as myths, fairy tales, novels, movies, and the social sphere in general. The pandemic has not escaped its explicative power. Since March 2020, healthcare workers have been widely represented as heroes – and even superheroes – fighting to protect humanity, while the novel coronavirus is typically depicted as an evil creature – a monster – threatening human life. After introducing narrativity as a key principle in articulating social discourses, the article analyses the role of the hero-villain narrative structure in the Covid-19 pandemic focusing on how it shaped the discursive construction of the virus as a villain and the healthcare workers as heroes.

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic became a global issue in the first months of 2020. A relevant milestone in its development was Wednesday, 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organization classified it as a *pandemic*. The Covid-19 pandemic was (still is?) a phenomenon characterized by its globalism, multidimensionality, and explosive character. Regarding globalism, it was a phenomenon that affected the whole world and required multilateral coordination

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(e.g., between national and local governments) and central governance (by the World Health Organization, the European Union, and other international organizations) to manage effectively.

It was a multidimensional phenomenon since it did not only involve a biological/medical dimension – related to the contagion, preventive measures, healthcare treatments, and deaths – but also other dimensions like the economic, political, environmental, and religious. The biological dimension triggered multiple symbolic, discursive, and cultural phenomena. These phenomena relate to how individuals and societies *made sense* of this unprecedented and disruptive event. Therefore, we can approach a pandemic as a biological, natural, and medical event that causes discursive, cultural, and symbolic phenomena.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic had an explosive character. Given the speed of infection and circulation of the virus, the passage from a state of "normal life" to a "pandemic mode" was extraordinarily rapid and did not allow a smooth transition. In many countries, schools closed from one week to the other, people were not allowed to leave their homes or cities, and telework became a rule. As a result, individuals had to adopt new practices and interactions in their everyday life without much time for transition or adaptation.

Practices and interactions are two key objects of interest for social semiotics, the branch of general semiotics interested in how social reality is constructed as an effect of sense through and in discourse. Over the past four decades, this research field has seen significant theoretical, methodological and empirical developments (Floch 1990; Landowski 1989, 2005, 2014; Fontanille 2008, 2015, 2021; Marrone 2001; Ventura Bordenca 2022; Verón 1988; de Oliveira 2004, 2013; Demuru 2019; Hodge & Kress 1988; van Leeuwen 2005). Even if social semioticians around the world differ in their concepts and basic tenets, they share a common interest in sense-making within the social sphere, in particular through the study of meaning-making as a *process* that is dynamic, open, extended in time and in *vivo*.[1]

Social semioticians took an interest in the Covid-19 pandemic from its early stages.[2] The "new normality" brought along new practices (confinement, washing hands more frequently than before, disinfecting things with alcohol, wearing facemasks, etc.) and interactions (online meetings and lessons, avoiding touching

[1] In spite of this common interest, a unified, general and encompassing social semiotics is still a task to be accomplished. This is the case because the theoretical enterprise it proposes is huge: anything ranging from signs to forms of life and including texts, objects, practices, and strategies (Fontanille 2008), amongst many other objects of study, might be of interest for social semioticians.

[2] Some examples are Sedda (2020), Landowski (2021), Leone (2020; 2021), Migliore (2021), Escudero Chauvel (2020) and Alves (2021), among many others.

the body to greet other people, video calls between family members and friends, etc.), while an explosion took place at the discursive level, i.e., the level related to sense-making of the pandemic in and through discourse. One example of this dimension is the individual and collective actors' attempts to blame particular individuals or social groups for introducing the virus into their countries, like when Donald Trump called it "Chinavirus" during a press conference (Perrigo 2020; Moreno Barreneche 2020a).

This article focuses on the narrative dimension of the Covid-19 pandemic. More precisely, it examines one of the hegemonic narratives many social actors worldwide used during 2020, and 2021 to make sense of this biological phenomenon: the one articulated around the 'hero versus villain' narrative scheme. This standard and transcultural polemic structure can be found in narrative texts ranging from myths to advertisements, including fairy tales, fables, novels, movies and other cultural products with a narrative component. Different theoretical perspectives converge in suggesting that narratives make sense of human experience both in individual and collective terms. Therefore, they are linked to *a cognitive* function. For Claudio Paolucci (2012: 313), "once the continuum of experience is given, something must segment it and give it form." From a semiotic perspective, that 'something' would be narratives.

The Covid-19 pandemic did not escape the explicative power of narrativity. This article focuses on how the narrative articulation hero vs. villain was used to make sense of the pandemic. Specifically, on one side, there were the healthcare workers, discursively constructed as heroes – and even superheroes – fighting in the front line to protect humanity (Moreno Barreneche 2021). On the other side, was the novel coronavirus, discursively constructed as an evil creature or monster threatening human life (Moreno Barreneche 2020b). As argued below, this narrative confrontation triggered an axiologization – positive in the case of the healthcare workers, negative in the case of the virus – that occurred almost intuitively around the globe thanks to humanity's shared encyclopedic knowledge and, in particular, to its familiarity with the 'hero versus villain' narrative scheme.

