Human-Viral Hybrids as Challenge to the Outbreak Narrative and Neo-Liberal Biopolitics[1]

Małgorzata Sugiera (Jagiellonian University, Kraków)

Abstract

The article starts with Jean-Luc Nancy's recent supposition that the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the precarious foundations of the Western developed and progressive societies, laying bare the mechanism of their biopolitical regime. Following Nancy's argument, the article draws first on the example of a few recently published French Corona Fictions which depict contagion as one of many, tightly entangled factors, mostly of an anthropogenic nature. From this perspective, the article then offers a close reading of two speculative pandemic fictions fabulations of the turn of this century: the novel *The Blood Artists* (1998) by American novelist and screenwriter Chuck Hogan, and *Rifters* trilogy (1999-2005) by Canadian SF author Peter Watts. Both revisit and morph the outbreak narrative, introducing a new type of protagonist – the human-viral hybrid – to reveal the workings of biopower and geontopower as yet another form of structural violence inherent in the late liberalism.

1 The article was written within the framework of the project 'Epidemics and Communities in Critical Theories, Artistic Practices and Speculative Fabulations of the Last Decades' (UMO-2020/39/B/HS2/00755), which was funded by the Polish National Science Centre (NCN).

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

AN ALL-TOO-HUMAN-VIRUS

It is not without reason that Jean-Luc Nancy entitled his small volume *An All-Too-Human Virus* (2022), with intentional reference to Nietzsche's well-known book *Human, All Too Human* in which the German philosopher explained that phenomena once thought to be of divine origin had been revealed as all too human in the second half of the 19th century (cf. Nietzsche, in Nancy 2022, 10). The volume was published in June 2020, at the end of the first period of lockdown in France. It gathers the French philosopher's recent interventions, mostly posted online, which focus on the way the Covid-19 pandemic, which at the beginning froze the whole world in place,[2] brought to light and "revealed – indeed, deconstructed – the fragile and uncertain state of our rational and smoothly functioning civilization" (Nancy 2022, ix). Thus, to put it differently, the pandemic as well as the containment and mitigation measures against its spread have performed as a kind of magnifying glass which enlarged most of the basic contradictions, fault lines, injustices and limits of our (Western) developed and progressive societies. As Nancy argues further, the pandemic soundly attests that humans "get bogged down in a humanity that is surpassed by the events and the situation it has produced" (ibid., 11). Moreover, under these conditions, he explains that when both life and politics visibly defy humans, we gain a better understanding that the widely used term 'biopolitics', which refers to political mechanisms and strategies controlling and managing the basic biological features of the human species, totally fails to grasp the situation in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. When both our scientific knowledge and our technical power bring with them mostly uncertainty, we have lost our sense of self-sufficiency, and have been forced to finally discover how interdependent we are in the world we so long believed to be fully under our (colonial and scientific) control. It is in this sense, emphasizes Nancy, that today Nietzsche's expression rings true to us, Westerners, who are no longer unquestionable masters of the universe and ourselves.

What is even more important in the context of this article, in an intervention which gives Nancy's volume its title, he addresses a key-difference between pandemics of the past and the Covid-19 pandemic. As a rule, the former, as sickness

2 Although well over 100 countries worldwide had instituted either a full or partial lockdown and many others had recommended restricted movement for some or all of their citizens by the end of March 2020, not all of the world 'froze' in the same way, see e.g. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52103747 or https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stay-home-restrictions, 2022-11-29.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

in general, were recognized as 'divine' or 'natural' disasters, and therefore exogenous to the social body, even if they spread through social interaction. In contrast to that "[t]oday the majority of sicknesses are endogenous, produced by our living conditions, food supply and indigestion of toxic substances" (Nancy 2022, 10). That is why, as Nancy stresses in another intervention in the volume, we can be sure "of only one thing: of the enormous ecological or 'econological' difficulties that await us regardless of the outcome of the pandemic" (ibid., 19f.). A couple of years and a few waves of the Covid-19 pandemic later, we are in a better position to understand the French philosopher's insistence on the practical irrelevancy of the outcome of the recent outbreak. Firstly, to the majority of us it has already become evident that the ever-changing, ever-evolving nature of viruses not only seriously undermines the optimistic technocratic vision of controlling – or even of putting an end to – most of contagious diseases through vaccination. But also, we have no longer reason to believe in the capacity of scientists to detect patterns and determine probabilities of any future pandemic that will give us enough time to apply some pre-emptive measures. Secondly, the notion of emerging viruses, which used to naturalize the idea of their permanent thread, has recently revealed its anthropogenic genesis. Global warming causes glaciers and permafrost to melt, liberating ancient viruses and bacteria at the same time when mining, plantation farming and lumber depletion turn stressed animals into chronically feverish bioreactors through destroying their habitats, opening new chains of transmission of zoonotic pathogens to humans. Therefore, contagious diseases, their outbreaks and spreads are no longer seen as exogenous to the human body and independent of human agency. Because all recent epidemics and pandemics have been generated by intrinsic interactions between human biology and more-than-human, albeit often human-caused environmental factors, pathogens have been increasingly recognized as one among many such factors, tightly entangled, interdependent and equally threatening.

