

Bloody Investigations. Scientists as Ambiguous Pandemic Protagonists in the Dystopian Streaming Series *La Valla* and *La Révolution*

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In loving memory of M.W.

Abstract

By focusing on the French alternate history drama *La Révolution* and the Spanish futuristic dystopia *La Valla* (both 2020), this article confronts two divergent representations of the virus expert as pandemic protagonist: the virtuously acting practical physician (Joseph Guillotin) and the epidemiological researcher crossing ethical boundaries (Alma López-Durán). It is important to consider the specialist's object of investigation, i.e., blood, as a fundamental element: as a source of infection as well as a potential agent for a cure during the outbreak, blood represents a serial key element and a narrative *leitmotif* in both pandemic fictions. Among the three analytical aspects of striking heroic or nuanced unscrupulous character description, the protagonist's spatial-semantic localization and interaction with groups of further epidemic agents – infected aristocrats in the French series, immune children in the Spanish series –, this study systematically and contrastively examines the positioning of the respective medical main character within the series' specific value system (also taking into account the different aesthetics representing the viral thread). On the basis of this narratological inventory, it can moreover be demonstrated that these dystopian fictions, despite their amimetic nature, negotiate critical issues of the current pandemic.

PANDEMIC PROTAGONISTS GOING VIRAL ON NETFLIX – AN INTRODUCTION

Scientists, especially virologists, infectious immunologists, human physicians, and microbiologists, are not only in demand in our new Covid-19 reality when it comes to communication about the virus – its structure, transmissibility and containment – but they also play a leading role in pandemic and Corona Fictions films and series as actively involved key characters in effectively combating the viral threat. Indeed, in addition to literary outbreak fictions, audiovisual outbreak fictions in particular are experiencing an extraordinary boom during the Covid-19 pandemic as artistic-cathartic forms of coping (cf. Bronfen 2020, 14 and 134). This can be seen both in the increased demand¹ for older and more recent pandemic fictions ‘classics’ of the last decades – for example, Wolfgang Petersen’s *Outbreak* (1995) and Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011) – as well as in the multitude of new pandemic and Corona Fictions’ creations since 2019/2020. In particular, streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime which are profiting from the pandemic and physical distancing, are targeting epidemic or pandemic disaster² series and films, such as *The Rain* (2018-2020) and *Songbird* (2020). This tendency includes the two drama series focused in this study, *La Révolution* (France 2020) and *La Valla* (Spain 2020). Production of these series started before the pandemic: filming for *La Valla* took place from February 2019, and for *La Révolution* from July 2019. This circumstance shows that the demand for epidemic productions existed even before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the topicality of the subject has probably intensified interest in them.³

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- 1 A series of statistics on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on streaming behaviour in Germany and worldwide is provided by the website *Statista.com* (cf. Rabe 2022a). One statistic there shows that Netflix subscriber numbers reached their highest level ever in the fourth quarter of 2021 with 221 840 000 international payers; in the meantime, the numbers are declining slightly again (after lockdowns and physical distancing restrictions were lifted) (ibid. 2022b).
 - 2 As fictions that stage profound impacts of disasters on the affected societies (national health emergency, environmental degradation, collapse of the political system, etc.), the aforementioned series fit the concept of disaster genre. Nevertheless, a precise distinction between emergency, disaster and catastrophe (cf. Montano 2020) should be made when categorizing these fictions.
 - 3 Netflix keeps viewership figures a closely guarded secret. But the fact that in the case of *La Valla*, Netflix becomes the third diffusion medium after the Spanish streaming provider Atresplayer Premium and the public broadcaster Antena 3, suggests Netflix’s