The following section introduces the principle of narrativity and discusses the role of narratives in articulating social discourses used to make sense of experience and everyday life. Subsequently, the attention shifts to studying the 'hero versus villain' narrative scheme in the Covid-19 pandemic (section 3) and the resultant discursive construction of the virus and the healthcare workers (section 4).

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2. Semiotics and the principle of narrativity

Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's relational approach to meaning and value, Algirdas Greimas believed that "the production of meaning is the production of difference, the production of oppositions" (Greimas & Ricoeur 1989: 559). This relational premise guided Greimas' work and the Paris School semioticians, in general. According to Greimas' semiotic theory, the analysis of specific texts should be organized in different levels and always pay attention to the sets of oppositions that make meaning possible.

For Greimas, semiotic analysis begins at the narrative level, a deep (as opposed to the surface) and abstract level that becomes discourse (empirically perceivable through the senses, with a specific plot, characters, a time-space location, etc.) in the act of enunciation. As Greimas claims, "the semio-narrative level must be distinguished from what I call the discursive level since individuals are the ones who fabricate discourse. They do so by using narrative structures that already exist, that actually coexist with individuals" (Greimas & Ricoeur 1989: 555). The production of specific stories with specific characters and plots is grounded in existing narrative structures that individuals use as matrixes or molds to construct stories. The semiotician's task, therefore, is to render that narrative structure visible through the analysis of specific texts.

Scholars working in various disciplines and embracing different theoretical perspectives have shown great interest in narratives to explain how individuals make sense of their lives (Bruner 1991; 2003; Ricoeur 1983; 1991; Somers 1994; Salmon 2008; Campbell 1992). In particular, semioticians have privileged the role of narrativity in sense- and meaning-making (Paolucci 2012; Fabbri 1998; Lorusso, Paolucci & Violi 2014; Pessoa de Barros 2017). For Greimas and his followers, the concepts of *narrativity* and *narration* refer to different things. They take *narrativity* as the principle allowing human beings to make sense of experience in narrative terms and *narratives* as cultural devices grounded in a plot. However, in the semiotic perspective, every discourse is narrative since the discursive and the narrative are different but coexisting levels. While the narrative structure is essentially abstract and empty, located at a deeper level of signification, all the diverse specific narratives are discursive products shaped by this abstract and empty narrative articulation.

The principle of narrativity will provide the general framework for studying the narrative configuration of the Covid-19 pandemic following the adversarial logic of a hero versus a villain. Greimas saw in narrativity the overarching organizing *principle* of discourse (Greimas 1970, 1986; Greimas & Courtés 1979; Greimas & Ricoeur 1989). Maria Pia Pozzato (2007: 70) states it is "the abstract organizational principle of sense placed at the level of the semio-narrative structures of Greimas'

generative path." Greimas had a *universal* conception of narrativity. As he argued in a well-known exchange with Paul Ricoeur, "when we speak about semio-narrative structures, we are dealing with kinds of universals of language, or rather with narrative universals. If we were not afraid of metaphysics, we could say that these are properties of the human mind" (Greimas & Ricoeur 1989: 555). Therefore, as Gianfranco Marrone (2007: 7) argues, the concept of narrativity functions as

> an interpretative hypothesis of the deepest cultural and ideological systems, assumed to be almost universal. Hence the idea that narrative structures contribute to the underlying semantic articulation of texts and discourses, both explicitly narrative and non-narrative, but also of concrete social practices and lived experiences.

In this sense, as the Italian semiotician elaborates,

> in the variegated field of human sciences, it is therefore evident that narration is by no means a practice and a set of contents that can be circumscribed within the literary, imaginative, and fictional sphere only; on the contrary, narration should be considered a supposedly universal phenomenon endowed with its own logics that produce and, at the same time, articulate human and social meaning, giving a form, and therefore consistency and value, to collective and individual experience, which is more or less codified and more or less institutional (Marrone 2007: 8).

Marrone (2007: 8) proposes that narrative models function as the "source and purpose of individual and collective action, and thus as a general form of experience and semantic engine of every micro- and macro-social transformation." This semiotic account links the concept of narrativity closely to those of experience and everyday life since it makes narration "the primary form of human and social experience, as a profound model of attributing meaning to the world of men and things" (Marrone 2007: 10).

For this reason, narrativity has become relevant for semioticians interested in cognitive science. For Claudio Paolucci (2012: 302), narrativity is a "deep form" that we can find in any discourse and, therefore, strongly linked to cognition since "stories provide a set of tools that can assist human cognition in organizing experience and knowledge." This is the case because, as Paolucci (2012: 302) claims, "narrativity operates as a mediating factor capable of managing our encyclopedic knowledge by adapting it to the situation." This idea is especially relevant to our case study. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the 'hero versus villain'

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narrative structure fulfilled a specific social function related to mediating how individuals and societies made sense of an unknown, unprecedented, and exceptional situation through what they already know (Eco 1997; Dagatti 2021).

