Anita Pelle – Sarolta Somosi (eds) 2025: From Policy to Practice: Studies on the Green and Digital Transition in Europe, Szeged, DOI: https://doi.org/10.14232/gtk.ppsgdte.2025.19

Virtuality and Virality: Pandemic and Digital Alienation in a Contemporary Hungarian Novel

Gábor Szabó

Since the pandemic, numerous theoretical discourses have examined a world order often described as posthuman, in which the unsettling realization of nature's uncontrollability has become an inherent part of our culture. Lockdowns and quarantine relocated social relationships into digital space – an event that not only marked a technological shift, but also led to existential and ontological reconfigurations of human existence. Solitude emerged as a new experiential quality, proliferating across digital platforms. The supposedly oppositional spheres of reality and imagination, fact and desire, trauma and compensation, loneliness and community began to infiltrate one another virally, dissolving their autonomy and forming hybrid, infected categories. In this study, I analyze a contemporary Hungarian pandemic novel to explore theoretical approaches that trace the formation of new patterns of selfhood within the hybrid space shaped by digitalization and the virus – understood both as a biological entity and as a metaphor.

Keywords: virus, virtuality, reality effect, imaginative self, state of exception

1. Theoretical Pathways: Framing

Digitality, simulation technologies, and cybernetics have radically transformed our perception of reality and the range of experiences possible within it, while simultaneously destabilizing traditional modes of knowledge acquisition. At the same time, they offer a conceptual framework through which one might interpret the civilizational shock triggered by the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus – since the virus emerged into a reality already rendered fundamentally uncertain. During the pandemic, "the center of human life shifted towards connectivity," and the sphere of virtuality gave rise to new philosophical concepts and ontological frameworks designed to make sense of the unprecedented crises.

This made it increasingly important to explore the connection between virtuality and virality – an effort that has inspired numerous interpretive attempts. These studies often blend terminology associated with digitality with concepts drawn from biology, medicine, and philosophy. The reason for this hybridization lies in the growing recognition that a diffuse but unmistakable global transformation has occurred – a mutation arising from our entanglement with digitality. The emergence of a virtual ontological domain – one that reshapes our conception of reality – makes it both possible and necessary to reflect on the intersections between the coronavirus and (digital) virality.

As Dominic Pettman emphasizes:

"The reach, intensity, and industrial resources utilized by digital media are all unprecedented. We cannot know what effects these will have on our behavior or ways of thinking" (Pettman 2015, p. 49).

Our understanding of reality and our interpretations of the world are increasingly mediated by virtuality through the use of digital representational techniques. From pixels and digital fractals, we glimpse the contours of a new world that had previously remained hidden. Digitalization, the foundation of cyberculture, is not merely the everyday use of computers and other technological tools; it represents the internalization of a new mode of thinking. Its consequences reach beyond the technological domain to the ontological and epistemological. If the computer functions as a simulation model for previous media, then this simulation-based remediation – or metamediation – progressively defines our reality.

Posthumanist technological transformations have rendered the future almost inaccessible to human cognition. Owing to the database-like structure of digitality, as Lev Manovich writes:

"New media objects are rarely narratives. Instead of stories, they offer databases: collections of individual items, each with the same significance as the next." (Manovich 1999, p. 45)

In this click-based configuration of self and world, everything appears equally significant – no single item carries more depth or meaning than another. Understanding virtuality fundamentally involves concepts such as presence, heterogeneity, plurality, and worldliness. Following this cybernetic turn, the traditional distinction between natural and artificial becomes blurred, as we now have the ability to program hybrid realities that occupy an in-between space, allowing nature to speak only through quotation. (Belting 2017) The technological sphere of virtuality can generate a parallel ecology. Mapping this techno-viral, virtual ecology may help us interpret the coronavirus pandemic and the altered (infected) world, where actuality and potentiality necessarily coexist and are inseparable. We can understand the sphere of virtuality as a relative and shifting reality devoid of absolute measures – one marked by desubjectivization and de-anthropomorphization.

The link between digitalization and complex technologies has not gone unnoticed by philosophers reflecting on the coronavirus pandemic. A few notable examples follow.