Both series implement the formulaic plot and stereotypical tropes of the outbreak narrative (cf. Wald 2008, 2; Schweitzer 2018, 40) into a dystopian setting. In the French format an alternate history stages the events in the historical past of 1787, whereas the Spanish production represents a near future dystopia of the post-apocalyptic year 2045. In these European series, the virus expert – more precisely: the general practitioner Joseph Guillotin (Amir El Kacem) in *La Révolution* and the epidemiologist Alma López-Durán (Eleonora Wexler) in *La Valla* – represents a central character. Even if both roles (of the opposite sex) are diametrically opposed from a moral point of view, they reflect the broad typology of the scientist as a pandemic protagonist in fictional outbreak stories. Fundamental to the characterization of the medical main characters is their respective relation to blood, the serial fulcrum of the viral narrative of both streaming productions, which, in its ambivalence as infectious carrier substance and basis of a possible vaccine, according to the guiding thesis of this paper, decisively shapes the panoramic ambiguity of the researcher in these two epidemic fictions. In other words, with regard to the narrative construction of characters, it depends on whether the vital fluid, the specialist's object of investigation, is conceived in the series as 'good blood' or 'bad blood' (Knust/Groß 2010, 7) and in what way the virus expert relates to it.

The following comparative analysis of *La Révolution* and *La Valla* is divided into three parts: First, both outbreak series are examined for overarching narrative and motivic analogies of their plot structures with regard to their divergent dystopian subgenres. This will be followed by a discussion of the always culturally shaped, ambivalent semantics of blood, illustrated by examples from the two series. The seriality of this *leitmotif* is also examined in its significance for the serial-narrative discourse structure. Finally, a detailed structuralist-semiotically oriented interpretation of the two fictional medical specialists Joseph Guillotin and Alma López-Durán will follow in three steps. In a first step, the two pandemic protagonists will be analyzed according to Hans Wulff's definition of heroes and with regard to the respective value system of the series universe. Secondly, this classification will be deepened by a consideration of the spatial-semantic location of both protagonists, taking into account Jurij Lotman's spatial semiotics. Thirdly, a close look at the interaction structures between the researching main characters and further central groups of people in the epidemic, namely the infected literal

expectation of high demand during the lockdown. However, for the broadcast on Antena 3 from September to December 2020, Gregory (2021, 166) testifies to a mediocre audience rating.

‘blue bloods’, i.e., the aristocrats mutated into zombie-like beings in Joseph’s case, and the immune children, Alma’s experimental subjects, ends the examination.

DYSTOPIAN SERIES GENRES AND VIRAL AESTHETICS

In both the francophone and hispanophone worlds, the Covid-19 pandemic has spawned several thematic series productions (with regional peculiarities of content and form), of which *Épidémie* (TVA, Canada 2020) and *En Thérapie* (Arte, France 2021-2022), *Diarios de la cuarentena* (RTVE, Spain 2020), and *Raúl con Soledad* (Movistar Plus+, Peru since 2020) are just a few of the numerous titles. The major difference between these and the two series examined here is that *La Révolution* and *La Valla* are dystopian fictions (classified under the overarching science fiction genre) in which an amimetic serial world forms the spatiotemporal background.⁴ As a transmedia genre producing literary, cinematic/television, and hybrid works (cf. Jenkins 2003) and despite some isolated precursors, dystopia builds on the horror scenarios of the 20th century (fascism, world wars and the Nazi regime) and the turn of the millennium (terrorism, scarcity of resources, overpopulation, climate change) by representing these scenarios and their consequences in fictions of a post-apocalyptic and/or posthuman world (cf. Voigts 2015, 2; Stein 2016, 47; cf. particularly Claeys 2017). Regardless of this science-fictional effect of alienation, several references that critically reflect our social reality are clearly discernible – especially with regard to the two series discussed.

The Netflix series *La Révolution*, released on October 16, 2020 with eight episodes, belongs to the subgenre of alternate history, whose basic characteristic is the altered repetition of history, in this case of the conflictual events leading to the French Revolution in the county of Montargis (about 120 km south of Paris).⁵ The

4 On the tradition of fantastic and science fiction series in French and Spanish TV, see Evrard 2020, Sánchez Trigos et al. 2015, and Cascajosa Virino 2018. Furthermore, it remains to be said that the SF genre is dominated by anglophone productions, see Favard/Machinal 2022.