The best proof of these more and more evident changes are not only scholarly books and articles, Nancy's volume included, but also recent Corona Fictions that either aim at depicting the Covid-19 pandemic realistically or that speculatively fabulate future ecological and economic catastrophes in which a fictional contagion plays its deadly part along and together with other disasters. It suffices to recall some of the novels written shortly before or during one of the first waves of the ongoing pandemic. In June 2020 when Nancy's volume *An All-Too-Human Virus* was published, a young protagonist of Tom Connan's *Pollution* (2022) starts a first-person account of his daily life in a manner of Michel Houellebecq's characters. Although well-educated, David is only partly employed in a start-up because of the Covid-19 pandemic and he is deeply disappointed by life in France,

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

which he overtly refers to as an underdeveloped though once well-developed country. That is why at the outset of the novel he leaves Paris for an experience of woofing at an organic farm on the Cotentin peninsula in Normandy. Seeking a place free of the pandemic and pollution to recover from a deepening depression, unexpectedly he finds himself at the very center of a serious health crisis of unknown cause(s). Significantly, because of their focus on the pandemic neither government and responsible health agencies nor nation-wide media have taken any interest in the death of local children, farmers and farm animals. Contrary to typical outbreak narratives, no real cause of this health crisis will be sought and found in Connan's *Pollution*. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the novel's protagonist will still need to cope with a next coronavirus's mutation or already with multiple epidemics causing similar symptoms as cough and impeded breathing. Interestingly, the author moves the action of the last part of his novel into the very near future, to autumn 2023. Then shortly after the sixth lockdown, literally on the last pages of the book the critical situation becomes even more complicated through a grave leakage in a nuclear power plant near Cherbourg, the biggest town of the region. Clearly, although *Pollution* realistically depicts the situation in France after the first lockdown, it is not a novel specifically about the Covid-19 pandemic. Its main aim is rather to demonstrate to what extent the virus has worked as a catalyst, unleashing an economic, social and ecologic dynamic that has already been long in the making. In this respect, Connan shows both humans helpless in the face of tightly entangled crises and the virus as an all-too-human phenomenon as Nancy does.

It is not only in realistic Corona Fictions similar to Connan's that characters have to get by surrounded by rumors, partially verified or fake news. Many of newly published speculative fabulations do not show decision-making governmental bodies or representatives of national health agencies experimenting with new vaccines or fighting fictional pandemics by other means. They focus rather on grass-roots communities, which are afraid and/or uninformed of the real nature of the threat, and therefore react blindly to events that surpass their understanding. Some protagonists do not even notice the quickly rising death toll. A case in point is a reclusive London painter in Oana Aristide's debut novel *Under the Blue* (2021), set in the summer months of 2020. Seeking refuge in his studio from all-too-present environmental destruction, the melting of the polar icecap, eco-terrorism, and TV news about yet another epidemic in a distant Siberia, the painter does not even notice that after two weeks the Russian contagion started to ravage London and the entire world. Importantly, Aristide intermingles two plotlines in her novel. The second one, which starts already in 2017, is a story of two computer scientists who in a remote Arctic location feed data to an advanced AI program,

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

starting from the beginning of written history. They expect it to predict what should happen next to the human species, so that adequate pre-emptive measures can be introduced on time. As it turns out, although the AI was able to predict faultlessly all historical catastrophes and crises, the situation of the late 2010s is, however, too multipronged and complicated to envisage the pandemic which will shortly wipe out the whole world, as Aristide's protagonist witnesses during his trek across post-pandemic Europe and northern Africa beneath the eponymous blue. The failure of cutting-edge AI is not only the best and anticlimactic proof that humans have lost their mastery over the world. It is also a significant signal of entangled paradigmatic shifts which the Covid-19 pandemic has made apparent, affecting fictional imagery in its turn.

Another proof of the recent changes in our understanding of pathogens and epidemics as one of environmental factors is the new hierarchy of protagonists in recently published Corona Fictions. It was long heroic scientists and physicians who frequently played the primary role in outbreak dramas.[3] They did it even in virocentric mockumentary narratives of the last decades such as Richard Preston's *Dark Biology* series (1994-2019) or David Quammen *Spillover* (2012). Now however, their relevance for and function in the novel's plot has changed distinctively.