One of our main theses in this study is that the hero-villain narrative articulation served the purpose of *making sense* of the biological event in a story form that opposes characters that confront each other in the quest to achieve specific narrative programs. That story – one of the human heroes that stand for and protect humanity fighting against the biological 'monster' – is a concrete narrative shaped by the principle of narrativity and results from using an empty narrative structure – 'hero versus villain' – as the matrix for the discursive creation of the specific story. Moreover, this was (still is?) a story that societies tended to assume would have a happy ending, as usually happens in hero-villain narratives.[3]

Paolucci (2012: 303) argues that "if for the cognitive tradition, narrativity always represents a form of thought that has the role of structuring cognition, for the semiotic tradition narrativity is the form of meaning that structures thought." For semioticians, the principle of narrativity is relevant because it structures thought: "if thought turns out to be the amorphous mass not yet articulated or segmented by semiotic structures, the syntagmatic form of this articulation is of a narrative nature for semiotics. This means that narrativity behaves as the semiotic form capable of giving meaning to thought" (Paolucci 2012: 304). That is why, from a semiotic perspective, the idea that "narrative is a basic way of shaping experience – intra-psychic and inter-personal, micro- and macro-social, phenomenologically lived and culturally filtered" (Marrone 2007: 10) functions as a disciplinary tenet.

Three more aspects are worth mentioning before analyzing the hero-villain narrative structure during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first is that narratives exist as *virtual* entities, actualized in different narratives through specific enunciation acts (i.e., acts of textual production). For example, the narrative scheme 'hero saves damsel in distress' can take different discursive forms, i.e., characters, spatial and temporal settings, plots, etc. The various Disney movies that use this narrative scheme for their plot provide ample illustration of this. As Greimas (1989: 557) argues,

> narrative structures do not exist per se but are a mere moment in the generation of signification. When the subject of enunciation says something, he utters a durative discourse and proceeds by means of figures that are linked up. It is the figures that bear the traces of narrative universals.

[3] The slogan "*andrà tutto bene*" ["everything will be all right"], which had a broad circulation in Italy during the hardest moment of the pandemic, shows this dynamic in a clear manner. Cf. Salerno & Lozano (2020).

The second aspect relates to the nature of the concrete discursive configurations that enable researchers to gain access to the virtual narrative scheme. Here comes into play the methodological emphasis of social semiotics: anything can be used as a semiotic resource to produce sense and meaning, from words to gestures, including images, music and the tone of voice. Therefore, different modalities (verbal, visual, gestural, musical, etc.) become relevant in studying sense- and meaning-making. Since cultural products are made of different substances or modes, *multimodality* and *syncretism* are crucial to understanding meaning-making as a process involving different substances (Kress 2010; Machin 2007). Here, the idea of *text* understood broadly as anything that correlates a dimension of the expression with one of the content is crucial. Following Paolucci (2012: 304),

> It is impossible to account for cognition independently of the semantic and cultural structures that articulate it (since thought proposes itself as a purely amorphous mass before the appearance of the latter); therefore, if we want to study these structures, we must operate on the basis of empirical manifestations (texts), so that we can find there constant forms of structuring of meaning.

Social semiotics is, therefore, an empirical science practicing a type of textual analysis, i.e., one that works with concrete corpora and studies how specific configurations on the expression level evidence units of meaning on the content level. For example, when examining the narrative dimension of sociocultural phenomena, analyzing specific texts (literary, visual, audiovisual, musical, etc.) enables researchers to understand how these are meaningful and how signification occurs.

To conclude, a third relevant aspect to consider when studying the role of narrativity and narratives in sense-making is related to the circulation spaces of the texts shaped by a specific narrative scheme. In our era, digital social media are central to everyday life. These platforms have become spaces for the emergence, circulation, and consumption of discourses and texts, sense, and meaning. Since these new media usually coexist closely with traditional mass media, some scholars have proposed to define this situation as *hypermediatization*. It is in this context that the Covid-19 pandemic occurred and the narrative configuration analyzed in the next section emerged around the globe to make sense of the pandemic.

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3. The 'hero versus villain' narrative articulation of the Covid-19 pandemic

We must analyze specific texts to gain access to the underlying narrative structures. Our study begins with analyzing a mural painting from the coastal town of Supetar, on the island of Brač, Croatia. Figure 1 shows a mural on the wall of a small construction located on one of the town's main roads.

Figure 1. Mural painting on the wall of a testing center in Supetar, the island of Brač, Croatia. Source: photograph taken by the author, August 2022.

The image is multimodal – or syncretic, in Greimassian terms – since it includes words and images. The words TEST and COVID19, two nodal points in the pandemic's discursive dimension, are written in two different colors: black and red. A possible interpretation of these words is that the small building with yellow walls was used to take samples for PCR tests. In the painting, the words do not stand alone, although their presence would have been enough to indicate the site of a public COVID-19 testing centre. Besides the referential function of language revolving around the message "this building is a Covid-19 test center," the painting also includes semiotic resources that convey a different, non-referential message.

The author of the mural painted two other figures on the wall. These are not easy to describe since they do not resemble anything from the natural world in an obvious – or hyper-realistic – manner. On the upper right side, we see five blue bubble-like shapes. One is substantially bigger than the rest and has features we could recognize as a *face* (closed eyes, an open mouth, sharp teeth) and a *gesture*. Based on the reader's cultural encyclopedia, it could be interpreted as a fictional character, such as a Pokémon. On the mural's left side, we see a black figure with anthropomorphic features such as a head, arms, and legs wearing a light blue facemask. However, it does not have a face or any other trait that might give it neither individuality nor human nature. These two characters are presented in a specific relationship that can be interpreted as a situation: the black, anthropomorphic character is punching, has punched, or is about to punch the blue bubble-like shape with a face, who is expressing an emotion that could be read as pain, fear or surprise, among others.