5 As a literary genre, alternate history is to be distinguished from counterfactual history (Gallagher 2018) as a subject of historical scholarship. The founding text of the otherwise Anglo-American-dominated genre is Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Château’s *Napoléon et la conquête du monde, 1812 à 1832. Histoire de la monarchie universelle* (1836) – *Napoléon apocryphe* in short – which, like *La Révolution*, also deals with the historical events of 1789 (cf. further Roberts 2019). The genre explanations have already been published in somewhat modified form in Wörsdörfer 2022, 185f.

so-called nexus story, which is based on a genetic model of history, i.e., which places cause and effect at the center, focuses on that moment in the French past from which the fictional events take a different path to the actual historical course of events with which we are familiar (cf. Hellekson 2013, 2 and 5): the game changing appearance of an existence-transforming virus with which King Louis XVI pursues the ‘big plan’ of a truly blue-blooded, posthuman noble race. If the plot of the French series, due to the revolt of the common people against the aristocrats, can therefore also be assigned to the subcategory of battle story (cf. *ibid.*, 7), it also corresponds to the special form of secret history (cf. Morgan/Palmer-Patel 2019, 20), insofar as it – linking the ‘what if’-question to a conspiracy theory,⁶ as in Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) – follows the nexus point event with a supposed cover-up, with the result that it is the goal of the serial narrative to reveal the ‘true’ story.

The (up to now)⁷ 13-episode series *La Valla*, first broadcasted on the VoD provider Atresplayer Premium (weekly from January 19, 2020) and then publicly on Antena 3 (weekly from September 10, 2020) and finally on Netflix (weekly from September 11, 2020), sets its plot in the opposite temporal direction, namely in the future of the year 2045 following the outbreak of World War III and a nuclear catastrophe. Unlike other futuristic series, however, the fictional world is not determined by robotic-machine and biomedical future technologies, such as cloning (cf. Graumann 2013; Tiehen 2016); rather, after the collapse, it has undergone a social regression into a form of state authoritarianism, the concrete manifestations of which are reminiscent of both the Nazi era and the phase of the era of *franquismo* (cf. Gregori 2021, 167 and 175-179; Léger 2022).⁸ In this series, too,

6 The possibility is real that by using the motif of secret intrigue, *La Révolution* could have promoted conspiracy theories and fake news in the reception context of the Corona pandemic. Here, an explanatory handling of fictionality by the series makers would have been desirable.

7 In contrast to the French series *La Révolution*, which was not continued after one season despite initial plans (and therefore comes to an abrupt, open end), there is the Netflix announcement of a renewal for a second season for *La Valla*.

8 In his address to the nation, the Minister of Health, Luis Covarrubias (Abel Folk), Alma’s husband, quotes the national writer Federico García Lorca, who was killed at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War: “Federico García Lorca once wrote: ‘There are things hidden in walls that, if they suddenly came out into the street and shouted, would fill the world’” (cf. XII El discurso [37:55-38:11 min.]) (“Federico García Lorca escribió: ‘Hay cosas encerradas dentro de los muros que si salieran de pronto a la calle y

a conspiracy at the highest political level plays a role, so that the macrostructural narrative and motivic parallels to *La Révolution* already become quite evident.

As different as the two dystopian series may be in their temporal setting, they possess a fundamental commonality in their either very clear or only implied reference to national crisis-like states of emergency. The fictional *Ancien Régime* on the eve of the French Revolution and the Franco dictatorship following the Spanish Civil War, which in *La Valla* is the model for the new social structure of the series world, are equally characterized by an arbitrary leadership style of the powerful and authoritarian state structures: In *La Révolution*, for example, Donatien (Julien Frison), the new Count of Montargis, after his posthuman transformation spreads fear and terror among the population of the county, and describes its task as follows: “People need to remember what their fate is: to submit, to obey... and to feed us” (VIII. La révolte [08:51-09:21 min.]).⁹ Besides, the ruthless captain of the guard, Pérouse (Dimitri Storage), embodies the police apparatus marked by the use of violence. His counterpart in *La Valla* is the newly appointed *comandante* of state security, Coronel Enrique Jiménez (Manu Fullola), who not only allows but actively supports the most brutal interrogations of prisoners (III. Los niños perdidos [26:02-26:26 min. and 28:19-30:16 min.]). In the Spanish series, moreover, drones, informers (the groundskeeper Begoña), and vast numbers of soldiers for the constant surveillance of the population of New Spain are omnipresent from the beginning.

