

# Last Light (2007) as a COVID-19-Like Narrative by Alex Scarrow

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## Abstract

Considered as having recently sprung up, health literature has suffered a long neglect by critics. However, with the outbreak of COVID-19, the latter has not finished reviving traces of literary pandemic representations. Consequently, much research is nowadays focusing on its collateral interactive impacts with the economy and other sectors while eluding stark thematic similarities that exist with anticipation fiction in terms of aesthetical representation. Thus, through comparative approach, Alex Scarrow's *Last Light* is chosen to highlight those parallels with oil fiction. Consequently, the analysis must, firstly, foster that oil fiction does reflect pandemic-like symptoms representations marked by economic and sociocultural substrata. Secondly, oil, like any pandemic, shall invariably influence characters' mindset in the throes of paranoia, duality, quest for social identity, etc. Thirdly, oil fiction is meant to pervade and seep throughout the whole narrative fabric thereby embedding a literary journalism style and fueling the narrative with aesthetic representations abundant with tropes that inevitably tap into medical, financial, pyramidal, conspiracy metaphors, etc.

## Keywords

Conspiracy, Duality, Literary Journalism, Coronavirus, Peak Oil

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## 1. Introduction

Marie Telling's "Ce que la littérature peut nous apprendre sur les épidémies" (What literature can teach us about epidemics) is a particularly compelling and groundbreaking contribution to a deeper understanding of the diverse potentials of energy humanities. This is all the more relevant because literature has always convoked historical facts that have irreversibly impacted human life through fic-

tional treatment of situations that are intricately related to health, economy, culture, etc. Indeed, how many of us have not, for instance, read or heard of the success of works like Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Defoe, 1722), *The Plague* by Albert Camus (Camus, 1948), *The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood (Atwood, 2009), to name but a few? It may therefore prove worthwhile to determine why and how global curfew and lockdown measures will further pave the way to the comeback of thrillers that, like *Contagion*, enjoy a second success in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

With the rediscovery of certain bestsellers, although some anticipation fictions do not directly treat the theme of pandemic, they significantly display the same underlying thematic approach and establish consistent parallels with paranoia, poor governmental communication and management, human nature, consumption excesses, etc. which coronavirus is currently inspiring to many a reader. A case in point is *Last Light*, a narrative dealing with Peak Oil and conspiracy and rife with COVID-19-like symptoms and side-effects. In fact, Alex Scarrow depicts Great Britain and some places around the world impacted by a conspiracy around the management of dwindling global oil reserves. As usual, in situations of chaos like this, human beings tend to manage to survive in hostile environments ruined by peak oil.

The aim of this article is not to deal with the collateral interactive effects between oil and coronavirus but, rather, to focus on the similarities of their effects on society, economy, literature, etc., hence its particular focus on the following hypotheses. Firstly, oil fiction does reflect pandemic-like symptoms representations marked by economic and sociocultural substrata. Secondly, oil, like any pandemic, invariably pervades and seeps throughout the whole narrative fabric thereby fueling plot events and influencing characters' mindset and final narrative outcomes. Through a comparative approach, the study is meant to generate alternative perceptions in terms of prevention of psychologic, sociocultural and economic impacts, the inhibition of violence against women and children in times of confinement, aesthetic representations, etc.

This work is therefore divided into three parts. The first one performs an analysis of socioeconomic impacts of the crisis. The second one represents a psychological diagnosis of characters. Thirdly, it will be the place to explore aesthetic representations in the narrative.

## 2. Socio-Economic Impacts of the Crisis

In their treatments of oil-centered issues in fiction, critiques often widely resort to the notion of petroculture which has been defined as follows:

“Broadly defined, the term ‘petrocultures’ refers to the social imaginaries constituted by the knowledge, practices, and discourses resulting from the consumption of and subsequent dependence on oil.”

Although petrocultures involve a variety of social, economic, and political manifestations, they have also been defined in terms of cultural representations.

(Baptista, 2017)

Oil has consistently shaped both our *Weltanschauung* (that is our ways of seeing the world) and our ways of life into new aesthetic modes. These, in my view, stand at the very crossroads of literature and such various social and economic issues as resources and crisis management, education, gender, etc., and, as a result, reflect representations of societies based on oil economy. This section is therefore meant to highlight the multifaceted dynamic of oil and pandemic related to economic and social contexts that are inherent in populations in periods of, say, pandemic crisis.