At this point, the reader might find this detailed description unnecessary. Anyone living in 2023 understands that this painting relates to the Covid-19 pandemic; that the blue bubble-like shape is the coronavirus and that the black character wearing a chirurgical mask to protect himself from the virus stands for humanity. Moreover, we could easily recognize the image as a specific occurrence of a broader narrative scheme that, since March 2020, has been used worldwide, i.e., that which represents the coronavirus as an enemy to be defeated. This narrative scheme justifies the red cape that the black character wears. The representation makes of that character *a (super)hero* thanks to the use of the cape; a semiotic resource culturally codified as a distinctive trait of fictional super heroic characters like Superman, Batman and others.[4] Therefore, the image evidences an axiologization – or valorization – of the two characters: while the anthropomorphic character is axiologised positively, that is, in *euphoric* terms, its enemy is axiologised negatively, that is, in *dysphoric* terms. This axiologization is grounded in the narrative structure that determines that one of the plot characters must be good/virtuous and the other evil/malicious. The result is a value-loaded representation.

The interesting aspect of Figure 1 is that only a few of the characters' traits are necessary for the underlying narrative structure to be recognized in cognitive terms. For example, the blue bubble-like shape could have been green, the black character did not need to wear a cape, and the situation depicted did not have to be a punch in the face. In semiotic terms, the specific figurative configuration of Figure 1 expresses a virtual narrative structure that was brought to life in this particular case as we see it, but that could have been different, like in Figure 2.

[4] This does not mean that every superhero must wear a cape to be such a thing. In this sense, the cape is not a necessary condition for a character to be a superhero, but it functions as an index of the superhero identity, just as smoke functions as an index of fire: if you see someone wearing a cape, then he/she is probably a superhero, just as smoke indicates that a fire is on nearby.

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Figure 2. Mural in Kazakhstan. Source: Cohen (2020).

The mural depicted in Figure 2, from Kazakhstan, also includes three 'bubbles' that stand for the coronavirus but these do not present any traits that might be read off being a living (human, animal) creature and/or having a personality and, with it, intentions and emotions. The virus representation in this mural reflects the three-dimensional model created by the United States Centre for Disease Control in 2020 to represent the novel coronavirus visually. There is also an anonymous figure – in this case recognizable as a human thanks to the more realistic representation of the body – that is fully covered – including the face – by a white suit replicating those that healthcare workers used to treat patients infected with Covid-19.

However, the white suit has in the chest the yellow symbol of Kazakhstan's flag: this inclusion functions as a cultural reference to the universe of superheroes since its position resembles that of the emblems that superheroes like Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Spiderman wear on their chests. The mural also conveys a relationship between these two characters, generating a situation: confrontation. This adversarial narrative structure is figurativised in discourse through the pose of the healthcare worker, who is ready to hit and whose closed fist is surrounded by a white and yellow shape that can be read as a semiotic strategy to set a focus of the action. Unlike the mural in

Figure 1, this one includes more characters besides the attacking healthcare worker and the coronavirus. A non-aggressive healthcare worker consoles two patients, and all wear chirurgical facemasks, like the anthropomorphic character in Figure 1.

While in Figure 1, we saw the virus had already hit, and in Figure 2, the virus is about to be hit, Figure 3 presents the same narrative scheme in the form of a healthcare worker in the moment of hitting the virus. As opposed to the previous ones, this mural does not include traits that axiologize the human character – like capes and other symbols – or the virus – like malicious gestures – in any particular way. The interpretation of the situation as advantageous for the hero (following the logic of the situation, 'hero defeats villain') depends on culture and is not readable as such in the image. Here, the virus could be the hero and the healthcare worker, the villain defeating it. However, the virus shape – a three-dimensional bubble with spikes – and the human's facemask are the same as in the previous images. Moreover, in the three images, the healthcare worker is placed on the left side and the virus on the right. We can interpret this topological decision as a resource guiding the movement of the action. It also makes the opposition between the two characters visible, as it is customary in sports, video games, or other social practices that imply confrontation.

Figure 3. A mural in Vila Nova da Gaia, Portugal. Source: Buğra Kanat (2021).

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Figure 4 presents a mural in Jakarta, Indonesia, which is also based on the conflictive narrative structure that opposes a man wearing gloves, a facemask and protecting himself with a shield (similar to the one used by Captain America) to the virus, represented as small red balls with spikes that move swiftly towards the man and hit the shield. The man is wearing the Indonesian flag on his shirt, and the shield also has its colors. Once again, the conflictive narrative scheme is in action, and the two characters involved are a human and the virus; however, the situation is inversed for the human character in comparison to the three previous images, since instead of attacking, he is now *defending* himself. Although not clearly visible, the man protects a woman embracing a girl, and both wear facemasks.