In Aristide's *Under the Blue*, shortly after the painter had left the city for his cottage in Devon, he is visited by his London neighbour and her older sister who happens to be a doctor. Although she worked in one of the capital's hospitals during the outbreak, the doctor seems to be too traumatized to speak about a probable source and course of the pandemic even from her limited but still better-informed perspective. Thus, the reader of the novel will never learn about what caused the apocalyptic catastrophe of which multiple traces the three protagonists see each day on their road trip to Africa. The situation of non-knowledge, in which the reader finds herself, is clearly intended by the author. When compared to typical outbreak narratives premised on Conan Doylean detective stories, the denouement in Aristide's novel demonstrates exemplarily how the imaginary of contagious diseases has recently changed. Significantly, even when doctors do not remain silent after traumatizing events, their accounts have nothing to do with an expected scientific, medicalized approach, which the reader expects and knows so well from earlier pandemic fictions.

3 A formulaic plot that Priscilla Wald calls 'the outbreak narrative' in her *Contagious* (2008), chronicles epidemiological work from the identification of an emerging disease to its containment. Therefore, as a rule it shows scientists and physicians as its protagonists. A good case in point are *Contagion* (1995) and *Pandemic* (2019) by Robin Cook, a prolific writer, credited in popularizing the medical thriller.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

A case in point is Valérie Clo's novelette *Gaïa* (2022). It offers a personal testimony of two sisters who kept putting down their impressions almost each day during a terrible hurricane which wiped out an entire region of France in the mid-21st century in a culmination of multipronged climate changes. While the pregnant Mel stays in a small organic village, her sister and physician Laura tries to alleviate the suffering of patients in a city hospital. Indeed, she does exactly this – she tries to alleviate their suffering because she is altogether unable not only to treat their diseases but also to adequately identify the cause of their suffering. There are simply too many and too tightly entangled causes for what overwhelms and exhausts the body's immune defenses, beginning with different ongoing viral epidemics, and finishing with insupportably high summer temperatures and other weather phenomena. Desperately frustrated by her total helplessness, Laura decides eventually to leave her patients in the hospital and join her sister. Hence, both Aristide's and Clo's examples demonstrate that – traumatized in silence or not – doctor protagonists of recent Corona Fictions, which combine the topics of epidemic outbreak and climate change, stand often in a clear contradiction to their heroic predecessors who skillfully exercised their expertise because they have to live in the same situation of non-knowledge as their (potential) patients do. Therefore, they clearly belong to those humans who, as Nancy commented, "get bogged down in a humanity that is surpassed by the events and the situation it has produced" (2022, 11).

In what follows, my aim is not, however, to enlarge the corpus of the newly published Corona Fictions to further support this point. I will rather take a step back to demonstrate that from today's perspective some signals of the recent changes in the pandemic imagery may be identified in former fictional, albeit scientifically informed narratives. The two chosen examples – the novel *The Blood Artists* (1998) by American novelist and screenwriter Chuck Hogan, and *Rifters* trilogy (1999-2005) by Canadian SF author Peter Watts – different as they are, both come back to the outbreak narrative as defined by Priscilla Wald in her book *Contagious* (2008) to morph its well-known structure. As Wald explains, in its various scientific, journalistic and fictional incarnations, the outbreak narrative "follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment" (Wald 2008, 2). In the case of Hogan's novel, Wald writes explicitly that it "offers an especially vivid example – reading almost as a blueprint – of the outbreak narrative" (ibid., 257). However, she focuses on the novel's human-virus protagonists only as deadly disseminators, which embody the urgency of scientific expertise, and does not even mention Peter Watts's trilogy with its specific embodiment of a human-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

viral hybrid. Both novels, which the article will analyze, focus on the outbreak narrative's key-figure of contagious disease carrier, the Patient Zero, but in my reading they do it rather to complicate and undermine the common qualitative understanding of the pathological body and of pathogens as the main source of contemporary health crises. Thus, a closer look at the novels will support Nancy's main thesis that the Covid-19 pandemic has not so much spotlighted but rather revealed the precarious foundations of the Western developed and progressive societies.

ANOTHER VIRUS

As I have already indicated, it is in the circumstances caused by the recent outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic that Jean-Luc Nancy recognizes the inadequacy of the term 'biopolitics' to grasp the situation in which both life and politics visibly defy humans who lose their sense of self-sufficiency. A few years before Nancy's recognition, in her *Geontologies* (2016) Elizabeth Povinelli offered another critical look at Michel Foucault's well-known definition of the Western regime of power, inaugurated at the turn of the 19th century and then consolidated during the 1970s, which has turned the basic biological features of the human species into the main object of this regime's political strategy. The strategy focuses on the management of sexuality and health at the level of the individual and population. Alongside biopower, that is a formation of power which works through managing life and death, and aims at normalization of life, Povinelli identifies another entangled regime that has been operating within the framework of contemporary late liberalism, spewing out a plethora of new problems, figures, strategies and concepts. She calls the new regime geontological power, and explains that it "does not operate through the governance of life and the tactics of death but is rather a set of discourse, affects and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife" (Povinelli 2016, 17), that means the distinction between the lively (*bios*) and the inert (*geos*). Povinelli links the new regime to the emergence of the geological concept of the Anthropocene and an upcoming ecological catastrophe – the extinction of humans, biological life and possibly the planet itself that urges us to take into account a previously marginalized form of death other than the life and death of individuals and species, that is a kind of an original lifelessness. This relatively novel perspective reveals that Western ontologies are covert bio-ontologies, and effectively subverts the previously stable ordering divisions of Life and Nonlife.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