### 2.1. Pandemic-Inspired Representations of Economic Issues

To economically analyze consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and that of peak oil which “is the theorized point in time when the maximum rate of extraction of petroleum is reached, after which it is expected to enter terminal decline” (Climate Launch Pad, 2020). It is important to heed the following briefing of the European Parliament Think Tank as guideline:

“The evidence reported in various studies indicates that epidemic disease impacts on a country’s economy through several channels, including the health, transportation, agricultural and tourism sectors. At the same time, trade with other countries may also be impacted, while the interconnectedness of modern economies means that an epidemic can also implicate international supply chains.” (Delivorias & Scholz, 2020)

The reading of this passage channels the complex search for similarities towards the context of globalization and interdependence of countries. As a result, oil, through its use as a commodity, appears as a source of wealth, dominance or dependence, hence Alex Scarrow’s singular depiction of the consumerist British society as a community of extravagant consumers causing material excesses with “oilrich luxuries,... big cars, big homes, and an endless supply of power” (501). And, unsurprisingly enough, he announces that they are at the end of the oil age.

Today, it is amazing to see how current world economic superpowers and old ones have joined their forces to fight the coronavirus. One reason for this is globalization which makes them all vulnerable. With oil which “sustains this interconnected, interdependent world” (284), Britain is depicted as largely dependent on importation: “The vast majority of the food we eat in this country comes from abroad.” (73). Thus, Andy describes on page 245 how world agriculture through Argentina and Brazil suffers from the impact of oil crises and how the phenomenon reverberates throughout the whole supply chain. Similarly, *PBS News Hour* (2020) titled “How the COVID-19 pandemic is sending American agriculture into chaos” with Trump announcing a \$19 billion aid for farmers.

In the majority of oil crises, the Third World pays the price. Therefore, with the disparities that exist between oil producing and non-producing countries or developed countries and developing ones, Ash argues that all countries will suffer from this crisis, contributing to what he calls a “global sacrifice” (510). A pa-

rallel could therefore be drawn with the Coronavirus impact which has plagued each and every country. Concerning an economic analysis of oil dependence, the author compares oil to “the twentieth-century version of the Roman slave economy.” (325). On account of modern economies using oil in all sectors, people get accustomed to simplified life until becoming dependent on the different services it provides. He analyses this type of dependence through the angle of slavery: “He said some economist once calculated the ways in which oil helps us live and translated that into slave power. He compared the oil economy to the Roman slave economy.” (325).

In terms of finance, due to the domino effect, peak oil has caused the tumbling of prices of oil barrels impacting Wall Street, like the world is experiencing it presently with the Coronavirus. Besides predictions announcing the drop of the sterling, *Scarrow (2007)* goes as far as forecasting, as in *Robinson Crusoe (Defoe, 1719)*, the same worthlessness of currencies in the near future after the crisis has lasted few days: “Money doesn’t mean anything right now.” (255).

## 2.2. Social Impacts and Prevention

Socially, the impact of oil can be analyzed in the light of dependences generated by a consumerist society as well as from the point of view of the various impacts of governmental policies during crises. Social impact analysis is often related to political decisions in the management of crisis. As in periods of pandemic, measures like confinement require a number of precautions since lockdowns are, generally, the first type of policy to be adopted by governments: “Reduce population migration from the cities. That’s what Andy would have dryly answered, thought Jenny. It was the first step in disaster management—you have to control the movement of people as quickly as possible.” (252). *Scarrow* warns about the appropriateness of its implementation. Ruth sees it as a source of acceleration of social instability: “They start panic-buying; you end up with food running out in the shops, people getting even more worked up.” (253).

Social divisions among members of the family and members of the community are perceptible. Lockdowns sometimes prove to be inadequate for vulnerable people. Within the families, they may, for example, constitute a sort of detrimental exposure of children as with the Sutherland family which happened to be particularly struck with anxiety due to the separation from their children left to themselves in a gang-prone district. This reminds us of the political debate that implied Dominic Cummings, British Prime minister’s Special Adviser, was accused of having broken lockdown and travelled home. Thus, the novel reveals that the same confinement measures are not applicable everywhere as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Environmental injustice remains an important theme in crisis management. A major issue related to this theme is the repartition of food, water, energy and security. Through a satirical view, the narrator goes as far as to inform the reader of the uneven distribution of electricity. He describes the situation “as if some

central switchboard had been overrun by monkeys who were now randomly punching the shiny buttons in front of them.” (385).