In concluding the analysis of pictures that evidence the use of the hero versus villain narrative scheme (to which we can add many other non-visual texts), it is worth examining a child's drawing (Figure 5). The drawing evidences the cognitive relevance of the hero-villain narrative scheme to make sense of the coronavirus and the Covid-19 pandemic: in the picture, two characters – Sara and the Corona Monster – are caught in the middle of a fight. The fight is represented through an edgy orange shape with the word BAM inside. This semiotic resource is taken from the culturally coded repertoire of superheroes comic books. Moreover, Sara is wearing red boxing gloves, while the monster presents traits that demonize it, such as frowning, sharp teeth, and holding its arms up in a threatening manner.

Figure 4. Mural in Jakarta, Indonesia. Source: Marcus (2021).

Figure 5. Drawing shared by Sara Rollof. Source: House of European History (2020).

As shown in the description of the figures presented so far, the conflictive narrative scheme that opposes the virus to humanity is a meaning-making structure that can have multiple manifestations regarding the characters it shows and the established relationship between them. As we have seen, the standard figurativization of the narrative scheme is that of a *fight*, including violence and physical hits. However, other products use the narrative scheme without figurativising it as a fight. Instead, they use *games* such as hand-wrestling or tug of war. While the semio-narrative structure at the deep level remains the same – a conflict between a good/virtuous and an evil character – the forms it might take are different: on the one hand, there can be an *antagonistic* discursivisation, when the opponent is considered an *enemy* that we must eradicate; on the other hand, there can be an *agonistic* discursivisation, when the Other is seen as a *legitimate opponent* that must be defeated but not necessarily destroyed, like in a game. However, some modes of bringing that narrative scheme to life might be more frequently used than others, like in the figures analyzed so far, where the discursivisation is antagonistic and takes the form of a fight or war (Cassandro 2020; Testa 2020; Dagatti 2021).

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Figure 6. Street art depicting the coronavirus in Gland, Switzerland. Source: Marcus (2021).

4. The characters shaped by the 'hero versus villain' narrative structure

As discussed in a previous section, the narrative configuration shapes the semantic value of the units involved, i.e., it impacts its characters' specific features and traits. We have seen above that the virus has been normally axiologised in dysphoric terms, while healthcare workers are axiologised in euphoric terms. To figurativise these values, different semiotic resources and discursive strategies are used. For the virus, a standard strategy of constructing an enemy (Eco 2012) is evidenced in Figures 6, 7 and 8.[5]

According to Umberto Eco (2012), throughout history, the standard representation of the enemy has followed specific semiotic mechanisms. More precisely,

> the enemy must be ugly because beauty is identified with good (*kalokagathia*), and one of the fundamental characteristics of beauty has always been what the Middle Ages called *integritas* (in other words, having all that is required to be an average representative of a species; by this standard, those humans missing a limb or an eye or having lower-than-average stature or "inhuman" color were considered ugly). (Eco 2012: 5)

[5] For a more in-depth semiotic study of the discursive construction of the coronavirus as a monster, see Moreno Barreneche (2020b).

Figure 7. Street art depicting the coronavirus in Gaza. Source: Marcus (2021).

Figure 8. Coronavirus-themed piñata. Source: Jasso (2020).

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In cultural terms, we can express ugliness through aesthetic and *ethical* semantic values. Visually representing the coronavirus draws upon a limited set of recognition traits, i.e., a circular shape with spikes, often crowned to create an isotopy for the idea of a *corona*virus. However, to represent the virus' ethical traits, i.e., its alleged intentionality of destroying humanity, other semiotic resources are employed to express a dysphoric axiologization. In almost every visual representation of the virus as an entity with intentionality and emotions (as in figures 1, 6, 5, 7, and 8), it is depicted with gestural traits and attitudes that convey the idea of danger or threat, like frowning, an open mouth with sharp teeth and a malicious smile, among others. In the encyclopedic knowledge of the model reader, all these traits evoke movie and cartoon villains for that is how the virus was represented since March 2020. As argued above, these figurative traits are shaped by the underlying narrative structure, which requires two units to work: a good and virtuous character (the hero) and an evil one (the villain).

The hero-villain narrative structure also shapes the representations of the hero, in this case the collective actor of the healthcare workers.[6] The coronavirus was a new entity, invisible to the human eye, that entered our cognitive horizon through the pandemic. In contrast, the collective actor of the healthcare workers preexisted as part of the *continuum* of professional activities. However, the speed of the contagion disrupted their working routines, methods and everyday life – they were forced to adapt quickly to save the lives of thousands of patients infected with the new Covid-19 disease. In this context, the social value and meaning associated with this collective actor changed radically. A different, more aggressive, violent, heroic – and even super-heroic – type of agency was ascribed to it.

We can find different modes of representing this collective social actor in texts worldwide. To begin with, there were *collective* (Figure 9) and *individual* (Figure 10) representations.

Drawing on Jean-Marie Floch's (1986) distinction between a *referential* and *mythical* relationship between discourse and what it represents, one could argue that these two murals are referential since they depict healthcare workers *as they are*, i.e., without any added meaning. This is the case even if the individuals shown in the images do not exist and are mere inventions of the artists. However, the fact that these images are painted on public walls adds a second layer of sense that transcends the *referential* dimension, which is *mythical*. These images say something about the individuals depicted just by the fact of being the object of a mural in the public space. This is the case even if those individuals do not correspond to real individuals.