In his short text *The Invention of an Epidemic*, Giorgio Agamben interpreted the pandemic as a biopolitical overreach, with society responding through excessive measures. (Agamben 2020) In contrast, Jean-Luc Nancy argued that Agamben failed to grasp how, in the 21st century, our everyday lives are defined by complex technical interconnectedness, where the exception becomes the norm. Nancy described a simultaneous pandemic-biological, computer-scientific, and cultural "viral state of exception," characterized by a peculiar hybridity (Nancy 2020).

Unpredictability and uncertainty thus constitute an organic part of our posthuman cultural condition. Roberto Esposito concurred, claiming that the biological concept of the "viral" has infected various disciplines and language games, so that we now speak of virality in social, political, technological, and medical terms (Esposito 2020).

The virus's spread and its media representation became deeply intertwined, erupting into a reality already compromised by multiple overlapping crises – ecological, climatic, and existential. The virus, digitalization, loneliness, and fear collectively mark a world that has become unspeakable and unthinkable – a

fractured world withdrawing into itself. Yet this strangeness may also reveal new aspects of reality.

Alongside theoretical discourses, literature also responded to the pandemic. Pandemic-themed novels, essays, and blogs emerged to document the altered existential condition. In what follows, I aim to illustrate the new mode of world-experience emerging from the entanglement of the pandemic and digital being through an analysis of a novel by one of Hungary's most significant contemporary authors, László Garaczi – a work that engages with philosophical currents and employs postmodern formal and linguistic strategies.

2. A Poetics of Solitude, Imagination, and Digital Being in a Contemporary Novel

László Garaczi's prose has always been characterized by the integration of surreal, strange, or rule-defying world models into the text, blurring and leveling the boundaries between the irrational and the real. However, in his 2022 novel Weszteg, this rule-breaking, outlier existence, and the shocking reordering of the familiar structure of reality, become the sole focus of the work, where the strange becomes the general, the irrational the everyday, and the *unheimlich* takes on a natural form, disturbing the established order of known rules. In Bettelheim's terms, the extreme situation becomes the valid reality of the work's world: Weszteg stages the shocking new and unfamiliar world- and self-experience of the pandemic. It shows how the human way of life is subordinated to a force beyond it, and how the civilizational shift brought on by the pandemic shifts the dynamics of personality into the digital space, reshaping the structure of human consciousness.

In several passages, we can recognize elements of recent reality: the exercise of biopolitical control by ideological power is evoked as a familiar experience. But the text can also be read as an apocalyptic vision, presenting the tensions of a being moving toward the inhuman, problematizing the "human way of being" and re-conceptualizing it.

Weszteg is structured around three alternating narrative voices, whose passages sometimes complement each other, offering explanations, and sometimes connect in dissonant chords. These partly divergent lines of thought enable the reader to experience the same sense of the uncontrollability of meaning that characterizes the state of existence in the novel's threateningly foreign and incomprehensible world. Among the voices, only Hajni, the teacher who moved from Sopron to Pest, and the web-specialist Brúnó share some enigmatic relationship. Their fragmented memories and failed attempts at communication together form a mosaic of their acquaintance, cohabitation, and breakup. The third voice is Sybille, a Berlin eco-feminist activist, whose poetically theoretical text, The Songs of Dr. Schnabel, offers details of an apocalyptic, multi-era virus and decay narrative. This embedded text serves as a "work within a work" whose catastrophic vision expands the pandemic situation of the recent past to global, philosophical horizons, interpreting it in a historical context.

Brúnó not only reads and comments on Sybille's text, but also briefly summarizes its chapters and quotes its first and last sentences, which, interestingly, mirror the final

sentence of the Garaczi novel. These formal solutions may suggest a mirror-like relationship between the embedded text and the novel, hinting at their identity.

The text, beginning with Hajni's voice, portrays the realistic and familiar world of pandemic lockdowns: isolation, the disorienting nature of existence, the terror of routine becoming irrelevant, and the daily survival practices that largely take place on digital platforms.

With the introduction of Sybille's voice, the pandemic also becomes a historical-scale narrative of destruction, presenting itself as the final chapter in the collapse of human-centered existence. According to the novel's intention, this represents the twilight of humanist culture: a portrayel of the destruction of a subject equally vulnerable to the inhumanity of both nature and digital technology.