What is important in the context of my argument, is that this new perspective allows Povinelli to propose a set of three figures of geontopower, one of which is the Virus. In contradistinction to the two former figures (the Desert and the Animist), "the division of Life and Nonlife does not define or contain the Virus" (Povinelli 2016, 35f.), because viruses have been recently categorized as lively or inert depending on the stage of their complicated life cycle, which is dependent on other processes. That is why Povinelli sees a close connection between her figure of the Virus and the popular cultural figure of the zombie, "the aggressive rotting undead" (2016, 37). In other words, although the Virus confuses and levels the fundamental distinction between Life and Nonlife, and by this means also shows its limit, it does this only to sustain the late liberalism ideology and governance by restabilizing it as a supposedly vital form of existential crisis. That is why Povinelli links the Virus to the central imaginary of the Terrorist as the external/internal political "Other" – and while both are seen as an ultimate threat to the capitalist system, they also serve as a source of profit.

Significantly, Povinelli came back to her figure of the Virus after the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, in November 2020. In her essay "The Virus: Figure and Infrastructure", she emphasizes an important difference between the Virus and the coronavirus. Povinelli makes it clear that while the actual virus becomes a figure of geontological failure to govern, the Virus-as-Terrorist blocks a vital understanding of the current pandemic as yet another form of structural violence, as a manifestation of the ancestral catastrophes of colonialism and slavery. Thus, she points at what she names 'ghoul health' and defines it as the prefigure of the concept of the Virus:

> [It is] the global organization of the biomedical establishment and its imaginary around the idea [of] the big scary bug, the new plague. [...] It is the bad faith of geontopower in which the real threat is not the virus but the contemporary global division, distribution, and circulation of health. (Povinelli 2020)

Therefore, the only way to see that the current pandemic is yet another form of toxicity that colonialism has seeded, bringing along also the Anthropocene, is to differentiate the actual virus from the Virus. I will approach this problem by focusing on the cultural imagery of viruses wherein the Virus materializes as the qualitative difference between the normal and the pathological body, which will then also be demonstrated in my reading of both chosen examples of Hogan's and Watts's novels.

The ontological understanding of the normal and the pathological reaches back to the second half of the 19th century when researchers identified microbial

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

organisms as causative agents of communicative diseases in laboratory experiments (cf. Caduff 2015). It is on these experiments that the qualitative difference between the normal and the pathological is premised. Although the microbiologists of that time were able to see only traces of viral infections, they assumed that also this kind of contagious diseases is caused by specific and external agents, attacking the organism from the outside. The reification of disease as an entity separate from the patient not only simplifies the process of healing which becomes an action of removing a given contagious agent from the body, leaving it as healthy as before. It is also a source of many cultural fabulations in which a doctor or a scientist, often working for a governmental agency, acquires new capabilities of mastering and weaponizing the agent after removing it entirely or temporarily from the diseased body.

The Rain, a three-season Danish series (2018-2020) produced by Netflix, is a case in point, albeit here it is a carrier himself who learns how to manipulate a pathogen that is causing his disease. The action begins rather typically with a prologue when a virus that is carried by a heavy rainfall wipes out almost all humans in a part of Scandinavia which will subsequently be contained by a perimeter watched over by military forces. Six years later, when the virus has also already mutated to become deadly for plants and animals, the siblings Simone and Rasmus who take shelter in a bunker start to search for their father who, as a scientist and microbiologist himself, may provide a cure. As it progressively turns out, Rasmus is a carrier of the original virus with which his father experimented to cure Rasmus's genetic disease. In the second and third season of *The Rain*, Rasmus learns how to extract the virus from his body and use it as a handy weapon against scattered groups of survivors. To demonstrate that the virus is a separate entity, it is made visible as marking Rasmus's body by swelling and bulging veins before leaving it as a black swarm, ready to execute its master command, and then to return. An important development in this is that Rasmus increasingly enjoys the power over the life and death of others, in a sense becoming one with the virus – as the Virus. Though by the end of the third season, he is killed by an extract from a specific flower which also rids the world of the deadly virus, *The Rain* leaves no doubt that it was a proper punishment for Rasmus's transgression of the ontological line between the normal and the pathological; the line which is still fundamental for the biopolitical regime as all three figures identified by Povinelli demonstrate.