[6] For a more in-depth semiotic study of the discursive construction of the healthcare workers as heroes, see Moreno Barreneche (2021).

Figure 9. A mural depicting healthcare workers in Porto, Portugal. Source: Pacheco Miranda & Pinto da Costa (2020).

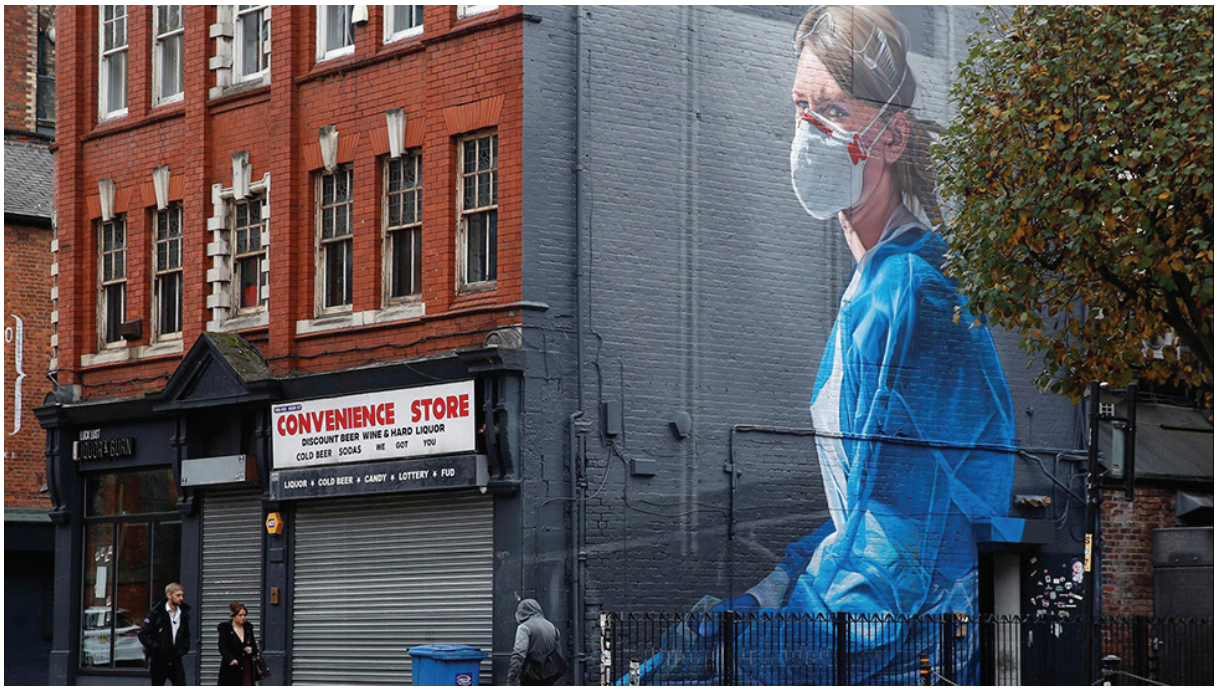

Figure 10. A mural depicting a single healthcare worker. Source: Marcus (2021).

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Figure 11. Street art depicting a healthcare worker in Denver. Source: Suri (2020).

The *strategy of mythification* is visible in other cultural products which depict the healthcare workers individually or collectively through semiotic resources that eliminate any possible interpretation of the text as merely referential. Figure 11 shows a single healthcare worker, recognizable by the attire, the facemask, and the stethoscope hanging from the neck. Next to the signs of professional identity, however, there are semiotic resources that have a mythical character and add a second layer of meaning: wings (the cultural reference seems to be the guardian angel) and, like Sara in Figure 5, boxing gloves. Figures 12 and 13 also depict single members of this collective actor (the former also uses the attire and stethoscope; the latter only the attire), but they add a second layer of sense by using two culturally codified symbols: Wonder Woman's crown and Superman's emblem. Figure 14 makes the same association by juxtaposing an image of healthcare workers and one of the superheroes (Flash Girl, Superman, Wonder Woman, Green Arrow). Figure 15 also exploits the superhero imaginary by using *an emblematic practice*: opening the shirt wide to reveal one's true superhero identity, otherwise hidden underneath an ordinary appearance.