As if addressing a message about coronavirus lockdown zones and equitable vaccine distribution, Scarrow warns about discrimination of areas he calls “safe” regions and those called “lost-cause big cities” (385). Andy criticizes the encampment of people with the supposed aim of protecting them. He argues that the fact of rationing them with “water bottles and high-energy protein bars for the next fortnight” (465) may be sufficient for few days but not in the long run. The indeterminacy of the duration of health and oil crises is pivotal.

Scarrow also stresses the grouping according to their professional affiliation like housing estates where live “supposedly sensible middle-class, middle management types and media moppets” (474). In his descriptions of the street after the chaos, he portrays social disparities by identifying districts that clearly show the stratification of populations notably with rich areas spared by chaos and poor looted rows of houses. The police and militaries are positioned in strategic points only, leaving the population to itself. Consequently, security remains a key issue in this COVID-19 context favourable for chaos.

The COVID-gendered narrative, too, is suggested through the violence that men exert on women, particularly with the theme of rape. Jenny experiences an attempt from Paul after they escaped the assault of hungry people gathered around the service station. He uses this scene to depict the psychological state that characterizes “potential rapist... bully... abuser... murderer” (396) in moments of chaos or absence of rules that are compared to “a window of time” which could be definitely closed and “untraceable”.

With frequent advertisements denouncing domestic violence during these periods of confinement, the legitimacy that male imposes on women is depicted on page 397 following quotation: “But he had the ace card, as all men do over women—brute strength. If he got a good grip on her, it wouldn’t matter how much faster she could move. It wouldn’t matter one bit—brute strength was everything.”

As it could be seen from above, aesthetic parallels could be drawn between economic and social crises and COVID-19 eruption and development mostly in terms of alerts on risks of social mutations in times of large-scale catastrophes that can plunder the world. Further associated advantages include authors’ varied abilities to use thrillers to better make people aware of these issues that are dealt with. And, to better hammer it home, Scarrow as far as calls for cultural consciousness about dependence and lack of communication in times of global crises.

### **3. A Psychological Diagnosis of Characters**

Petrofiction, as a new literary genre, can also be said to be significantly pervaded by conspiracy, chaos and characters that develop consistent psychological states, etc. Interestingly enough, links between oil crises and Coronavirus-related pa-

thological symptoms could be posited through the enlightening discovery of the following research findings: “Psychological research on past crises can help people cope with the daily—sometimes hourly—newsflashes about the coronavirus... While the new pandemic is unique in many ways, there are lessons to be learned from a significant body of literature on the psychological and behavioral health responses and consequences of disaster events” (Weir, 2020). Last but not least, *Last Light* written before the COVID-19, further buttresses our interest in psychological analyses aimed at contributing to better management of said crises.

### 3.1. Representation of the Self: Between Paranoia, Duality and Archetypes

Paranoia is important in the analysis of characters in a conspiracy. The character who displays the most paranoia signs is Andy. “He spent too much time obsessing about the whole Peak Oil thing. And a little paranoid too. Just silly little things like worrying about viruses on his computer that might be spying on him, noises on the phone line.” (389). Knowing the sheer consequences and the involvement of the group who commissioned the rewriting of the report, he developed an obsession with the stability of oil. Like the pronouncing of the word “contaminated”, the word “Peak oil” becomes source of anxiety until becoming an obsession.

Like a character in a thriller or a spy fiction, he developed “little tics” (476) such as “checking the tone on the house phone” and “ritual tour of the downstairs windows and doors before bedtime” (476). This, particularly, Jenny suspected to be “a minor case of obsessive compulsive disorder” (476). His suspicion reaches a level which the author compares to a “tumour”, to these can be added the frequent irritating reminiscences of the family. As with a transmissible disease, Jenny experiences this psychological state, too, when travelling alone with an unknown man, Paul. This allows the author to further tap the impact of the issue of gender on such a treatment of petrofiction by describing how Jenny developed a deep anxiety of being raped all along her travel back home, particularly when they reached tree-covered areas and had to leave the main road.

In these states of anxiety and suspicion, Scarrow allows the characters to indulge in soliloquy. Jenny’s dialogue with her other self is linked to a curious nightmare warning her about her children being in danger.