Before looking closely at Chuck Hogan's *The Blood Artists* (1998), I have referred to this Netflix series because the figure of Rasmus as the Virus provides a useful background on which better to see how differently a figure of viral-human hybrid functions in Hogan's novel. On the face of it, *The Blood Artists* still reads

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

as an average medical thriller in which events unfold in 2016, a year that was still a near future for the reader at the moment of publication. However, the author skillfully makes use of the well-known detective narrative convention on which modern epistemological discourse is premised (cf. Wald 2008, 157-212) to subvert not only the ontological difference between the normal and the pathological but also between culture/civilization and nature/the Earth. Dr. Maryk from Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, one of the main characters, offers the reader a telling metaphor of what is at stake in the novel:

> We [humans] are a fungus spreading over this planet, colonizing, warring, consuming. The Earth is a cell we are infecting. And nature is the Earth's immune system, just now sensing the threat of our encroachment, and arming itself to fight back. Macro versus micro. Viruses are the Earth's white blood cells. We are the Earth's disease. (Hogan 2009, 181)

Dr. Maryk's words demonstrate that the plot aims at showing vital relations between humans and their environments in a perspective which today may rightly be named planetary (cf. Mann/Wainwright 2018; Chakrabarty 2021). Nevertheless, the action starts to unfold here in a way rather typical of outbreak narratives, that is with a prologue set several years earlier in a small village in Central Africa, near a Congolese wild nature reserve. After an outbreak of an unknown zoonotic retrovirus has been discovered there, the village is ruthlessly bombed out by the US army to prevent the pathogen from spreading. The virus turns out to be deadly not only for humans, but also for all living organisms. What is important, it attacks brain cells, causing permanent personality changes in those who have happened to survive. The specific feature of the virus makes a difference because it causes a pandemic situation different to that in *The Rain*: it induces/causes no longer a battle between the organism and the foreign agent but rather an internal struggle between opposing forces – a narrative element which Wald overlooks in her reading (2008, 257-259). This becomes more and more evident when two years later, there is a new outbreak in the American provincial town of Plainville that gives the virus its name. Thus, the plot is reminiscent of Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995), well-known at the time when the novel was published. Yet, Hogan introduces some changes in the outbreak narrative, which are significant in the context of my argument. Among others, the narrator presents all events in a chronological, linear order. The reader thus comes to know the Patient Zero who has brought the virus to Plainville before being identified by Dr. Maryk and his colleague, Dr. Pearse, both in charge of an epidemiological research program. In this way, the reader can direct all her attention at what constitutes the Patient Zero – a human-

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

viral hybrid as a kind of onto-epistemological scandal which subverts all fundamental binaries: between life and nonlife, substance and process, nature and culture. On those binaries both the outbreak narrative and neo-liberal biopolitics are premised.

In Hogan's novel, the Patient Zero had once been a US-American botanist who carried out his research on an endangered plant species not far from the outbreak location in Central Africa. By chance the botanist met a woman who survived the bombing of the village and in whose body the virus fought an undecided battle with an immuno-serological injection which she had received secretly from Dr. Pearse shortly before fleeing the village. The Patient Zero has not only become a new place of this undecided battle, he also started to experiment with the virus after returning to the US to come up with a mutated version, deadly only for humans. His intention in this was to get rid of the master species in order to effectively slow down the pending ecological catastrophe. The concept of human-viral hybrid forms the core of the novel, which is additionally emphasized by the author's decision to duplicate the phenomenon. It is Dr. Pearse who becomes the second hybrid after being intentionally infected by the Patient Zero who seeks easy access to the CDC bank of all known pathological agents deadly to humans to accelerate a general collapse of civilization as the only efficient means of saving the damaged planet. This time, however, in the form of the first-person narrative, Hogan allows the reader to follow step by step, the process of reaching the dynamic balance between the human and the virus up until the moment of a confrontation of both hybrids – the botanist and Dr. Pearse. Nevertheless, this confrontation does not bring an end to the story as is the case in *The Rain*. In *The Blood Artists* the human-viral hybrid is something more than only an epidemiological singularity. It also functions as a way to reveal a biopolitical mechanism on which the modern epidemiology is premised.

It is not without reason that among the mottoes which open Hogan's novel, there is an anonymous poem of which I would like to quote a fragment:

> A virus does not want to kill.
> It does not even want to harm.
> It wants to change.
> It wants that part of it that is missing.
> It wants to become. (Hogan 2009, 4)

The poem clearly shows that viruses by definition are neither external entities nor human enemies. We are – at least partly – to blame for their becoming dangerous. The Iranian writer and philosopher Fahim Amir explains:

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

> The connections, similarities, and relationships between our bodies and those of animals are the hinges that open the door to the viral will to reproduce – accelerated by the infrastructures of the world economy and amplified by social inequalities like those in nutrition, healthcare, and housing. (Amir 2021, 162)

To demonstrate this, Hogan's novel introduces yet another human-viral hybrid in a way which links with the prologue in which Dr. Pearse decided to save the life of the aforementioned seemingly healthy African girl. This time it is Dr. Maryk who has to make such a choice. Unlike Dr. Pearse, he did not hesitate from eliminating every possible threat to public health. This time, however, he makes up his mind to save a Plainville epidemic survivor who has been infected anew by the Patient Zero. To save both her life and public health, Dr. Maryk relocates her to a small island to live alone in a wild nature reserve. Thus, it seems that all recent events have convinced him that it is not viruses but rather humans who pose a real threat to the human species. Significantly, Dr. Maryk's decision also demonstrates that against his hope to find a cure it will not be an easy task because after infecting the body the virus becomes one with it.