In terms of the elaboration of the outbreak narrative underlying both epidemic fictions, *La Révolution* and *La Valla* each follow one of the two variants distinguished by Bronfen (2020, 140): while the French series, by presenting the nobles as infected with a mysterious virus that turns the blood blue, equates the epidemic with a political infection, the Spanish series frames the outbreak of the noravirus as a struggle on two fronts: against the deadly spread and against the corrupt structures within the state leadership (most notably the unscrupulous president and parts of the medical department). In dealing with the virus as an overarching motif, a specific design is conspicuous in each case with regard to the series’ aesthetics: as in other pandemic productions about the undead (cf. *ibid.*, 78), *La Révolution* gives a concrete face to the threat in the form of the posthuman aristocrats –; these aristocratic monsters visualize the horror, whereas in *La Valla* the virus remains almost invisible as one of several serious problems of its post-apocalyptic society

critaran, llenarían el mundo”). In addition to the historical references, there is an intramedial allusion to the dystopian Hulu’s series *The Handmaid’s Tale* (since 2017).

9 All translations are the author’s and followed by the original in the footnote. “Le peuple doit se rappeler à quoi il est destiné: se soumettre, obéir... et nous nourrir”.

in the first half of the series:¹⁰ After individual sufferers appear in secondary strands at the midpoint of the season, for example a dying woman who has recently given birth in episode 5 [13:39-14:46 min.] and an infected person in a queue in episode 7 [6:56-7:04 min.], it is not until episode 10 that a viral chain reaction leads to an ever-widening outbreak in the home of the Minister of Health and his wife Alma. This circumstance visualizes the serial moment of the virus narrative, which in both epidemic streaming series follows less a dramatic structure – inscribed in other pandemic fictions (cf. Research Group *Pandemic Fictions* 2020) – but rather, in keeping with the genre, a serial principle that is closely linked to the motif of blood.

AMBIGUITY AND SERIALITY OF BLOOD

In all civilizations, human blood has a socio-culturally shaped meaning that goes beyond its biological value as a vital substance; the semantics of blood are socio-cultural constructions that may well be contradictory to one another and move between the poles of life preservation and life endangerment, but equally metaphorically, for example, in the realms of personality constitution, (group) solidarity and (moral) contamination (cf. Levina 2015, 8; Knust/Groß 2010, 7f.). In *La Valla*, blood – more precisely, the blood of ‘special children’ that provides a sufficiently strong immune response to the noravirus for a vaccine – is of central interest. Accordingly, it is regarded as the sole elixir of survival, helping to reassure the continued existence of mankind. However, the fact that the test subjects are defenceless children gives the experiments performed on them without safety precautions (cf. IX. Recuerda quién eres [04:42-05:14 and 45:38-46:18 min.]) a dubious image from an ethical point of view, bringing forth a tension in the viewers’ minds between the potential sacrificing of a few to the healing of many. The structure of meaning of blood in *La Révolution* is different: here, blood applies to posthuman aristocrats – in analogy to other monster narratives (cf. Marigny 2003, 190-192 and 196-202) – as a source of nourishment and, within the ‘bloodthirsty’ series aesthetic, above all to the visual hyperbolization of violence, for example when the bloodied face of Donatien’s sister Marie (Philippine Martinot) is seen in long close-up immediately after her transformation and the bite of her first victim

10 The viral spread is initially only discussed in the sound channel of the president’s televised speech; in the image channel, the threat remains relatively unspecific during the disinfection of the new arrivals and the isolated exposure of a sick person (cf. I. Otro mundo [01:03-03:17 min. and 21:40-22:22 min.]).

(cf. VI. L'alliance [38:04-38:14 min.]). Joseph Guillotin's resistance against the 'bloodsuckers' accordingly proves to be a justified fight against evil in *La Révolution*.