Her adult mind chided her. Just a nightmare, Jenny. God knows you’re due one after everything you’ve been through this week.

Yes... a nightmare. That was it. But the sensation was strong; an overpowering sense of being hunted, chased, fleeing from certain death.

Classic nightmare material is all this is, Jen. This really isn’t what you think it is.

Isn’t what? Maternal instinct? Of course not. (433)

The narrator emphasizes the duality of the self. The maternal instinct represents Freud’s Id3 and is under the control of emotions. The second self is

“her adult mind” meaning her superego which represses her maternal instinct to persuade her that it is a nightmare. Also, Jenny’s pessimism about rape is perceived through soliloquy when she confides: “Today, and tomorrow, and for God knows how long... you don’t want to be a woman on your own.” (251).

In a context “when the rules go” (355), Scarrow defends that human beings are fallible in nature, “no matter which country you live in” (355). With the situation created by the peak oil, Great Britain is hit by riots due to food, water and electricity shortage leading the population to radically change. Thus, Scarrow insists on the psychological Id or animal lying in human nature as the proverb illustrates: “What’s bred in the bone comes out in the flesh”. The narrator suggests words like “cavemen”.

The character of 50 cents stands for the archetypal power animal described as an “unassailable leader” (424). On page 436, Scarrow goes even further when he describes the gang as “feral creatures now; wild things, ogres, trolls, hobgoblins” or “a pack of baboons she had once seen on a family trip to the zoo many years ago, simple-minded creatures with a basic set of overpowering drives: thirst, hunger, anger... rape.” (436). Ultimately, he qualifies people as “un-British” (395) when they turn to be violent people.

The archetype of the hero through the representation of the self is pivotal. It takes the role of the alpha-male to suggest our superego. The latter is embodied by Andy. Before going to Iraq, he was seen by her wife as a “pacifist” (243). But through experience that brought him close to death his self knew a metamorphosis as Mike admitted: “Your husband turned out to be a real alpha-male back in Iraq, a sharp thinker—a good field-man,’ he said.” (488). Therefore, he developed psychological defense mechanisms to overcome his fear on the battlefield and his anxiety to find his family safe. This acting out 5 urges him to emerge from his reality anxiety and take the command of the group of militaries to get them out of Iraq.

### **3.2. The Mob and the Quest for Social Identity**

This psychological analysis of characters is proved crucial in times of crisis, particularly in cases of social distancing since it allows to understand and anticipate human behaviours. In literature, for instance, crowds have often been perceived as being negative and volatile. This allows Scarrow to depict them in the light of their relationships with the individual and his own quest for social identity. Therefore, Stephen Reicher explains: “The social identity theory posits that the self is a complex system made up primarily of the concept of membership or non-membership in various social groups” (Reicher, 2000). This section will therefore focus on the identification of groups and the representation of the very self.

In her quest for social identity, Leona tries, in the absence of her parents, to reassess membership within a community marked by violence. Informed by her father about the impending chaos, she becomes part of what she calls “the minority that know” and develops suspicion. This attitude increased during her

shopping when “there was a moment of shared communication, eyes meeting, and barely perceptible nods of acknowledgement.” (167) with shoppers. Insistent side eyeing finally made her aware that she was not alone, far from it.

In periods of oil and pandemic crises and social unrest, sensitivity to a social identity is spatially, too, particularly discernible. In a moment of chaos rife with looting and gang reign, Leona feels the need to share food provisions with people “she could feel safe with; preferably adults, older adults.” (408). She identifies herself as belonging to vulnerable people. This psychological surge of solidarity and compassion for an isolated or fragile layer of the population reminded her of an essay she wrote at school when she longed to live “in a world populated only by teenagers—the beautiful people, young, alive, energetic and fun.” (408) as if willing to take refuge in fantasy.

This attitude is different from that of another gang whose members show loyalty to the current chief “more like a group of feral creatures, cooperating under the intimidating gaze of the pack alpha.” (452). After the overall shared emotional experience when 50 cents killed the other member of the gang, he leads them to primitive levels; hence, 50 cents representing the Id. Ironically, Scarrow sets a comparison defending that “the bird world mirrored the human world. The crows were the gangs, and the pigeons were nervously hiding away somewhere else.” (454). Pigeons represent the fringe of the population tucked away in their houses.