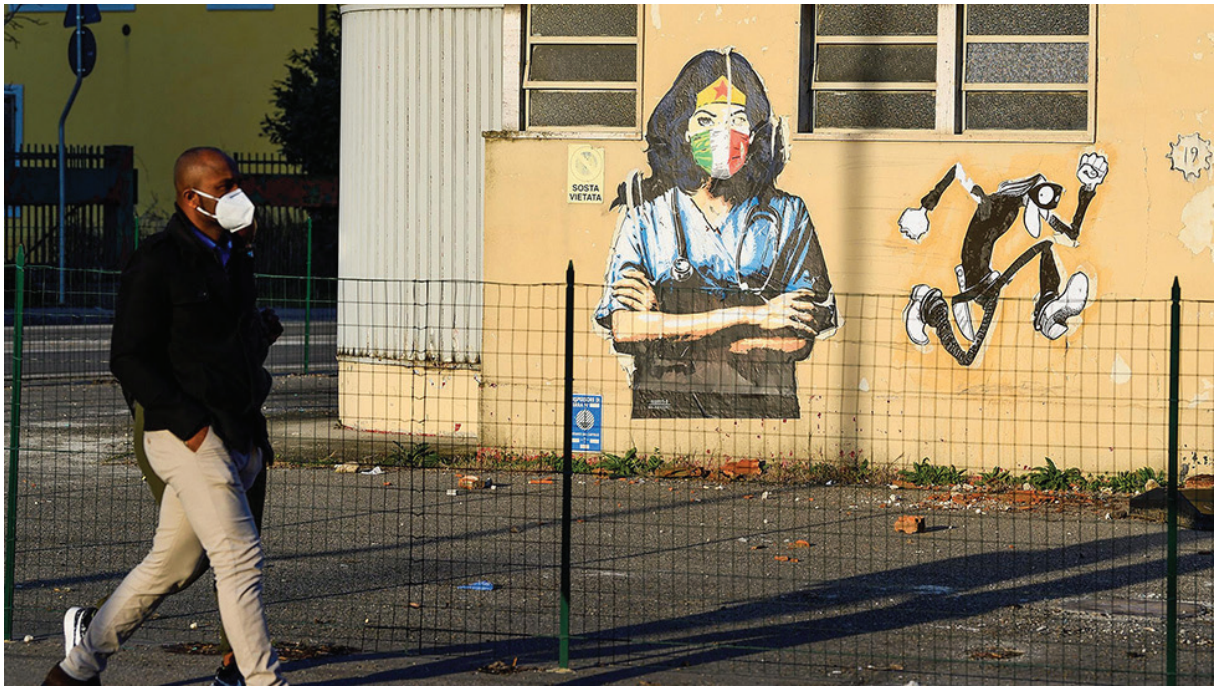

Figure 12. Painting of a female healthcare worker in Codogno, Italy. Source: Marcus (2021).

Figure 13. "Super Nurse" mural in Amsterdam. Source: Mitman (2020).

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As all these images evidence, there seems to be an overarching narrative, found at Greimas' level of the semio-narrative structures, that made the healthcare workers the story's heroes by employing culturally coded semiotic resources related to the encyclopedic domain of the superheroes. Before the pandemic, this apolitical collective used neither violence nor physical force in everyday life to accomplish their professional tasks. However, these images represent them through the mediation of semiotic resources and social discourses that show violence and the use of physical force or that activate narratives coded in culture that imply their use, such as those of superheroes.

In this sense, the healthcare workers became prominent heroes – and even superheroes – in social discourse *thanks* to the Covid-19 pandemic, the explosive context that allowed their positioning within the public sphere – and discursive construction – as a critical professional group in the efforts to stop the coronavirus. This positioning and discursive construction is independent of the individuals that are part of the collective. In this sense, there is an interesting tension between the anonymity of an 'everyday hero' and the celebrity of a superhero both as such and as an ordinary human being, like Clark Kent or Bruce Wayne (Eco 1964).

Figure 14. Source: Metro (2020)