In general, blood is a polysemantic basic motif of the plot in the French series examined. For the class-conscious noble family of Montargis, the continuation of the bloodline is of essential importance. However, the unstable condition of Donatien (cf. II. Le revenant [06:04-06:23 min.]), who suffers from gangrene, which means that he had contaminated blood in his organism before his transformation, is a symbol of the decay of this aristocratic dynasty. Consequently, the degenerated scion Donatien represents the last 'withered branch' of a traditional and prestigious family tree. The succession of blood, in terms of a biological family genealogy, is subsequently substituted by the posthuman Donatien through the monstrous transmission of his now blue blood, with which he creates an entire army of aristocratic zombie creatures. Moreover, the serial transmission of the infected blood on the content level corresponds very clearly with the seriality of the streaming production on the discourse level, which is in line with the genre (cf. Wunsch 2010, 194-200, cf. fundamentally Eco 1990): the narration of the viral infection via the blood follows a serial growth, which is implemented in *La Révolution* by means of the exponentially increasing number of infected: if in the first episode there is only one carrier of the virus in the county with the old count, in episodes 2 to 4 another one is added with Donatien's transformation. In the sixth episode, he transforms four people (in addition to Marie, three close friends) and in the seventh episode, a total of 12 representatives of the provincial nobility into his equals (cf. Wörsdörfer 2022, 188). The task of the scientist, who is now focused, is in a first step to follow these blood traces.

THE SCIENTIST AS PANDEMIC PROTAGONIST

Of Noble Goals and a Black Soul: (Un-)Heroic Characterisations of the Virus Expert

The ambiguity of the character of the virus expert, which is now to be analyzed by using the two dystopian streaming series as examples, becomes particularly evident by taking Hans Wulff's definition of the hero into account. According to Wulff, the hero is, on the one hand, a value-neutral text-functional figure and, on the other hand, an ideological figure that is subject to the discourse of values as well as characterized, among other things, by actionality, liminality and transgression of boundaries (cf. Wulff 2002). While Joseph from *La Révolution* and Alma

from *La Valla* correspond equally to the first determination of the hero, which coincides with the function of the protagonist, these two characters position themselves on different sides of the heroic with regard to the second evaluative determination.

Both characters undoubtedly have an unchallenged pioneering role in the (bio-)medical field: Alma is, according to her own statement, the best virologist in the country, whose ground-breaking research will change the world (cf. XI. La soledad de dos [26:14 min.] and VII. Un asunto de familia [31:11 min.]); Joseph has already distinguished himself by means of self-experimentation through the successful discovery of a smallpox vaccine (cf. I. Les origines [20:25-20:50 min.]).¹¹ As a professionally rational representative of the Enlightenment¹² and a man of action – central characteristic of the hero – his scientific work is not based on pure book study (e.g. in the seclusion of the abandoned Lazarus Church), but decisively on experimental research on the medical object (cf. Wörsdörfer 2022, 187): he and his assistant Katell (Isabel Aimé González-Sola) make the decisive discovery for the mode of action of the mysterious virus during the dissection of an experimentally infected rat. Medially, the cognitive process is made visible through the close-up shot of a magnified microscope view (cf. II. Le revenant [34:34-34:39 min.]) – a shot that represents one of the outbreak tropes (cf. Schweitzer 2018, 50-54). Joseph reapplies the experimental method within his historical context when he (unsuccessfully) tests the blood of the Brotherhood's members for possible immunity using vials, pipettes and small bowls in a serial

11 The smallpox reference is based on the fact that the historical Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, on whom the main character in the series is modelled, was an ardent supporter of smallpox vaccination (cf. Korn 1891, 28f.). Otherwise, we can speak of a highly fictionalized exaggeration of the Guillotin figure in comparison to the historical model, as Korn and others portray it (cf. also Pigaillem 2004). In French history, the guillotine, this apparatus of mass killing used since 1792, is named after Guillotin – a fact from which the historical doctor has suffered much. If *La Révolution* had been extended for a second season, the guillotine might have become an effective killing instrument in the struggle of the revolutionaries headed by Joseph against the aristocratic zombies.

12 Joseph increasingly comes into contact with the 18th century revolutionary narrative: in a confidential conversation with his assistant Katell, she uses arguments for popular resistance to the rulers in free reference to *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?*, the influential 1789-pamphlet by Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (cf. II Le revenant [35:52-36:23 min.]). While one group of the insurgents relies on armed force and thus stands for the radical part of the revolutionaries, Joseph, representative of the moderate position, speaks out for non-violence.

experiment (cf. VII. Le dilemme [30:18-31:42 min.]). Similarly, in *La Valla*, as director of the CIM (*Centro de Investigaciones Médicas*), Alma proves herself to be an active agent, responsible for the use of the most modern technology by her research team in the laboratory experiments on the children.