Yet another point on which the novel's plot is premised should be underlined here. It is not a cutting-edge medical technology that helps fight the Plainville virus in *The Blood Artists*, rather Dr. Maryk himself is a kind of natural wonder. He not only has two hearts but also his blood cells are capable of quickly eliminating every kind of infection. In my reading of the novel, it is therefore the best evidence that the author intended to subvert the fundamental division between culture and nature with only a little help from experimental technology, which allows an effective use of what nature provides. This is worth remembering, because in the *Rifters* trilogy the situation radically changes – the protagonist is rather a specific form of cyborg-viral hybrid which makes the workings of neo-liberal biopolitics more visible.

ANOTHER "TYPHOID MARY"

To shed light on the historical moment when the outbreak narrative in its scientific incarnation was born at the outset of the 20th century, Priscilla Wald in her book *Contagious* critically reads the case of the first known "chronic typhoid germ distributor" (2008, 68). The epidemiological investigation that resulted in the 'discovery' of this person also resulted in various narratives of detection – the basis for what Wald named the outbreak narrative in her book. An Irish immigrant, Mary Mallon, worked as a cook in a summer house on Long Island, and was

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

identified as a "healthy carrier" (ibid., 70) during a typhoid outbreak in 1909. Identifying her was truly a task for a detective, because Mallon was neither displaying any symptoms nor, once identified, did she show willingness to submit to be tested for evidence of the typhoid bacillus. A certain Dr. Soper, an engineer in the U.S. Army Sanitary Corps, had not only located Mallon as the source of infection, but also documented his epidemiological investigations as a narrative of detection which "explained how epidemiological investigation worked, as well as why it was so important. It transformed the thread of Mary Mallon, the healthy carrier, into 'Typhoid Mary,' the symbol of epidemiological efficacy" (Wald 2008, 70). As a result and thanks to the narrative skills of Dr. Soper, Mallon became the infamous "Typhoid Mary" (ibid.), the most invoked – nearly iconic – example of a dangerous carrier of communicable diseases in the history of modern medicine.

A century later, as I have already demonstrated through the example of Hogan's *The Blood Artists*, the figure of an apparently healthy person which could nevertheless transmit a communicable disease returned in a specific variation of a human-viral hybrid in order to challenge both the already established outbreak narrative in cultural (re)presentations and the epidemiological efficacy discourse as a form of neo-liberal biopolitics. My next example, however, does not concentrate on a dynamic coexistence of human and viral entities/features in one hybrid organism. Depicting a healthy carrier as a protagonist who intentionally spreads deadly disease as a form of personal vengeance, Peter Watts's trilogy *Rifters* (1999-2005) focuses rather on what is performed/recognized as human/normal and contagious/pathological in a future world which seems to be born out of Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, first published in the mid-1980s. Indeed, to read Watts's trilogy in the context of Haraway's essay, which the author called "an ironic political myth" (2016, 6), highlights a neo-liberal entanglement of the trilogy's action that otherwise could have remained unnoticed because of its visible SF features. However, in Watts's version of the myth the outbreak narrative plays an important action-structuring part and a protagonist has been bioengineered prior to becoming infected and thus offering a model-example of a human-machine-viral hybrid in contradistinction to the protagonists of Hogan's novel.

Although a cyborg is often identified as a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, these defining features do not exhaust its basic characteristics. For Haraway stresses that it is also a creature of social reality – lived social relations as a political construction – as well as a creature of fiction which maps our social and bodily reality at the historical moment of the late 20th century. In other words, in *A Cyborg Manifesto* the cyborg through the very fact of its existence transgresses the border between the natural and the artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed. Therefore, Haraway argues: "The cyborg

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century" (2016, 6). In a sense, Watts's protagonist of Lenie Clarke does exactly this – she is "a woman turned amphibious by some abstract convergence of technology and economics" (2002, 5). She has to live through an epidemiological scenario in which the role of "Typhoid Mary" was designed for her to play in order not only to deconstruct the outbreak narrative but also to reveal both social relations and psychological/behavioural conditioning as an intended political construction.