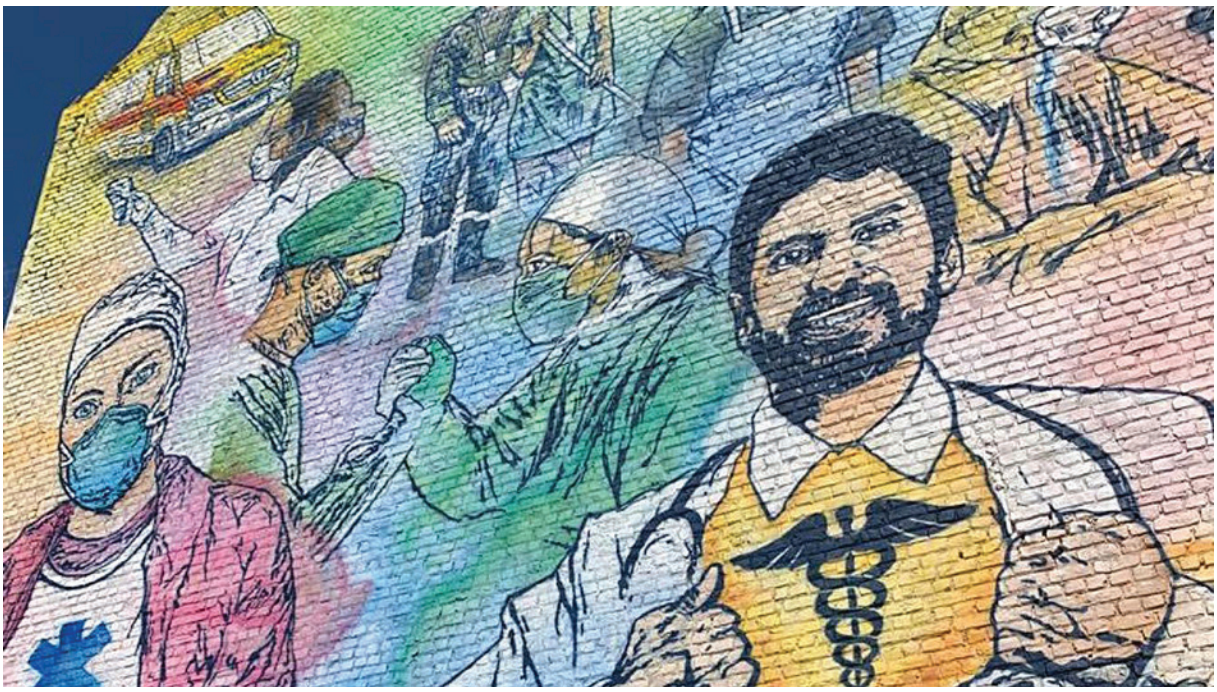

Figure 15. A mural depicting healthcare workers in Ixelles, Brussels. Source: Nord Éclair (2020).

Moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, different types of heroism were used to frame the healthcare workers' representation. While some texts present them as superhuman, tireless, and ready to tackle all challenges, others show them tired, exhausted, and even defeated. In the second case, heroism is constructed in less idealistic and more realistic terms, even with a tragic component that resonates with models of heroism traceable even in antiquity, like Antigone or Oedipus.

Besides the images discussed here, other events ranging from recognition to practices evidence this mythical construction, such as the fact that different international organizations and media outlets use to refer to them as *heroes* (United Nations 2020; France 24 2020; La Nación 2020) and "fighting in the frontline" (Time 2020). Moreover, prizes were awarded to this collective actor, for example, in Spain (El País 2020). Also, people clapping hands on balconies and windows to applaud health workers became a daily routine between March and May 2020 in various countries (La Libre 2020). Nevertheless, this is only one possible discursive strategy to figurativize the euphoric axiologization of this character as informed by the hero-villain narrative scheme. Other resources that do not imply the use of physical force or that do not even use the social imaginary linked to the universe of superheroes can also convey this meaning, like the gesture used in Figure 16. In this picture, the healthcare worker makes a heart gesture with his hands while looking the reader in the eye (a frontal glance is also found in Figures 9 to 15). We can interpret these signs as expressing loyalty, commitment, and compromise.

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Figure 16. A mural of a healthcare worker in Dublin, Ireland. Source: Mishra (2022).

5. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article was to render visible the discursive articulation of the Covid-19 pandemic grounded on the 'hero versus villain' narrative structure. Through analyzing different texts (mainly visual, but we can also find the meaning-making mechanism in journalistic texts, videos, documentaries, interviews, and other cultural products), we argued that we could see this narrative structure at the deep semio-narrative level as the matrix for the creation of social discourses of the pandemic. Moreover, it was shown how the structure shapes the representations of the two main characters involved in it, the hero and the villain, and how these are axiologised in euphoric and dysphoric terms, respectively, through the use of culturally codified semiotic resources (gestures, signs, etc.) and social discourses (superheroes, enemy, etc.). In this sense, the role that social imaginaries of

heroism and superheroes played in bringing this narrative structure to life during the Covid-19 pandemic is quite visible. The question remains about the appropriateness of these imaginaries – and even the 'hero versus villain' narrative scheme – to make sense of a pandemic.

This article could be a first step to conducting further research, including a comparative analysis of different types of representations worldwide and at different times of the Covid-19 pandemic. How did different societies make sense of the pandemic? Is the resource to the 'hero versus villain' narrative scheme universal? What are the different representations of the healthcare workers and the virus, and how do specific cultural parameters shape these? Besides, extending the study to other more dynamic and fast-changing cultural products, like social media posts, memes, and WhatsApp stickers, would be relevant. Finally, like in the study of any social discourse, it is essential to contemplate the diachronic dimension, i.e., how discourses emerge and fade over time. In short, once a narrative structure has been postulated, we should test it empirically. This article focused on the use of the 'hero versus villain' narrative structure to make sense of the Covid-19 pandemic. It does not claim that this was the only narrative structure, but only one frequently used.

The article should have demonstrated the relevance of the principle of narrativity in the academic attempts to explain how individuals and societies make sense of experience and everyday life. The question is open regarding if the Covid-19 pandemic can be considered everyday life or if it was perceived as a state of exception, even if it lasted a couple of years. Whatever the answer to this question, it is clear that the narrative articulation of the pandemic studied here revolved strongly around heroism. In this sense, analyzing specific texts can help us understand how we make sense of our experiences, individually and collectively.

An issue requiring further discussion concerns the socio-political consequences of narratives like the one studied in these pages. On the one hand, since discourses shape the social, the discourses that turned healthcare workers into heroes pressured them to keep working since there are high social expectations of them and their work to which they must conform. On the other hand, this positioning enabled a position of enunciation from which individual healthcare workers could give advice and even preach from a moral point of view about what individuals should do or avoid doing. Moreover, of sociological relevance is the issue of how the narrative structure discussed in these pages contributes to the discursive construction of a human Us thanks to the existence of the evil virus and how these contents construct the idea of solidarity. All these questions remain open and require further research.

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