As virus experts, both aim to generate a vaccine against viral contagion and disease, but the approaches they take are of a very different nature: while Alma is willing to use any means to obtain the medical key, Joseph respects the limits of what is ethically acceptable. Here, the gender aspect is also of some interest: As a career-oriented female scientist, Alma is portrayed in a relatively negative light, whereas Joseph is idealized as a man taking matters into his own hands in an analogous fight against a viral threat. Nevertheless, he too commits a (heroic) transgression in his search for the cause of death of the first victim by secretly dissecting a corpse (cf. I. Les origines [32:19-33:23 min.]). Yet, he pleads for a humane-peaceful approach – for example, while rescuing some prisoners – in the process of deciphering the mystery. Whereas Joseph selflessly sacrifices himself for the weakest – his first appearance is in the treatment of children in an orphanage (cf. I. Les origines [17:23-18:42 min.]) –, Alma turns out to be an entirely unheroic, calculating careerist who uses children who have exceptional biological conditions as experimental subjects, thereby overstepping all bounds of ethical and good scientific work. If her research partner has moral doubts about pushing the treatment of the children to the extreme, she coldly replies: “These kids were out on the street, they were miserable, and if they can’t take the dose, there’s a much better place for them: [...] heaven [...]. They’re already in hell” (I. Otro Mundo [57:58-58:18 min.]).¹³

She is also condescending and inhumane in the relations she has with her servants, referring to her importance as a virus expert: “I am valuable. Very valuable. My children as well. You’re not. You’re worth nothing” (cf. IV. El roce de la piel [24:30-24:40 min.]).¹⁴ Thus, ‘Alma’ turns out to be a telling name that refers to the dark soul of the unscrupulous scientist who, moreover, is mostly dressed in black in accordance with the series aesthetic.¹⁵ Apart from this and in terms of her

13 “Estos niños están en la calle, son desgraciados, y si no aguantan la dosis, hay un sitio mucho mejor para ellos: el cielo, Tomás. Ellos ya están en el infierno”.

14 “Yo soy valiosa. Muy valiosa. Mis hijos también. Tú no. No vales nada”.

15 Gregori (2021, 179) also draws the historical parallel to Evita, María Eva Duarte de Perón, involving Alma’s political ambitions at the end of the season, which is reinforced by casting the Argentine actress Eleonora Wexler in the role. As in many pandemic fictions, evil comes from outside (cf. Schweitzer 2018, 44-47). In *La Révolution*, e.g., the virus also comes from abroad, here from the New World.

overall character, her extramarital affair with *comandante* Jiménez, one of the series' villains, positions her on the amoral side, although her self-sacrificing and determined actions on behalf of her infected son Iván (Nicolás Illoro) appear, at least to some extent, to make her seem more human. In this the more traditional aspects of the female personality – the social care of her family and her maternal protection – cast Alma in a more positive light. This is further evidence of the gender-specific portrayal of the virus expert. Like numerous women in outbreak narratives (cf. Bronfen 2020, 47-71), Alma is an ambivalent figure who literally walks over dead bodies as she pursues her ambitious research objectives, while also promising salvation. Unlike Joseph, the idealized male saviour, in *La Révolution*, she cannot be described as heroic, since she shares far too many characteristics of a villain. Joseph, by contrast, grows more and more into the role of the virtuous hero, even building up his fellow fighters against the epidemic and also the noble monsters in a rousing speech before the big showdown (cf. VII. Le dilemme [35:24-36:30 min.]). In the role of the advancing leader, Joseph's unqualified heroism is revealed.

In Front of and Behind the Border: The Protagonist's Spatial-Semantic Locations

The different positioning of the virus expert in *La Révolution* and *La Valla* can also be confirmed by referring to the spatial semantics of the cultural semiotician Jurij Lotman. According to Lotman, the fictional world is constructed in particular through spatial relations to which semantic fields are assigned, whereby the plot unfolds eventfully whenever a character crosses the boundary between spaces (cf. Lotman 2006). In the Spanish series, the meaningful bifurcation of space is already implied in the title: 'la valla' – the border fence¹⁶ divides the fictional Madrid of the year 2045 into two different sectors: sector 1, the small, ideal enclave where the powerful and rich of the country live in luxury and with an intact nature; and sector 2, which is marked by the apocalyptic events of nuclear war and environmental destruction and the accompanying deprivation and misery.¹⁷ In *La Révolution*, a similar demarcation is not made explicit, but is nevertheless firmly integrated. The juxtaposition of the opulent night-time festivities at the Montargis

16 Gregori (2021, 170) interprets this wall as reminiscent of the border fences of Melilla and Ceuta, which separate Spain, a paradise for migrants from the African continent.