The structure of the "story within a story" not only confuses linear narration but also directs the reader's interpretation by the mosaic connections of its parts. This duality transforms different times and spaces into simultaneities, displacing both the embedded and the recipient story from their original contexts, reshaping the entire work's chronotopic order. Thus, the novel itself embodies the non-linear, asynchronous time-space relations of the digital realm.

The novel's simultaneously divergent and integrative network is connected through internal rhymes, recurring motifs, and links. However, this does not create clear meanings, close sequences, or fixed explanations. These junctions represent distant echoes of events in the text, their disintegration only creating vague, almost sensory experiences rather than providing clear knowledge about the interconnections of the relevant scenes.

Weszteg dissolves the oppositions of the „already" – „still" and „here" – „elsewhere", playing them off each other and ultimately collapsing the categories of perception. The present that emerges in the novel is no longer a fleeting moment of transition, but a constantly expanding, static 'now,' frozen and magnified in its simultaneity. In the sense of the 'spacious present' (as Gumbrecht calls the changed experience of time in his work *Production of Presence*), the future has ceased to be an open horizon of expectations and has instead become a realm condemned to repression by fears and uncertainties. The 'spacious present' expands the *now*, transforming it from a fleeting instant into a temporal field where presence can emerge and endure. But the loss of presence in this novel reflects a shift away from embodied, sensory experience toward abstract reflection. This leads to a kind of subjective disorientation, where the individual loses contact with the "here and now," and the present ceases to be a space for genuine encounter.

The text records the trauma of losing rational predictability and mastery over existence as the collective fear of human life falling back into zoé, which accompanies the changes in personal human relationships and the communication space.

Drawing on Freud's concept of *repetition compulsion* (Freud 1955), the text presents both figures as traumatophilic subjects who, compelled by internal tension, recreate the very images they seek to escape. The voices often follow the rules of psychotherapy in their choreography. Brúnó's first voicemail, for instance, analyzes his troubled relationship with his parents, and we also learn that, at his mother's request, he had to report his dreams in detail during his childhood.

In the series of repetitions, the characters act in accordance with the rhythm of the compulsive interplay between trauma and repression – what Freud termed the *repetition compulsion*. This very movement, this psychic dynamic, also governs the novel's structure: it informs the sequence of narrative segments, which move from juxtaposition to counterpoint, and ultimately toward integration.

Yet the struggle between the pleasure principle and the reality principle is not depicted solely as an intrapsychic drama. Within the altered existential and social space shaped by the pandemic's "state of exception," the displacement of lived experience onto digital platforms re-enacts the Freudian drama in a *transformed* register. Through this very shift – this movement away from the reality principle – the drama is repeated on a new, potentially redemptive stage governed by the pleasure principle.

Thus, in the novel, digitality – or the virtual sphere – initially presents itself as a seductive metaphor for the pleasure principle. Yet within the framework of the narrative's apocalyptic historical logic, it more aptly conjures the Nirvana principle – that is, the psychic tendency toward the minimization, regulation, or extinction of internal stimulus tension, as Freud posits in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.*

Alongside the virus's bodily destruction, the novel connects the characters' survival techniques and interpersonal failures to the sickness and treatability of their psyche. The characters communicate through delayed, interrupted, or unanswered messenger and phone messages: the "self" becomes the medium of absence and/or lack. Brúnó reads Sybille's book on his mobile phone, while the TV broadcasts news of a fictionalized, decaying world in the background.

The interactions occur not in a physical, but a digital space, and within the realm of imagination. The isolation of bodies, the reductive nature of communication, the web of desires and repressions, Brúnó's gaming addiction (the repetitive compulsivity as a manifestation of lack of freedom), all sketch the interrelations between a dislocated, collapsed human existence and the sick body: the new anthropology of "the happiest planet."