Lenie Clarke is one of the workers who run a generating station three kilometers below the surface of the Pacific, close to the Juan de Fuca Ridge. A huge international corporation has developed a facility here to exploit geothermal power. To survive and work on the ocean floor near a hydrothermal vent, various castaways from society were recruited as the crew; those whose histories have preadapted them to dangerous environments, who have got used to broken bodies and chronic stress. Lenie Clarke herself is presented as a childhood abuse survivor, almost addicted to her trauma. The workers have also been bioengineered to withstand the immense pressure in the depths of the ocean, swim in seawater and breathe it. The cutting-edge technology was used to alter them physically by such implants as, for instance, a plastic and metal hydraulic machine in their lungs which can take in water and corneal caps. They were also enhanced on the psychic-behavioural level, by tweaking their genes and neurochemistry, for instance, by induction of genes from a deep-water fish which function as neuroinhibitors whenever they are outside the station. Lenie Clarke aptly sums up all these alternations saying that the crew-people "tended larger machines, stealing power from deep within the earth in the name of supply and demand" (Watts 2002, 17). In the same name of capitalist supply and demand, in which huge international corporations and national states of the future world colonialize deep-oceans in Watts's trilogy, their Western predecessors aimed at terraforming other continents, destroying their ecosystems and unleashing – recently, mostly zoonotic – epidemics. That is why, the events in *Starfish* (1999), the first instalment of Watts's trilogy, develop similarly to the events in the prologue to Hogan's *The Blood Artists*, albeit on a much greater scale. Since after the corporation has discovered that the underwater power station could be contaminated by a contagious agent from one of the hydrothermal vents, the station is bombed out. Then Pacific Rim, inhabited mostly by ecological and economic refugees, is firestormed, which took millions of lives in collateral damage. These measures seem to be somehow understandable since the human civilization has to face a mighty enemy – deadly not only for all living organisms, but capable of reverse-engineering the whole biosphere.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

As one of the characters in Watts's novel explains, the contagious agent in question is a pyranosal RNA: "A precursor to modern nucleic acids, pretty widespread about three and a half billion years ago. (...) it would've made a perfectly acceptable genetic template on its own; faster replication than DNA, fewer replication error" (1999, 258). Although strictly speaking it is not a pathogen but rather a kind of soil nanobacterium, it behaves in a competitive way like a virus, seeking to change the life on Earth into its beta version premised on an alternative genetic template. That is why Watts calls it 'βehemoth'. To further complicate the action and stay true to his idea of extrapolating social reality of the outset of our century, the *Rifters* trilogy introduces another actor in the already complex interplay of interests which Hogan neatly avoided in *The Blood Artists*, namely an Internet of the future increasingly pestered by viral infections. To counteract it smart gels, made out of real neurons, are implemented at critical nodes. While fighting viruses on the net, smart gels learn to make a fundamental choice between the simple (files) and the complex (viruses) that unbeknownst to their human masters bias them against everything that is complex. Therefore, when asked to make an objective choice for all humankind between biosphere and βehemoth, smart gels prefer the latter. That is why they help Lenie Clarke not only to escape from the power station before it is bombed out and reach the coast but also to traverse the American continent and to come back home almost untroubled by police and secret agents. Seeking her private vengeance, she also carries βehemoth around with her to punish the world in the name of all social, racial and ethnic castaways and underdogs. Thus, on the one hand, Lenie Clarke becomes a symbolic figure, an incarnation of a revolt against economic and social injustice and for a better world. On the other, she is wanted by governmental health agencies as a materialization of what Povinelli (2020) called the Virus and the Terrorist at the same time. The author of the *Rifters* trilogy, however, knows how to unfold the events to demonstrate that the real threat is not so much βehemoth but rather the contemporary neo-liberal global division, distribution and circulation of power, wealth and health.

Called the Mermaid of the Apocalypse or the Meltdown Madonna, Lenie Clarke quickly becomes an Internet meme and a new incarnation of a female mythical figure who carries the plague around with her. By the end of the second trilogy novel, *Maelstrom*, she asks however: "You kill me for playing Typhoid Mary?" (Watts 2001, 334). There is a reason why she speaks about "playing Typhoid Mary" as both the well-known pathogen carrier and the very symbol of epidemiological efficacy: While checking her health now and again to prove that she really carries βehemoth in her blood, spreading around the disease, Lenie Clarke discovers that she has been not only bioengineered but also surgically, genetically

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

and chemically altered. Furthermore, her entire personality has been changed by Induced False Memory Syndrome. For it was much easier and quicker to engineer a highly specialized expert than to adapt a social castaway to carry out complicated tasks. It is not only Lenie Clarke's childhood abuse trauma that turns out to be fake. Effectively, the same can be said about her vengeance. Indeed, she only played the character of Typhoid Mary, in bad faith following in her footsteps and performing the well-known scenario of the outbreak narrative.