17 The division into two sectors is a standard trope of dystopian fiction, as also evidenced by *The Hunger Games* (2012). The existing class issues are spatially emphasized.

chateau and the sheer poverty on the streets and especially in the town's orphanage is particularly contrasting (I. *Les origines* [05:28-06:13 and 17:20-18:27 min.]).

The exclusive sector 1, where Alma and her family live in a luxurious mansion, is like a gated community (cf. further Tschiltschke 2018) due to the border protection system that runs through the middle of Madrid. The rigorous access controls, which include the verification of personal data and obligatory disinfection (I. *Otro mundo* [47:33-48:40 min.]), are strictly supervised by soldiers. The two worlds of post-apocalyptic Madrid are juxtaposed in terms of colour aesthetics: if the space of the ordinary population presents itself in shades of gray and brown, behind the border a light-flooded nature dominated by green unfolds; above the tree-lined manicured lawns of the villas, birdsong can be heard in the sound channel (cf. *Otro mundo* [49:00 min.]).¹⁸ As the wife of the Minister of Health and a leading researcher, Alma is on this side of the protective fence; within this little paradise, time seems to stand still: lavish dinner parties are the order of the day here (while everything is lacking in sector 2), where the poor – the majority of the population – are condescendingly discussed (cf. II. *Mi hermana Sara* [32:26-33:42 min.]). Alma herself behaves disrespectfully toward her servants, e.g., when throwing a cold cup of tea at the feet of the maid Manuela (Yaima Ramos) (cf. III. *Los niños perdidos* [13:26-13:37 min.]). With her location in the morally negatively semanticized space defined by abuse of power and arrogance, Alma is clearly anchored as a villainous character. She commits a borderline violation in Lotman's sense whenever she abuses the innocent children from sector 2 in her research facility for her experiments.

While Alma is located on the sunny side of the bipartite space, Joseph in *La Révolution* is located in the spatial and semantic field of misery and poverty. By intending to uncover the murder of the young peasant woman – and subsequently the disappearance of numerous others posted on the town missing persons board (cf. II. *Le revenant* [23:00-23:25 min.]) –, thereby exonerating an innocent prisoner, he moves on the side of moral virtue. Following up with his investigation, he initially enters a phase of liminality in the Lazarus ruins in the forest, from which he returns to the world, equipped with extensive additional knowledge about the origin and effects of the virus, in order to cross the border into the space of the zombie-like aristocrats. The shot of the insurgents' procession toward Versailles, preceded by a sequence illustrating the sumptuous halls in the Palace of

18 In addition to the spatial contrast between sectors 1 and 2, *La Valla* also presents a temporal contrast: The dam outside the capital, densely forested 25 years ago, has given way to a wasteland in the fictional present, as a dissolve shows: Water and plants have disappeared (cf. VIII. *El hijo de nadie* [03:13-03:19 min.]).

Versailles, which represent the spatial background of Donatien's meeting with the monstrous Louis XVI, also opens with a long close-up of Joseph, to whom the camera returns again and again (VIII. *La révolte* [39:08-39:57 min.]). Joseph and Alma stand on different sides of the semantically charged two-world structure, both crossing borders in the other direction, marking them within the ambiguous spectrum of the virus expert in the value system of the series as either a good (Joseph) or an evil (Alma) pandemic protagonist.

Of Monsters and Angels: Interactions with the Mighty and the Innocent

The interaction of the scientist characters with other groups of the outbreak narrative shows the diametrically opposed determination of the two experts. In this context, the blood metaphor is again of relevance. Joseph resists in both medical and direct-body combat the blue-blood contaminated nobles who literally bleed the people dry. Within this group of pandemic protagonists, blood takes on the meaning of disease and death: whoever comes into contact with it perishes as a human being. In contrast, Alma interacts with the pandemic group of children who are immune to the noravirus and whose blood, due to its particular composition, promises healing and continuity. In *La Valla*, blood is thus the source of life and – through the development of a vaccine – the basis of solidarity for the cohesion of society.