The uncertainty of reality is further reinforced by some of Brúnó's lines, which dismantle the very framework of the supposed "love story" and show the entire narrative as a desire-driven monologue of a single narrative consciousness. In this sense, Hajni's voice is merely a projection of Brúnó's consciousness, appearing through various media platforms (Skype, Viber, Messenger, SMS, phone calls, etc.). The always-on TV then broadcasts the images that create the characters' reality.If we regard Hajni's memories, desires, and thoughts as Brúnó's desires, the similarities that connect their monologues become understandable. The novel also hints that Sybille's book can be interpreted as an anxious projection of Brúnó's consciousness.

By merging the voices, the stories of "Hajni" and "Sybille" appear as mere inventions of the narrative consciousness, whose rules and connections are solely determined by Brúnó's psychological mechanisms. Thus, the story of Weszteg can be understood as a projection of Brúnó's anxieties – stemming from the trauma inflicted by his parents and his social phobia – through which the psyche attempts to expunge the painful feeling of its own wounds, placing them in the external world and escaping their suffocating burden.

"Hajni" and "Sybille" thus represent the removed consciousness's distant gaze upon itself, where strangeness and identity become intertwined. Yet, the

perspective of removal and the desire to be freed from anxiety is unsuccessful for Brúnó. While Brúnó is preoccupied with Sybille's post-apocalyptic vision of the pandemic, "Hajni," as a projection of Brúnó, watches the planet's destruction on TV. When Brúnó dreams of an earthquake, "Hajni" dreams of drowning, mirroring this in the projection.

Brúnó's self-enclosed consciousness seems to communicate solely about itself. It becomes a digital medium. His fantasies are not boundary crossings, but rather endless, hopeless extensions of himself. The violence visions in the text can also outline the repressed, forced impulses working within the traumatized consciousness. Brúnó's memory evokes an attack in fragmented moments that reverberate throughout the text. The first image suggests only a vague fear of aggression. A much later scene begins to shape this fear into a narrative: a homeless person attacks Brúnó. In the following scene, pain appears, and in the conclusion of the sequence, the narrator crushes the attacker's head, whose gaze strangely reminds him of his father's.

In these overlapping scenes, the identity of the attacker remains unclear, and even his reality is ambiguous – at one point, he appears as a Mortal Kombat game character. (It's undecidable whether this is the digitalization of reality or the reality becoming digitalized.)

However, the fact that the (imagined?) aggressor evokes his father's image suggests that the violent series is related to a threatening father figure. In "Hajni's" voice, this same repression is repeated in the memory of childhood fishing, where the "father's leaking wound" echoes the earlier bloody scene, and in another scene, an image of an older (father-like?) man's murder appears.

Sybille's embedded text reflects this personal repression in the collective neurosis of ideological paternalistic regression. The appearance of "punitive father figures" in various layers of the novel allows for the projection of both personal and collective subjugation as a traumatic existential experience.

Weszteg is simultaneously a realistic love story from the pandemic, a historical apocalypse narrative, a posthuman theory, an existentialist vision, and a psychoanalytic novel. At its center stands a lonely subject, vulnerable to both the media technology that breaks the boundaries of reality and imagination and the blind forces of nature, unable to find its place in this new world order.

Through internal reflections, repetitions, shifts in registers, and the continuous collapse and reconstruction of diegetic frames, the work resists the reader's desire for a totalizing, unifying interpretation, and because of its structural mobility, it can maintain many perspectives in play simultaneously.

This semantic diversity does not organize into a unity, because the embedding of perspectives and aspects creates not only fits but also gaps, absences, and differences, which continually push the interpretation forward toward new possibilities. The inner dynamics of form, simultaneously integrative and disseminative, and the role of absence in composition, compel the reader to fill in contradictions and gaps and to resolve dissonances. While the narrative consciousness, sprawling into text, attempts to preserve its own integrity through images, imaginations, and projections, the reader, by contrast, seeks to reduce the continuously slipping order of signs into a structure around an interpretable core

meaning. This multi-directional uncertainty transmits the same sense of helplessness to the reader that the characters experience in their world.

So, the novel brings together several narrative threads, each unfolding into key contrasts: the fading boundary between primary and secondary realities, the shifting relationship between solitude and the crowd, and the interplay between sensory and digital experience.