Through the assimilation of the mob with danger, the narrator identifies the subversive element who has an influence on the hungry crowd camping near the service station.

And there were some who wanted to rip her to shreds. She knew it was those of the latter kind who tended to make the biggest noise, the hidden sociopaths, the ones who cried loudest and longest for a lynching when some paedophile, benefit defrauding immigrant, or disgraced minor celebrity was being outed by the red-top press. (340).

The deconstructed archetypal character of the blonde is qualified as the “hidden sociopath” with her capacity in haranguing and dominating the crowd and is discernible through her voice and lack of compassion. This personality uses mass psychology to place herself as “horde leader”. She represents Freud’s id and has no morality; her impulse is to get food for her children whenever they have to loot or lynch Jenny to death. The narrator deduces that independently of our social status the id lies in anyone of us: “blue collar or white collar, if you’re starving enough, you’ll do anything to survive; middleclass, lower-class, tabloid or broadsheet reader. You scratch the surface and we’re all the same underneath.” (475).

To gain a momentary flinching of the leader, Ruth exploited two techniques. At first, she adopted their community as her social identity for she understood “neighbourhood was their tribe”. Secondly, she embodied the image of the leader by affirming her personality as leader in being “Bolshie, loudmouthed and

downright ballsy” (352) and “tapping into that inner-child thing everyone has” (352). She represents the superego which moralizes the Id.

Ruth failed when the blonde unveiled her status as foreigner and appealed to the sense of social identity, membership to the tribe in a context of hunger and lockdown. The starving people camping near the service station conclude that “They had to stick together, because it looked like no one else was going to come and help them out. When things turn to shit, you stick with your own.” (345). This remains a tremendous psychological behaviour during crises. To annihilate Ruth’s attempt, the blonde recurs to emotional contagion identified by Gustave Le Bon as leaders’ means of action. “Ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes. This phenomenon is very natural, since it is observed even in animals when they are together in number” (Le Bon, 2009).

Oil fiction as well as pandemic fiction share psychological states such as paranoia, suspicion, emotional contagion that could allow governments or international authorities forecast social reactions concerning environmental or sanitary injustice and entice population in their different policies.

## **4. Journalism and Analogies as Aesthetic Substrata**

### **4.1. Literary Journalism as Narrative Substratum**

Alex Scarrow instils in his narrative a dose of fictional representation of journalism and the journalist known as literary journalism or narrative journalism. Dealing with the theme of conspiracy and hypersensitive global interdependence, the representation of the professional and the profession plays an important role as a satirical and narratological tool.

Firstly, the fictional representation of journalists in *Last Light* is the place for satire reflected through the theme of conspiracy and fear. Scarrow treats the representation of the journalist as a protagonist. One of the first popular images of the journalist is through his appearance when he is on stage with his make-up and when he is on the field. In reportage during the riots, Jenny describes Sean’s change in appearance from “his usually well-groomed appearance” to “someone who had been roused from sleep after an all-night vigil.” (233).

The journalist bears the description of the flawed hero. He wears the mask of the unreliable person. He has the reputation of conveying false information: “‘I ask that you,’ Charles gestured towards the gathered members of the press and the media, ‘help me by not sensationalising current events.’ He aimed a reproachful gaze towards a row of seats in the middle, reserved for journalists from the various popular red-tops. ‘One thing I really don’t want to see are racial and religious differences being stirred up with inflammatory headlines.’” (171).

Charles, the Prime Minister, denounces the tendency in exaggerating information for a buzz. The author includes the racial and religious differences which are considered volatile in times of crisis. Thus, amalgam is a key issue in the representation of Islam by distortion particularly conveyed in “news on TV” (159).

Leona also makes the same remark when: “bird flu turned out like SARS to be yet another mediahyped non-event journalists” (165). They hyped these pandemics and push the population to buy and store foods which finally proved to be useless.

Additionally, media in Iraq are attributed to being unreliable and inclined to deliver religious and violence-prompt messages: “And the local radio stations still running in the country were no longer broadcasting news that could be considered reliable; instead it was a mishmash of religious sermons, calls to arms and incitement to sectarian violence.” (301).

Depicted as a group, journalists represent the pack which can be anonymous or pro-governmental as in periods of pandemics. In mentioning “red-tops” with media like *The Sun*, the *Daily Star* and the *Daily Mirror*, Scarrow represents the tabloid press which takes political positions. In search for information, the group is often caricatured as the “pack of hunting dogs” eager to squeeze some information out. In the political field, they sometimes wear the image of the corrupted and consequently fail to give the right information. The satire peaks when the narrator describes them as *Mediamoppets*.

Scarrow exploits through his writing the fact-driven or factual narrative. However, fictional and factual narratives are generally described as opposed. Therefore, the author wonderfully blends both. In fact, in a fictional conspiracy, the author bases his narrative on real situations to reinforce his conspiracy theory. Consequently, the reader is allowed to further explore the plot in search of historical facts that allow reliable comparisons, which proves all the more rewarding as the narration fully reflects well-researched information, as is the case when Scarrow meticulously provides such relevant details as dates for example.

To describe the spreading of a phenomenon like this, Scarrow recalls pandemic events through the panic or rapidity of their expansion. The bird flu is used on page 52 to describe the expansion of the civil war in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, in certain scenes of chaos he does not hesitate to convoke natural phenomena and riots. With scenes of riots, Scarrow reminisces about LA riots and Katrina in New Orleans. From all the interdependent countries, the author conjures up a general situation by providing examples of towns in states of utter chaos, confirming what the geography of the pandemic looks like.

Secondly, the narrative of *Last Light* reflects a literary device consisting in shuttling through a variety of environments, texts and styles. Its nonlinearity gives it an aesthetic and rhetoric form that is germane to tabloid descriptions thereby confirming its postmodernity. Alex Scarrow adopts a style which is a tabloid like the webpage of an online newspaper. In fact, through the three-quarters of the narrative, the author alternates between three main scenes: Iraq and southern Turkey, London and its surroundings and the house of Sutherlands.

Consequently, like a webmaster, Scarrow creates his hypertexts and browses between the private story and the public story. Behind the story of the Sutherlands, the narrator tells the public story about a world conspiracy and thriller

that gravitates around it. With the hypertextual narrative, hence the alternance between the triptych scene, Scarrow increases the suspense. Scarrow can create a scene which is volatile and the time of reaching the outcome he deliberately shifts to another scene increasing the reader's curiosity.

Besides the tabloid narrative, hypertextuality conveys the intermittence of the journalist text in the normal telling of the story. We have an example of hypertext on page 26 between the report of the journalist and the story. On page 233, after the appearance of Sean, the journalist, on the TV set and some comments on his clothing, the author shifts from the normal course of the narrative and inserts Sean's reportage on a riot. These hypertextual travels occur several times. This technique allows giving the reader information about the current situation that is prevailing and the motive of the character's future action.

Intertextuality is, as we can see it, of paramount importance. Alex Scarrow's intertextuality goes through references to seminal works of cinema, cartoon and literature. Its understanding requires the competence of the reader to identify the movie, the scene or the synopsis. The author tells some actions of unnamed movies with famous actors. Thus, to explain a gesture of Charles, the narrator makes an incursion into a movie: "There was a gesture he had once seen in a film, he couldn't remember which film it was, but it had starred someone like Morgan Freeman playing the President of the United States." (408). By citing *Home Alone* on page 412, the author encourages the reader to perform research to understand his allusion. Therefore, the genius of *Scarrow (2007)* peaked when, on page 409, Leona's fantasy of living in a world populated by youths only is linked to the story of *Lord of the Flies (Golding, 1954)*.

The representation of the pyramid and the theme of espionage through what Jenny mentioned about "Big Brother watching you" is telling and could, too, be understood as a palimpsestic rewriting of George Orwell's theme represented in his novel *1984 (Orwell, 1949)*. As such, it symbolizes, as with Orwell's narrative, the existence of a global ruling power different from legal institutions with, on top of it, the members of the Twelve and at the bottom the One Hundred and Sixty.

Italicized passages, too, inform the reader about the character's thought, feelings, discourse, etc. They may indicate a hypertext that allows the author to make an incursion into Andy's report as on page 302 when he cites the results of the "highest risk distribution chokepoints were to be hit within a twenty-four hour period". And, last but not least, many soliloquies are highlighted with italics.

## 4.2. Analogies

Analogies cannot escape the triptych representation of oil, globalization and terror. Therefore, the following analysis will focus on the representation of images that tap oil, globalization and finance which are key domains supplying oil and health with metaphors, symbols, etc.

Medical metaphors fuel the narrative. Oil has always aroused analogies as being source of life. With its liquid form, it is often represented through blood and its lexical field. Ash describes it as “our oxygen, our life’s blood” (502). This depicts the importance of the role such a resource plays in the economy. In fact, by associating the human body with the personification of the world, the narrator offers a vital role of oil: “The world is an old man with a weak heart, and oil is the blood supply.” (74). The analogy continues with the assimilation of oil shortage to artery block resulting in a no return state. “It needs only a single blocked artery to throw him into a seizure, and if it lasts long enough, the organs start dying, Charles, one by one.” Malcolm turned to look the Prime Minister in the eye. “Even if the blockage clears and blood starts flowing again—once those organs start failing, there’s really no way back.” (74). Like a doctor, he diagnoses the medical problem as being a thrombosis, an “embolism or stroke” (420).

Andy predicts a “System-wide failure” (465) leading to an apocalyptic world that will never “reboot after something like that” (465). This reflects a warning that economists are issuing about the impact of the coronavirus. With a more global impact, Scarrow talks about “a global, economic heart attack” (420). The author has tactfully instilled other tools to depict the dependence of some countries to the oil circuit or blood system. Instead of the common lexicon which refers to pipeline, tap, etc., he uses “drip-feed” and “strangulation” to illustrate the dangerous and “tenuous situation of this interdependent modern world”. Oil dependence is assimilated to an infection through a metaphorical idiom “to lance the boil” (501).

Alex Scarrow also explores the environment of conspiracy to describe the chaotic situation prevailing in Arab countries. To represent the rapidity and repercussions of the consequences, he compares their spreading to a “bloody bird flu” (52). By giving documentary information about the history of crises, he uses the pandemic lexical field through viruses. Health metaphors describe the relief of characters who survived mortal assaults by militia. The jet’s sound and Andy’s safe way back home are considered as “sedative” (420).

In describing the unpredictable effects of an oil shock or pandemic, metaphors of globalization are explored. Despite the unconsciousness of the risk by TV watchers at the beginning of bombings in remote Arab countries as this was the case with Coronavirus’ outbreak at Wuhan, the effects are felt all around the world through the metaphor of the butterfly described as follows:

“The butterfly metaphor captures the notion that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil today could affect the atmosphere in ways that bring a snowstorm in Alaska tomorrow? [...] In the field of international relations, the notion that in interconnected systems, small perturbations might reverberate or cause cascading disruptions is an important one. Dynamics of this kind have been observed in various forms of globalization.” (Yetiv, 2011)

The crisis began with a bombing in Saudi Arabia and which Cameron, journalist, predicted as a story which was “going to grow very quickly” (18). In fact,

with the growing conflict between Sunni and Shi'a, the two main religious communities, the explosive situation spread to the whole Arab countries like a civil war. With the undergoing globalization, the bombing of other chokepoints of the global oil circuit is felt throughout the world. To reinforce this contagious effect, Scarrow recurs to ludic analogies like endgame or dominoes: "It'll happen quickly when it happens... one thing after another, going down like dominoes." (26).

The representation of globalization inspires images. They convey human beings' unconsciousness of the issues in modern oil societies. When giving directions to the reader about a global perspective, Scarrow often refers to the notion of a "bigger picture" (60). He stresses on the fact of analyzing local impacts of oil or terror on global level. To make the readers understand the American motive about their intervention in Iraq, he invites them to go beyond, referring to the geopolitical map; even the conspiracy which is spreading around the world is represented through this image as Malcolm indicates: "They would see the bigger picture. They would see that this needed to be done for everyone's benefit." (285). He acknowledges the unawareness of the scope of this conspiracy which is as dangerous as a "tidal wave" (56), hence, the necessity of thinking global for the fight against Coronavirus.

This reference to a bigger picture tends to introduce a more complicated image which is that of the puzzle. Scarrow draws the image when representing oil imperialism. In fact, Farid explains Mike that his ideological discourse about his vision of Iraq constitutes a lack of understanding of the ideal of Iraqi people. "You Americans don't even know what picture is on the jigsaw!" (59). Further in the discussion, Farid made him know that Iraqi population do not negate the project of rebuilding their country but reject America's attempt at ideologically acculturating them through education, business, religion, etc.

Imagery-wise, the financial sector, too, deserves scrutiny. In the race for oil exploitation, foreign companies sometimes resort to joint ventures. This merging is revealed through the introduction of Mike and Andy who are sent to Iraq for risk assessment consultancy. Andy comments: "They all seemed to be hyphenated now, the oil companies. It was a sign of the times; struggling companies merging their dwindling reserves, all of them desperately consolidating their assets for the end-game." (31). This metaphorical union reflects the current trends marking the combined governmental fight for COVID-19. The author mentions two merging operations concerning with fictional companies such as Chevroil-Exxo for the account of United Kingdom and Texana-Amocon for United States motivated by dwindling oil reserves.

The treatment of the effects of instability in oil producing countries includes descriptions of oil-related impacts on stock markets and oil barrel prices. These descriptions often recur in financial metaphors as in the following quotation: "On Wall Street this morning, share prices took a major tumble as oil prices rocketed to over \$100 a barrel. There are some murmurings that the worsening

Saudi situation will trigger what is known in some obscure corners of the oil and gas industry as an artificial Peak Oil scenario.” (39). Like COVID visual representations through contamination rate comments, words like “tumble”, “rocket” and “trigger” describe fluctuations.

To reinforce the interconnectedness of the world, the author resorts to interconnection symbols. This is achieved through variations on the theme of conspiracy, along with symbols related to oil, globalization and terror. The Circle is one of such symbols with its circularity conveying the archetypal meaning of unity, entity or interconnection between different parts. Throughout the narrative, the global oil circuit is represented as a loop. To describe the inability of a “chokepoint” to produce oil, the author qualifies the global oil circuit as “out of the loop” (69). With the description of conspiracy as a hidden and coordinated group of people, Scarrow represents the image of the chain often used in the sector of transit or pandemic transmission (“breaking the chain of transmission”). As a consequence, the existence of a breach suggests the frailty of the chain, designated as the “weak link” (498) and personified as being the banker.

The representation of globalization is, too, made to emerge through a metaphorical representation of the pyramid. It represents the Orwellian 1984 hierarchy of world governance acting in the name of interdependence and with anonymity and no allegiance.

In terms of symbolic representation, it, too, might prove rewarding to analyze some acronyms or words that stem from periods of chaos and reactions of governing bodies using war or military (rocketed, trigger) and animal metaphors. In *Last Light*, the British government creates the Cabinet Office Briefing Room A (COBRA), the supreme body in charge of managing the crisis. Similarly, through the current COVID-19 context, Senegalese government created FORCE COVID-19 (Fonds de Riposte et de solidarité Contre les Effets du COVID-19), a Response and Solidarity Fund against the Impacts of COVID-19.

As for the environment, it is part of the representation of the oil crisis or pandemic. Its depiction generally covers a wide range of images of apocalypse, tsunami, invasion, fire, etc. As a consequence, Scarrow’s analogies to the destruction in Arab countries and developed countries abound and are drawn from real events.

Finally, in oil fiction marked by an environment of conspiracy, analogies end up abundantly tapping closely related sectors to depict its interconnectedness. Therefore, for further analyses, Alex Scarrow leaves the reader not enlightened about the existence of symbols that suggest masonic portent and that could be related to the conspiracy track.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to examine in *Last Light* COVID-19-like symptoms marked by economic and sociocultural substrata and show how oil, like pandemic, represents a certain power on the narrative fabric that fuels plot events

and influences characters. Alex Scarrow's narrative could, therefore, be said to have largely confirmed our hypotheses.

Indeed, Alex Scarrow's petrofiction reflects a variety of social, economic, and political issues that constitute a basis which could serve in pandemic crises like the COVID-19 in terms of repercussions and preventions. Consequently, these contexts impact characters that develop psychological reactions to oil crisis, governmental measures (confinement, mismanagement), conspiracy and even chaos. This implies, on the one hand, the embodiment of paranoia and duality of the self and, on the other hand, representations of mobs through which characters try to identify themselves as belonging to a social group. Besides, aesthetic analyses revealed that Scarrow embedded his narrative with literary journalism that confers the text its postmodernity through tabloids, hypertextual and intertextual narratological devices. And, last but not least, scratching the layers of the narrative allowed tapping highly metaphorical images along with symbols and archetypes that allow to delve into the wells of health, globalization, oil and terror.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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