In *La Révolution*, the constellation of characters between Joseph and his posthuman opponents is determined by the monstrosity of the latter. The aristocrat is not figuratively but literally a blue-blooded bloodsucker who poses a danger to his subordinates (cf. further Wörsdörfer 2022, 181-183). In contrast to literary and media tradition, the aristocrat is not associated with the elitist vampire, but with a zombie horde, whose bloodthirsty actions depict the anarchic conditions at the time of the French Revolution (cf. Hoquet 2014). The shots in the final episode 8, in which the infected nobles crouch over the corpses of the fallen and eat their flesh in the dirty city streets immediately after the barricade fight, can be described as iconic (cf. Wörsdörfer 2022, 190; VIII. *La révolte* [30:05-30:14 min.]). In contrast to the aristocrats' monstrous-animalistic libidinal behaviour stands Joseph's selfless-humanitarian self-sacrifice in the preceding sequences of the bloody battle fought with extreme brutality: it is the common man Joseph who, as a physician, cares for the wounded in the field at the greatest risk to his own life (VIII. *La révolte* [26:33-26:58 min.]). Joseph thus assumes the role of the good resistance and monster fighter, as the pandemic protagonist in the series system of drawing rigorously black-and-white characters.

In *La Valla*, Alma confronts the crowd of child probands as a group of pandemic protagonists. After the research breakthrough in CIM – and again and again from then on – she stylizes the ‘special children’ as her angels (cf. III. Los niños perdidos [37:28 min.]). During a visit to these boys and girls, she ostensibly mimes the familiar guardian, but what begins as a caring fairy tale lesson ends with the children being anesthetized by the yogurt provided and prepared for blood transfusion in the service of experimental purposes (cf. Los niños perdidos [38:04-40:49 min.]). For Alma, their value lies not in their ideal being, but in their material potential. The innocence of the defenseless children contrasts with Alma’s calculation and manipulateness, which she displays, for example, when she impresses upon little Marta (Laura Quirós), before returning to her father, that she is fine and that no one has done any harm to her (cf. V. Los inocentes [04:33-04:38 min.]). By taking the stance in her high-risk research that sacrificing a few for the salvation of many is an acceptable trade-off, Alma reveals herself, in juxtaposition with her ‘little angels’, to be the diabolical string-puller of an infernal plan. This virus expert, whose interaction partners are the weakest and most vulnerable people in society, is – unlike Joseph, who heroically fights monsters – a conscienceless and unscrupulous pandemic protagonist.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the broad spectrum of the role of the virus expert in audiovisual pandemic fictions: In *La Révolution*, Joseph Guillotin is a heroic investigator of the virus’s origins who fights for the cause of the tormented people and stands fearlessly on their side against the monstrous blue bloods. In *La Valla*, Alma López-Durán herself fills the role of the (complexly designed) villain, who spatially stands on the side of the exploitative elite and fights for the noble goal of eliminating the virus by carrying out high-risk experiments on defenseless children, thus transgressing ethical boundaries. While neither of these two streaming series provide a realistic depiction of the world as such, due to their dystopian science-fictional setting, their motivic and narrative constants nevertheless appear also to be valid for our present-day Covid-19 reality and, in the form of indirect serial commentary, sometimes offer orientation in the pandemic crisis period.

Regarding the role of the virus expert in epidemic/pandemic times, a critical questioning of scientific research thus takes place with different approaches for response. *La Valla* clearly problematizes a concept of science without limits, in which incalculable risks are to be feared for the individual. In contrast, *La Révolution* creates a firm belief in the good, selfless, self-sacrificing physician who

places his skills at the service of the community. Both series denounce the possible abuse of power by ruling elites, especially in chaotic times, with Joseph and Alma on different sides. In general, both Netflix series – and this should be critically noted in conclusion – fuel conspiracy myths, as they also circulate in our pandemic present, in which the virus expert takes an ambiguous position within the outbreak narrative – a position which, overall, does not inspire confidence.

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