By interpreting reality through the lens of information technology – and especially by presenting it as a product of the digital world from Brúnó's perspective – the text challenges the traditional hierarchy of reality. It questions the idea that virtual experience is inherently secondary to physical presence. At the same time, it shows how the two realms are deeply connected – constantly blending in our experience of the world and use of language. *Weszteg* offers a bleak portrayal of contemporary mass society, where isolation and overcrowding coexist.

The novel suggests that mass formation today is driven less by physical gatherings and more through digital platforms and mass media. This "virtual crowd" appears both as a faceless, merged collective – and as a set of lonely, isolated individuals, each confined to their private space and individual phobias.

The novel also reflects on how the pandemic reshaped our relationship with physical presence, human closeness, and shared spaces. These shifts are tied to broader trends of alienation and disconnection in everyday life – particularly through the growing influence of technology in shaping our interactions. The dualities of mass and individual, virus and digital contagion, imagination and reality, desire and actuality, patriarchal society and paternal trauma, freedom and oppression, the Self and the Other – these are not presented as separate or opposed elements in the novel. Rather, they infect one another, appearing in hybrid, cross-contaminated forms. This collapse of distinction invites a central question: What is existence to do when the once clearly delineated spheres of reality break down?

Garaczi's novel revitalizes Sartre's famous formulation from the end of *Huis Clos*: "L'enfer, c'est les autres" („Hell is other people.").

Twentieth-century existentialist thought could hardly have anticipated a condition":in which solitude, exposure, and anxiety would become not just existential categories but the everyday atmosphere of life itself. During the pandemic, quarantine emerged as the dominant metaphor for existence. Interpersonal relations were shifted to virtual space. Solitude no longer implied inner privacy – it was simulated, multiplied, and virtualized. Its very nature was transformed.

This transformation aligns Garaczi's novel with the works of Bret Easton Ellis, especially *Glamorama*, in which the "I" appears as nothing more than a projection produced by technical media: a sequence of surface images devoid of any inner depth – a condition evocative of Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum. A key distinction, however, lies in tone and implication. In Ellis's work, this simulacral mode is presented as a given, its horrific artificiality underscored by the cold neutrality of the prose. In Garaczi's novel, by contrast, self-reflexivity, anxiety, and the impossibility of reconciling with the sense of estrangement expose the monstrous logic of a new world condition.

One of the novel's embedded philosophical texts presents the pandemic as the latest phase in an ongoing historical process of decay. In this framework, history itself appears not as progress or continuity but as a perpetual ongoing eruption of apocalyptic events Alongside Bruno Bettelheim's concept of the pandemic lockdown as an "extreme situation," the novel implicitly evokes Walter Benjamin's thesis in *On the Concept of History*: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (Benjamin 1968, p. 257).

Garaczi's narrative thus extends existentialist thought beyond its twentieth-century framework, situating the self not in a stable opposition to the Other, but in a shifting digital, social, and psychic landscape where representations dominate and identity itself becomes volatile. Ultimately, the novel does not merely reflect a crisis in reality, but stages a broader cultural condition in which existence is itself infected – by language, image, and simulation.

3. Towards a Non-Conclusion: Simulating Theory

The novel poses a question of urgent contemporary relevance: how can the human subject in the early 21st century coexist with the relentless technological transformations that define our digital age? The state of exception functions here as a dual metaphor, referring both to the viral spread of digitalization and to the pandemic. In such a context, the Enlightenment ideal of the human as a sovereign, world-creating agent of reason is profoundly destabilized. The question might thus be reframed: what happens when the human subject faces the impossibility of understanding or shaping the world through rationality alone? What if the human spirit dissolves into digitality, severing – or radically reshaping – its ties to the traditions of humanism?

The world of the novel evokes an unsettling scenario – a kind of post-apocalypse – that offers no arrival of truth, no epiphany of logos or meaning. The characters (or is it ultimately just one fragmented subject?) appear to exist beyond the drama of "the end"; indeed, the very notion of an "end" seems to have been evacuated of meaning.

The dissolution into digitality and the collapse of humanity's central role inevitably fragment identity and self-image. Yet paradoxically, this very deconstruction signals a form of emancipation. It is an emancipation not driven by a predetermined telos, and thus one without a foreseeable trajectory or outcome. There is no clarity about what it yields – or what it should yield. The digitally self-representing subject gradually sheds all identity positions that are non-digital, stepping into a rhizomatic network that escapes systems of transparency and control. In principle, this opens the possibility for the free reinvention of the self – though no longer according to the classical ideals of Bildung.

From the outset, Garaczi's literary oeuvre has operated within a critical framework that resonates with the radical social analysis developed by Guy Debord in his foundational work *La Société du spectacle*. (Debord 1994) Debord's central concept of the "spectacle" functions as a key metaphor for a hegemonic world order – one that he and his generation still believed could be resisted through revolutionary tactics, above all by integrating avant-garde artistic practices with life itself.

In Baudrillard's *Simulacres et Simulation* (Baudrillard 1994) the concept of the spectacle reemerges within a more radically pessimistic framework, one in which escape routes are effectively foreclosed. While Debord acknowledged that the spectacle strives toward totality, he nonetheless identified internal ruptures – tension points between spectacle and reality – through which revolutionary praxis might be realized. Baudrillard, by contrast, posits a world of simulacra in which the anchoring of any authentic core of reality becomes impossible.

Weszteg portrays, in effect, the recursive reflections and repetitions of these simulations: the simulation of simulacra. What unfolds is a metastasizing proliferation of consciousnesses, characters, temporal layers, and narrative sequences, all forming within a groundless digital ontology. In this world, identities, events, and narrative threads multiply and dissolve with no stable center, no enduring reality to secure them.

The dense interweaving of social theory, philosophy, cultural critique, psychology, and theories of subjectivity in the novel underscores the emergence of what might be called a "posthuman turn" – a shift brought about by the expanding hegemony of the digital universe. *Weszteg* stages this transformation with remarkable clarity, marking it as one of the most radical developments of our age. While Garaczi formulates this shift in the idiom of literature, the philosophical undercurrents are unmistakable. At the same time, the narrative subtly gestures toward the political ramifications of a digitally induced and now-permanent "state of exception," highlighting its destabilizing impact on democratic social structures.

The novel implicitly aligns itself with the urgent critique articulated in the *Vienna Manifesto on Digital Humanism* (2019), which states – in overtly political terms:

"Digital technologies are disrupting the foundations of society and are challenging what it means to be human" (Vienna Manifesto 2019).

Garaczi's novel does not merely illustrate this crisis – it enacts it. It dramatizes the epistemological, existential, and ontological instabilities brought forth by digitalization, positioning literature not only as a space for reflection but also as a medium of subtle resistance. In doing so, *Weszteg* affirms the continued relevance of literary fiction in interrogating the evolving conditions of human subjectivity in the 21st century.

References

Agamben, G. (2020): *The Invention of an Epidemic*. Originally published in *Il Manifesto*. https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia Date of access: 23 June, 2025.

Baudrillard, J. (1994): *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press. (Originally published in 1981 as *Simulacres et Simulation*. Paris, Galilée.) DOI: 10.3998/mpub.9904

Belting, H. (2017): *Faces: A History of the Face*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Benjamin, W. (1968): 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. In: Arendt, H. (ed.): *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 253–264.

Debord, G. (1994): *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books. (Originally published in 1967 as *La Société du spectacle*. Paris, Buchet-Chastel.)

Esposito, R. (2020): *Cured to the Bitter End*. English translation available at: https://crisisandcommunitas.com/?news=cured-to-the-bitter-end-roberto-espositos-response-to-jean-luc-nancy Date of access: 23 June, 2025.

Freud, S. (1955): *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In: Strachey, J. (ed.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 18. London, Hogarth Press, 1–64. (Originally published in 1920.)

Garanczi, L. (2022): *Weszteg*. Magvető Kiadó, Budapest.

Manovich, L. (1999): 'Database as Symbolic Form'. In: Vesna, V. (ed.) (2007): *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 39–60. DOI: 10.1177/135485659900500206

Nancy, J.-L. (2020): *Viral Exception*. Originally published on *Antinomie*. https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/02/27/eccezione-virale/ Date of access: 23 June, 2025.

Pettman, D. (2015): *Infinite Distractions: Paying Attention to Social Media*. Cambridge, Polity Press.