In the third instalment of the *Rifters* trilogy, published in two volumes for commercial reasons, βehemoth is finally contained by a counter-nanobacterium and, therefore, humanity is saved, at least for a moment. Nevertheless, at this juncture even more questions about a real course of the pandemic crop out: Was Lenie Clarke really the Patient Zero who brought βehemoth ashore in her blood? Has someone engineered the original bacterium to make it more resilient and contagious? Were repeated firestorms an effective means to fight off the contagion or rather a way of diminishing the number of refugees and paupers and explaining it away as collateral damage? Those and many other questions undermine not only the figure of Typhoid Mary but also the outbreak narrative as a narrative of detection. By letting Lenie Clarke play a model epidemiological character, Watts created his own version of Haraway's ironic political myth of cyborg as "the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism" (2016, 9). By making use of the original story of modern epidemiology, he denunciated not only militarism and patriarchal capitalism but also the two main regimes – biopolitics and geontopolitics – on which they are premised.

CODA

I started my article with Jean-Luc Nancy's supposition that the Covid-19 pandemic has not so much spotlighted but rather revealed the precarious foundations of the Western developed and progressive societies. This resulted, among others, in laying bare the mechanism of the biopolitical regime premised on the divide between life and death, the normal and the pathological body. In support of his argument that today's diseases, contagions included, are symptoms of far deeper crises, I have drawn on the example of a few recently published Corona Fictions in which viral and bacterial infections are depicted as one of many, tightly entangled factors, mostly of anthropogenic nature. Significantly, scientists and physicians who very often played the primary role of heroic agents in the unfolding outbreak drama of pandemic fictions have been replaced here by other protagonists, who are similarly helpless when facing pending disasters. From this

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

perspective, I sought to answer the question about possible causes of such a distinct change by closely reading speculative fabulations from the turn of this century. Both revisit and morph the outbreak narrative and its protagonists of the epidemiologist-detective and the Patient Zero, introducing a new type of protagonist which I call the human-viral hybrid. When analyzed in the context of two paradigmatic neo-liberal figures of the past decades – the Virus and the Cyborg – the hybrid protagonists of Hogan's *The Blood Artists* and Watts's *Rifters* trilogy reveal the workings of biopower and geontopower, making way for a vital understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic and its fictional counterpart as not only a contagion but also yet another form of structural violence inherent in the late liberalism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Corpus Analyzed

Aristide, Oana (2021) *Under the Blue*, London, Serpent's Tail.
Clo, Valérie (2022) *Gaïa*, Paris, Buchet Chastel.
Connan, Tom (2022) *Pollution*, Paris, Albin Michel.
Hogan, Chuck (2009 [1998]) *The Blood Artists*, New York, NY, Harper.
Kainz, Kenneth/Arthy, Natasha (dir.) (2018-20) *The Rain* (TV series), Denmark, Miso Film/Netflix.
Watts, Peter (1999) *Starfish*, New York, NY, Tor Books.
Watts, Peter (2001) *Maelstrom*, New York, NY, Tor Books.
Watts, Peter (2004) *βehemoth: β-Max*, New York, NY, Tor Books.
Watts, Peter (2005) *βehemoth: Seppuku*, New York, NY, Tor Books.

Works Cited

Amir, Fahim (2021) "A Touch Too Much: Animals of the Pandemic", trans. by Geoffrey C. Howes. Ekaterina Degot/David Riff (eds.) *There Is No Society? Individuals and Community in Pandemic Times*, Hamburg, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 157-172.
Caduff, Carlo (2015) *The Pandemic Perhaps: Dramatic Events in a Public Culture of Danger*, Oakland, CA, University of California Press.
Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2021) *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press.
Cook, Robin (1995) *Contagion*, New York, NY, G.P. Putnam's Sons.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

Cook, Robin (2019) *Pandemic. A Novel*, New York, NY, G.P. Puntman's Sons.

Haraway, Donna J. (2016 [1985]) "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", *Manifestly Haraway*, Minneapolis/London, Minnesota University Press, 3-90.

Mann, Geoff/Joel Wainwright (2018) *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*, London, Verso.

Nancy, Jean-Luc (2022) *An All-Too-Human Virus*, trans. by Cory Stockwell/Sarah Clift/David Fernbach, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Petersen, Wolfgang (dir.) (1995) *Outbreak*, USA, Punch Productions.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. (2016) *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. (2020) "The Virus: Figure and Infrastructure", *E-Flux*, 2020-11, https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/sick-architecture/352870/the-virus-figure-and-infrastructure/, 2022-09-13.

Preston, Richard (1994) *The Hot Zone. A Terrifying True Story*, New York, NY, Random House.

Preston, Richard (1997) *The Cobra Event. A Novel*, New York, NY, Random House.

Preston, Richard (2002) *The Demon in the Freezer. A True Story*, New York, NY, Random House.

Preston, Richard (2019) *Crisis in the Red Zone: The Story of the Deadliest Ebola Outbreak in History, and of the Viruses to Come*, New York, NY, Random House.

Quammen, David (2012) *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, New York/London, W.W. Norton & Company.

Wald, Priscilla (2008) *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466162-014 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY