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APPARATUS
FILM, MEDIA AND DIGITAL CULTURES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Community, Myth, and Metaphor in Pavel Kostomarov's Outbreak Thriller Series *Epidemiia / To the Lake* (2019)

Irina Souch

Abstract

The article discusses the 2019 Russian television series *Epidemiia / To the Lake* (TNT Premier/Netflix), directed by Pavel Kostomarov and based on Iana Vagner's best selling dystopian novel about a lethal viral epidemic in contemporary Russia. Following Priscilla Wald's seminal contention that conventional outbreak narratives revolve around the insight that "the interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community" (2008: 2), I consider how *To the Lake* encompasses the breadth of responses to an aggressive viral threat 'predicting' the reactions of national governments and citizenry to the real Covid-19 pandemic the world is in the midst of currently. Such ostensibly prophetic nature of the series spotlights the mutually reinforcing relation between a longstanding and increasingly globalised cultural imagination about contagious disease and the medical and political interpretations of an actual pandemic. The article's aim is, therefore, to interrogate the arsenal of the outbreak-related tropes the series employs to unveil their cultural and ideological significance both for international and domestic audiences. In addition to Priscilla Wald's concept of "outbreak narrative," the article engages with Susan Sontag's work on bio-politics of disease, Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined community, and Kaja Silverman's notion of "the dominant fiction" which places patriarchal family at the centre of a vital (national) community.

Keywords

Iana Vagner; Jana Vagnerová; Russian TV series, outbreak narrative, outbreak thriller genre, biopolitics of disease, family.

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Introduction

A large, harshly lit parking area at a busy gas station on a snowy evening. Suddenly, a woman points at a middle-aged man who proffers a hand toward her, violently coughing. “He is contaminated” – she shrieks – “I can see it!” Another male figure decidedly steps forward and stabs the coughing man with a knife. The man falls dead, the onlookers hurry to their cars in panic and depart leaving the bleeding corpse behind (*Epidemiia*, Episode 2).

In November 2019, a new strain of coronavirus appeared in Wuhan, China, and rapidly spread across the world. The pandemic has exposed the ambivalent relationship between the disease and the notion of belonging, as governments embrace the strategies of “containment” and “herd immunity” by enforcing quarantines and travel bans. The communities imagined and consolidated through such strategies often have coincided with those of the nation. Frequently, governments’ responses to the virus outbreak have led to a renewed articulation of national borders, even if those had, in the preceding decades, grown less prominent under the pressures of political integration and economic globalisation. The corona-crisis also confirms that conflicting ideas about the origins of the virus, its level of contagiousness, and its fatality rates

have informed how we make sense of and respond to the pandemic. As Priscilla Wald points out in her influential book *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), over the last hundred-plus years the knowledge about epidemics within different realms has been shaped by what she terms the "outbreak narrative" that arrives in "scientific, journalistic, and fictional incarnations" and "follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes a discussion of the global networks through which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment" (Wald 2008: 2).[1] Inherent to these scenarios is the question of survival coupled with the feelings of fear for the unknown threat, suffering, and death.

Importantly, Wald reveals that medical, historical, and political accounts of epidemics are not separable from a growing spate of related popular publishing, film, and television productions. Popular artefacts undoubtedly form a powerful mechanism for shaping public understanding of and response to epidemics. Wald's views are supported by Heather Schell's contentions that, instead of representing, respectively, factual, populist, and speculative discussions of viruses "virology articles, popular science bestsellers, and science fiction (SF) […] are mutually, minutely entangled" (Schell 1997: 98). With an eye on the strong intertextual connections between these quite distinct genres, Ruth Mayer suggests that fictional texts revolving around the trope of the virus might even be more suited for reflecting on contemporary fears and fascinations because "they map out the world in speculative terms and thus address dimensions of the political unconscious that more solution oriented political and journalistic approaches to the same phenomena tend to reason away or repress" (Mayer 2007: 2).

Recognising the cultural function of fictional epidemic-themed narratives, this essay focuses on a recent Russian television series *Epidemiia / To the Lake* (Pavel Kostomarov, 2019, TNT-Premier) based on the 2011 bestselling novel *Vongozero* by Iana Vagner. Preceding the global spread of Covid-19 by just a few months, the show encompasses the breadth of responses to a mysterious, aggressive viral threat "predicting" the reactions of national governments and citizenry to the real pandemic the world is in the midst of currently. Illustrative of Wald's and Mayer's arguments, this uncanny coincidence spotlights the mutually reinforcing relation between a longstanding and increasingly globalised cultural imagination around contagious disease and the medical and political interpretations of an actual pandemic. My aim is therefore to interrogate the arsenal of the outbreak-related tropes the series

employs to consider their cultural and ideological significance both for international and domestic audiences.

The Story: Between Prophesy and Genre

The television evening news reports on a rapidly-spreading virus that resembles a steroidal flu. A virologist introduced as Professor Pakhomov explains that the infection begins with three to four days of coughing which is then eventually followed by death. The interviewer immediately starts de-emphasising the threat, and when the indignant scientist attempts to intervene, he is quickly cut off (*Epidemiia*, Episode 1).

Epidemiia begins with a sudden virus epidemic paralysing Moscow. The disease is extremely contagious and lethal for those who contract it. Military patrols roam the urban environment to identify and isolate the sick – recognisable by the hurried breathing, violent cough, and bloody eyes – and ultimately fail to protect the citizens, as the city and its suburbs are increasingly taken over by gangs of vicious marauders. As social and economic disorder proliferates, an unlikely group of co-travellers flee the capital heading for the remote Karelian lake Vongozero in the Northern part of Russia in search of a safe refuge. The group consists of the middle-aged protagonist Sergei (Kirill Käro), his retired father Boris (Iurii Kuznetsov), girlfriend Anna (Viktoriia Isakova), and her adolescent son Misha (Eldar Kalimulin), who suffers from Asperger syndrome. They are accompanied by their neighbours: the caricatured "new Russian" businessman Leonid (Aleksandr Robak), his pregnant young wife Marina (Natal'ia Zemtsova), and his recalcitrant teenage daughter from a previous marriage, Polina (Viktoriia Agalakova). At the last minute, Sergei's vindictive ex-wife Irina (Mar'iana Spivak) and their eight-year-old son Anton (Savelii Kudriashov) also get on board. Underway, the group meets an ambulance medic, Pavel (Aleksandr Iatsenko), who joins them after a mob of looters brutally murders his driver.

Released in November 2019 by TNT-PREMIER,[2] the series (initially titled *The Outbreak* in English), was positively received, scoring 7.3/10 on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) forum. Earlier that year, *The Outbreak* participated in the official selection of the international festival CANNESERIES as a full feature film version. It also appeared in the main programme of the Moscow International Film festival (MMKF) and received a special award for "the highest achievements in genre cinematography" at the first Moscow cinematic adaptations festival, "Chitka" (Al'perina 2020). The global spread of Covid-19 suddenly put the production in the spotlight transnationally. Both pundits and

social networks observed that *Epidemiia* "predicted the context in which we all live now. The story and choices that the characters have to make […] [presently] appeal to any person in any country in the world" (Modestova 2020).[3] This international acclaim led the Swiss Research company The WIT in April 2020 to declare *Epidemiia* to be the only Russian project listed in their *Fresh TV Fiction* selection of the most buzz-worthy shows world-wide. Six months later, the series, now called *To The Lake*, was acquired by Netflix, released on 8 October 2020, and scored 100/84 on *Rotten Tomatoes*. One critic remarked: "The series is especially gutting right now, and I sincerely hope it stays in the realm of fiction instead of becoming our reality" (Luchtman 2020).

Indeed, *To the Lake* contains some disconcerting similarities to the present pandemic situation. In its early episodes, Sergei and Irina witness a passer-by unexpectedly collapse on the ground, wheezing and with glassy eyes; we see Irina's colleagues wearing masks at her workplace except for, tellingly, the dead woman she finds in the bathroom; the media consistently downplay the severity of the situation; conspiracist videos go viral on social media; the airports and the highway to the capital are closed; harassed-looking paramedics wheel a gurney through a hospital hall with a patient coughing up fountains of blood. Particularly distressing (and presumably stirring up a range of epidemic-related fears) is the scene depicting a military unit quarantining a school. When Irina arrives at the spot to retrieve her son, a crowd of anxious parents is already gathered in front of the sealed-off building. Inside, terrified personnel and children are kept under surveillance in a gymnasium, while armed men wearing heavy gas masks roam the corridors. They find a small girl cowering in the corner, her eyes bulging and bleeding. Scooped up, she is shot with a blast of a mysterious white liquid that causes her to start sobbing and crying as she's carried out on a stretcher. The camera is careful to provide a horrifying close-up of her face, her red-rimmed eyes peeping through the bluish-white mask.

However "scarily prescient" (Keller 2020) the series might appear, it should not be overlooked that the catastrophic scenario it unveils also exemplifies an array of fiction, film, and television productions preoccupied with real or imagined epidemics that for the past several decades have swept through the transnational marketplace. Understanding genre in Richard Slotkin's terms as "the development of a powerful association between particular kinds of setting and particular story-forms" (Slotkin 1992: 233) helps to place *Epidemiia* in the generic repertoire of outbreak thrillers revolving around malignant viral infections.[4] Slotkin further elaborates that the "genre worlds are also never-never lands whose special rules and meanings have more to do with conventions, myths and ideologies than with historical representations" (ibid.:

233). Originating in the US, since the mid-1990s the outbreak thriller has developed in a fully-fledged genre, which, as popular culture critic Dahlia Schweitzer shows in her book *Going Viral: Zombies, Viruses, and the End of the World*, offers a way to process the growing cultural anxieties fuelled by emerging viruses in a globalised world, bioterrorism and, especially, "the current fascination with manifesting the end of the world" (Schweitzer 2018: 35).[5] Once best suited for cinema, emergent virus narratives now increasingly turn up on smaller screens as television shows, which Schweitzer explains by the latter medium's "unique relationship to news, information, entertainment, and catastrophe" (ibid.: 52).[6] Schweitzer is also keen to point out that whereas the historical conditions of production and reception might evolve, outbreak narratives foster a number of key thematic elements invariably appearing in different combinations and to different degrees. She lists the following leading tropes: identifying an original accident; othering individuals, deeming geographical areas and life styles threatening; putting in place security measures against the believed-to-be contagious agents; unifying the uninfected "us" against the infected "them"; using microscopes, charts, and maps to make the invisible visible; and, finally, communicating a fear of progress with globalisation being as one of its forms (ibid.: 53).

Epidemiia not only reproduces a large number of the listed generic formulas but it also perfectly fits in the apocalyptic sub-category, which most recent outbreak tales invariably favour (Schweitzer 2018: 168).[7] As Heather Schell suggests in her analysis of the film *Outbreak* (Wolfgang Peterson, 1995, USA), to a large extent the reason for apocalyptic accounts can be found in the present-day surge of interest in pandemics as the biggest threat to humanity, which reflects popular beliefs "that the world could end in pestilence, almost as though viruses have now taken the place of nuclear weapons in our apocalyptic imaginations. We seem to live in a fragile world […] where some small social change might push the button that instigates viral Armageddon" (Schell 1997: 112). Against a real-life backdrop of economic crises, institutionalised corruption, military conflicts, environmental pollution, and climate change, the apocalypse might appear as a justification for reinstating the moral codes of "proper" behaviour and reasserting the existing ideas of national, racial, and sexual identities and borders. While the more traditional outbreak scenarios envisage an efficacious epidemiological response followed by the containment of the disease and the restoration of the social order, in *Epidemiia* the medical forces are very soon shown incapable to defeat the virus or help the infected. The narrative progressively shifts focus to depict the world in the process of being unmade by the catastrophic epidemic. Schell notes that "viruses represent social change – frightening and enormous social change – and our drastic fear of viral epidemics

is in part a reactionary response to the possibility of such change" (ibid.: 96). In the following section, I will discuss how, alongside its disconcerting references to the current pandemic, disease in the series functions as a metaphor for the possible dissolution of and ultimate confirmation of societal status quo.

The Lethal Disease: Between Metaphor and Political Critique

A man in military uniform coughs up blood as he prepares to burn himself and what one assumes is his dead family in their home. In the background, a crackling radio broadcast is heard: "It is early to draw conclusions but, judging by the facts, some illegal military formations are attempting to seize power in the country. They operate across the territory pretending to represent the authorities. It is not known who is in command. Under the pretence of evacuation, they force people out their houses executing those who offer resistance. There has been a number of armed confrontations between the local population and the so called 'Cleaners.' Hopefully, the situation will be under control soon. The acting authorities strongly advise everyone not to leave their homes and not to enter in contact with the representatives of the illegal units" (*To the Lake,* Episode 6).

The outbreak story *Epidemiia* tells actively draws on the metaphoric significance of disease. As Susan Sontag explains in her seminal book *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), disease has an extensive and complex history of metaphoric uses in military, political, and scientific discourses.[8] Historically, proper statecraft is conceived on a medical analogy: "[S]ociety is presumed to be in good health; disease (disorder) is, in principle, always manageable" (Sontag 1978: 80), whereas "the melodramatics of the disease metaphor in modern political discourse assume a punitive notion: of the disease not as a punishment but a sign of evil, something to be punished" (ibid.: 81). Seen from this vantage point, remarkably, a contention that society suffers a horrible illness can equally justify both the state's repressive measures and revolutionary violence. Sontag writes:

> The persistence of the belief that illness reveals, and is a punishment for, moral laxity or turpitude can be seen […] by noting the persistence of descriptions of disorder or corruption as a disease. So indispensable has been the plague metaphor in bringing summary judgments about social crisis that its use hardly abated during the era when collective diseases were no longer treated so moralistically […] and when great infectious epidemics were so often and confidently proclaimed a thing of the past. (ibid.: 142-143)

Sontag's work helps to demonstrate that an outbreak narrative is never only about the illness itself. Employed metaphorically, the lethal virus in a fictional story makes it possible to unveil deeper truths about a concrete social reality than the mere state of its medical infrastructure. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines epidemic as a disease "prevalent among a people or a community at a special time, and produced by some special causes not generally present in the affected locality" (*OED*, New Sydenham Soc. Lexicon). Along with the disease's (perceived) outlandish origin, the definition implies a community in some way already out of balance. Both notions distinctly reverberate with the events that define *Epidemiia'*s narrative spin. Interestingly, while the origin of the disease in this "top-notch plague story" (Luchtman 2020) is revealed only in the finale, when a group of white-clad Asian-looking individuals land on the lake in a plane and head to the woods on snow scooters, we see that it is not zombies, vampires or other alien creatures transmitting the virus, running amok and killing the humans. Because no actual super-spreader is identified, the disease not only appears to signify a larger societal malaise but also to exacerbate the already existing fissures in social structures.[9] Amidst the erupting panic even more disturbing are the actions of those in power (represented by the security forces) with their futile attempts to maintain the order and contain the contagion.

In light of Sontag's theorisations, it is unsurprising that, upon the series' initial release in Russia, many critics promptly interpreted it as a commentary on the country's current social and political conditions. Such reactions are predictable in view of the long-existing (post-)Soviet tradition to use science fiction as a mirror on societal ills and inequities. A quotation from an interview with the original novel's author Iana Vagner confirms this. Vagner says the following:

> Post-apocalyptic narratives can be entertainment for the serene and prosperous, but we [usually] react to them seriously and with much apprehension. Not in the least because we are brought up with Soviet science fiction, which succeeded in saying much more than mainstream literature; [we] are too able to read between the lines. The fantastic genre for us is not an "attraction". (Vagner quoted in Bukovskaia 2020)

The degree to which *Epidemiia* could be read metaphorically becomes evident if one recalls the controversy surrounding the series' fifth episode that includes scenes depicting the security forces deporting and killing the hospital patients and inhabitants of an outlying Northern settlement. The episode starts when the protagonist group narrowly escape passing through a military checkpoint on a remote countryside road. They realise moments later that they have lost little Anton. Meanwhile, Anton wanders in a village where he witnesses soldiers randomly shooting civilians under pretence of clearing the zone from infection

and is saved from being shot by a hospital nurse called Olga. When the Muscovites finally arrive at the place they find it deserted. A helicopter flies overhead and drops pamphlets confirming that this area needs to be evacuated. The flyers promise hot meals, medical attention, and accommodation. Outside the hospital, Irina frantically gets on her hands and knees to search for her son through a bloody pile of corpses. In the other part of the village, people are rounded up at gunpoint and bundled onto buses as a part of the alleged evacuation scheme. As viewers already know, the buses take the evacuees to a ranch where they too are mercilessly executed. The episode's finale shows Anton reuniting with his parents while a group of villagers mobilised by Olga offer armed resistance to the military commandos to prevent deportation. The group leave afterwards to hide in the woods.

Two days after its release in Russia on December 12, 2019, episode five was removed from the streaming platform, inevitably prompting critics to suggest censorship. Four days later it reappeared with allegedly modified content (an accusation neither asserted nor denied by the series' producers). It does not escape viewers' attention, however, that the ensuing episode six contains a scene in which a radio broadcast warns the public about the operations of illegal military units.[10] The PREMIER's press service has explained the incident as a "changing business decision" (Vedomosti 2019, Mikolaichuk 2019), while Russian media have implied the Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii played a role in the episode's return (Meduza 2019). In an interview shortly after, director Pavel Kostomarov claimed that the fifth episode was essential to the story because it broached the subject of the "Russian revolt" through Olga's appeal to her fellow villagers to offer resistance "because we [the people] cannot be treated like this." Referring to contemporary political protests in Russia, Kostomarov contended:

> It is a pity that the peaceful protests […] remain insufficiently represented and not convincing enough for the authorities. It is a pity that the authorities prefer to smash [the opposition] instead of entering into a dialogue. This happened in 2012 and again in 2019. It is an outrage that innocent people are sent to prison as a sign of warning to others. […] It is depressing to witness the passivity and subservience of people who see everything, understand everything but only moan in response […] We don't have the strength to stop being passive. And because of that "they treat us like this." (Mikolaichuk 2019)

It is worth considering that, when aired on Netflix, the socio-political connotations of the series went unnoticed by mainstream global audiences, who interpreted episode five as germane to an "action-packed" subplot. Critic Anthony Kao even found that the series as a whole "[did not] actively encourage international audiences to learn more about Russian history or society" (Kao

2020). To support his suggestion, Kao quoted *Epidemiia*'s producer Valerii Fedorovich who sought to downplay the political connotations of the series by pointing out that its protagonists belonged to Russia's top 1% of well-off urban professionals whose calamitous journey to the lake could be seen as a cautionary "odyssey" outside their cosmopolitan Muscovite bubble into a world of more "common" Russians.[11] According to Kao, Fedorovich did not expect non-Russians to fully grasp the nuances of the series' complicated social dynamics, and so it was left to viewers to draw parallels with the "liberal elite" situation in their own countries.[12] It is beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate on the array of intertextual and historical references the fifth episode contains to fully explain its impact on the (post-Soviet) Russian audience; nevertheless, the controversy it instigated illuminates how understanding metaphors relies upon relations to the socio-political and cultural conditions in which metaphors circulate (rather than upon their independent ability to produce particular critical readings of a given cultural text).

Although not every audience can be expected to fully grasp the metaphoric allusions of the series' narrative, the fact that such a large community of viewers still recognised and were compelled to identify with the characters' predicaments testifies to its reliance on a number of cultural myths that appear to shape the accounts of contagious disease emergence and containment across genres and media. In the next section I will discuss how and to what effect *Epidemiia* employs this mythological imagery by closely engaging with Priscilla Wald's theorisation of "the outbreak narrative" as one that presents a "contradictory and compelling story of the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection and cooperation" (Wald 2008: 2).

The Community: Between Dissolution and Restoration

On the final stretch of the route, the refugee group splits up when the heavily pregnant Marina forces Leonid and Polina to leave the others out of fear of becoming contaminated by the sick Anna. Driving through the woods the remaining party suddenly comes across Leonid's car, abandoned and covered in blood. Misha is determined to follow their footprints and look for them, but Anna tries to talk him out of it: "Misha, they chose to leave […] it was their choice. Now we have to take care of ourselves". Says Misha: "Did you see the blood? Was someone chasing them? Why were they in a hurry?" Irina interferes: "I am done with this discussion game, let's go!" Misha continues walking. Now Sergei tries to restrain him: "They are already far away, we can't help them! […] They are not family! Think of your mother! They are not our

family!" Misha struggles and starts having an epileptic seizure (*Epidemiia,* Episode 7).

One can appreciate from the above discussion that epidemic discourses often amalgamate literal and metaphoric understandings of illness by reflecting on the states of both biological and social bodies. To investigate how this amalgamation and reflection happen, I return to Priscilla Wald's theorisation of outbreak narratives in which she lays bare the close relation between the notion of communicability of contagious diseases and the definitions of (national) identity. Wald takes recourse to Benedict Anderson's influential thesis in *Imagined Communities* (1983) to argue that outbreak stories effectively reveal the fictiveness of the nation by questioning the very possibility of national boundaries. At the same time, such stories disclose how "the depiction, as much as the management, of those diseases reinforces those boundaries" (Wald 2008: 67). Exposing the dangers of policing borders between an avowedly healthy "us" and a contaminated "them", Wald nevertheless advances the idea that "[t]he interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community" (ibid.: 2). For Wald, the discursive formations around contagion are stories that have come to define who we are as social beings.

The catastrophic collapse of the medical, social, and political structures announces the idea of the end of times. Creating an acute sense of urgency, *Epidemiia* pays due attention to the central authorities' restrictive and curative measures across the national territory, but its main focus is on the two families who travel as one group and whose tribulations arguably allegorise the predicaments of the nation (not least because of the variety of their ages, education, and cultural and social standing). The trials the characters must withstand are exacerbated by their radically different backgrounds and ideological orientations. They did not "belong" together in the first place, and their interpersonal "communicability" is close to non-existent. In addition, most of them are social misfits: Sergei's father Boris never found his footing in the new Russia after his scientific lifework was discarded during Perestroika; his stepson Misha presumably has limited empathic abilities due to Asperger syndrome; Leonid's exorbitant wealth has put him out of touch with the rest of society; his daughter is a drug abuser prone to violent outbursts; and his wife is a former nightclub stripper. Apart from Sergei's and Leonid's superficial comradeship as neighbours, all others categorically do not get along. Having started a new family with Anna, Sergei is persecuted by his unforgiving ex-wife Irina who is shown grudgingly trying to turn Anton against his father, and acting with hostility towards her successor. Sergei and Boris have just reunited after many years of estrangement. In turn, the relational dynamic between Leonid's

new wife and his adolescent daughter is fraught with tension. The all-consuming fear of the virus (and the medical and social chaos it brings about) seems to be the only social glue that connects these people, and that fear also fuels their constant suspicions about each other's health conditions. Nevertheless, the situation dictates they coordinate their actions and behave as a collective immunological "body", which, to stay alive, needs to constantly avert microbial and social intrusions. As Wald contends, "outbreak narratives […] make the act of imagining the community a central […] feature of its preservation" (ibid.: 53), while "communicative disease transforms a social group into a mystically connected biological entity" (ibid.: 54).

The "mystical" quality of the incidental alliance strengthens as the series progresses and the internal contrasts and conflicts gradually turn the travellers into an archetypal cast in an ancient drama.[13] Moreover, it transpires that the destination to which they are bound is a converted ship, which provokes strong associations with the Genesis flood narrative and Noah's Ark.[14] The repeated aerial shots of the procession of cars slowly moving along the snowy roads reinforce these biblical references and introduce what, in film theory, is known as God's perspective. This particular form of framing and symbolising narrative events points to what cultural anthropologist Victor Turner denotes as the present rediscovery of the symbolic wealth, meaning, and transformative capacity of traditional myths and religions to help address "our modern 'dramas of living' – now evermore on a global and species-threatening scale" (1981: 164).[15] Accordingly, Wald contends that outbreak stories often operate as "myths for contemporary moment" because they "simultaneously forecast the imminent destruction and affirm the enduring foundations of community" (Wald 2008: 10). The series' reliance on myths of communal belonging is evidenced by the way it moves from the critical assessment of existing (ostensibly deficient) laws and institutions of social life to the careful re-affirmation of fundamental (primordial) hierarchies and moral orientations.

One of the decisive moments in this development occurs when, only 200 kilometres from Vongozero, the expedition comes to an abrupt halt as Anna begins to display the unmistakable symptoms of infection: shortage of breath, violent coughing, and release of frothy blood from mouth and nose. Following a panicky argument about the course of action, Anna insists on driving her car further alone, but her condition rapidly deteriorates and the travellers have to interrupt the journey. Again, the shot from above shows the semiconscious Anna carried on a stretcher towards a speck of light deep in the woods. The group arrives at a stately villa with lavishly furnished rooms, a well-stocked kitchen, a swimming pool, and a private chapel. The residence seems

abandoned until they discover in the study the dead bodies of a middle-aged man in a military uniform, a woman, and two adolescent girls. Viewers already know that this high-ranking officer shot his family and then succumbed to the lethal disease before he could set fire to the house.[16] While Pavel discharges his duties as a medical professional (he distributes masks and gloves, roams the rooms in search of medicines, finds a space to isolate the sick Anna), others surrender to physical and emotional exhaustion. The terrors of the previous days and the ghostliness of the house suddenly make the most painful experiences of the past resurface. Through flashbacks, we see the ten-year-old Sergei in a forest with his father, who, in a state of inebriation, shoots him in the leg while explaining how to fire a rifle. The recollection of this incident equally tortures Boris, who resumes his long sworn-off drinking habit and starts searching for redemption through prayer. Irina is haunted by the recent memory of her infected mother desperately knocking at the door of her Moscow apartment (whom she left to die a horrendous death in order to protect herself and her son). Anna mentally reviews a string of lies undergirding her relationship with Sergei. Polina remembers the last hours at her dying mother's hospital bedside and her father's conflicted consent to euthanasia. Marina recalls the night she discovered her unwanted pregnancy and seduced Leonid to make him believe that the child was his. Adding to the story's melodramatic overtones, the flashbacks not only grant viewers insight into the mental states of individual characters (their thoughts, obsessions, anxieties, and general struggles to grasp their disintegrating reality), they also underscore the decisive role family histories play in their lives.[17]

The precarious stability of the group crumbles when Irina decides to quarantine Sergei and Misha, suspecting they might be contaminated because of their intimate relationship with Anna. In this scene, Sergei enters the dining room with a stock of firewood only to stumble upon a large oval table and chairs segregating the space in two parts. An angry altercation follows.

Sergei: What is this, a barricade?
Irina: Right, we will divide the house in two halves […] and meet in the kitchen. Nobody from your side crosses over to ours. We were waiting to tell you.
Sergei: Oh, now we are having a meeting!
Leonid: Sergei, put yourself in our place, we have to ensure our safety. What can we do?
Pavel: This is reasonable, no need to take risks.
At this point Polina tries to climb over the table to Sergei's space.
Leonid: Polina, stay where you are!
Polina: Oh, and how is your side not contaminated?! Like the sandwich rule? When you drop a sandwich and it stays on the floor for less than three minutes, can you still eat it?
Sergei: This is stupid. We have stayed together all the time until now. If we have caught

the virus then I should get sick, not Anna. She is just tired. She has a cold and will be better in a week's time.

Leonid tries to reason that they don't have enough supplies to last a full week, but Sergei loses his temper, kicking the chairs, throwing a water glass at his opponents and shouting: "Then leave, it is a one day drive to the lake, and we will stay and die in this leprosarium!!! […] You want to divide the house, but have you considered that it might be contaminated already?!"

I give a detailed account of this dialogue to illustrate how understandings of contagion are traditionally associated with protection of one's physical boundaries. Despite the ordeals they withstand collectively, the characters are reluctant to disavow socially inculcated beliefs that establish borders, make distinctions, and maintain a reliable distance from others, thereby ensuring their personal integrity and biological security. Against all rational reasoning, the division cleaves along nuclear-family lines: the kin are considered to be the most intimate and safest social unit (despite many painful memories different characters have of their familial entanglements). I will return shortly to the role family plays in the final (re)constitution of community. At this point the above scene allows me to demonstrate the double-sidedness of the notion of herd immunity on which the characters initially seem to depend for their survival. According to Wald, the idea that disease spreading can be effectively stemmed by the reduction of susceptible individuals in a population "do[es] not necessarily preclude human agency, but […] [it] offer[s] an epidemiologically based conception of community, which is further developed in the outbreak narratives" (Wald 2008: 48-49). Immunity effectively functions as the material, biological source of community: members who are not immune die, and thus those who survive a pathogenic event share a common immunity that binds them. Thus, in Wald's account, the concept of herd immunity represents a key paradox that helps explain the morbid fascination that communities have with "the stranger", or "the marginal man" who embody the uneasy tension between the possibility of biological security, through immunity and new genes, and the menace of a deadly infection harboured by a "healthy carrier". In other words, while the community conventionally relies on the notion of exclusion, this exclusion can be as much informed by a particular set of shared ideas and beliefs, as it can be forced by biological circumstances.

The series illustrates these paradoxes by showing how "the herd" provides protection (against marauders, infected individuals, fake security forces), but only as far as social containment and commitment to it are maintained by all members. It is no coincidence, then, that distrust – regarding each other's intentions, health, and sexual liaisons – features as a leitmotiv throughout the

story. Promising “a safe haven” amidst social and viral dangers, the herd always bears a risk of also harbouring insincere profiteers, sexual competitors, or latently sick and infectious bodies. In the end, sticking together turns out to be the only available path to take out of the crisis. The narrative asserts that drawing borders and rejecting collective-minded attitudes only heightens individual vulnerability to lethal dangers lurking behind each corner. Leaving the others behind, Leonid’s family embarks on an adventure full of unpredictable perils: following a severe car crash, Marina suffers a miscarriage and temporarily loses her mind, after which they have to endure the traumatic experience of being taken hostage, in the woods, by a psychopathic woman. Conversely and against all odds, Irina, who is the first to demand isolation of the (potentially) sick, stays in the house with Sergei because she still considers herself a relative. Their survival is miraculously accomplished through the intervention of an outsider. Inexplicably, hospital doctor Pavel appears to be immune to the virus (similar to the mythically surviving gravediggers during historical plagues), and he transfuses his blood to Anna to secure her recovery. While unable to fully reconcile with his son, the “old patriarch” Boris dies of heart failure, and a new member Pavel is added to the household though his blood connection with Anna and his freshly kindled romance with Irina.[18] The show depicts immunity as secured by a necessary addition of a healthy stranger, which demonstrates how emerging diseases substitute herd immunity for the traditional forms of (genetic) kinship:

> The process through which the stranger is incorporated into the community converts the threatening disequilibrium into a principle of renewal. The threat of instability or imbalance, that is, becomes an attribute of the biologically based community conceived increasingly as a discreet ecosystem. (Wald 2008: 57)

When the final episodes reunite the surviving members of the group on the ship (ultimately accepting Sergei’s patriarchal status), it becomes clear that this “communion of connected strangers” (ibid.) requires a re-articulation of their (opposing) goals and values in a meaningful structure. The structure’s arrangement makes cultural sense: for outbreak stories, Wald indicates this sense is created largely through the invocation of mythological stories that “evoke the sentiments out of which society is actively constructed” (Lincoln 1989: 25). The myth on which the series most relies for the conceptualisation of moral orientation and social forms of life is the myth of family. Its narrative reaffirms the premises of Kaja Silverman’s notion of “the dominant fiction”, which she conceives of as “a society’s ideological ‘reality’” consisting of images and stories “through which a society figures consensus” (Silverman 1992: 30). Drawing upon elements of the western society’s dominant fiction, outbreak narratives in general (increasingly becoming an intrinsic part of this fiction)

and *Epidemiia* in particular re-establish a pivotal signifier of (collective) identity and our contemporary social reality – the paternal family. “[T]he dominant fiction presents the social formation with its most fundamental image of unity, the family. The collectivities of community, town, and nation have all traditionally defined themselves through reference to that image”, writes Silverman (ibid.: 42). Despite numerous ruptures in traditional consanguineal constellations, family ties operate as a principal towards which directionless individuals gravitate in situations of uncertainty and which ultimately feed the feelings of community and belonging. Incorporating (genetically healthy) strangers, *Epidemiia*’s outbreak yarn fails to imagine this new immunologically and morally realigned community as meaningfully distinct from a (heteropatriarchal) family of sorts. In its depiction of people facing imminent destruction by an epidemic and enduring apocalyptic struggles, the series emphatically foregrounds family values as foundational for the contemporary moment and indispensable for the formation of a vital (national) community.

Conclusion

Resonating with present pandemic anxieties, the story of post-apocalyptic survival in Pavel Kostomarov’s *Epidemiia* unfolds as a remapping of social space shaped by a sudden proliferation of uncontrollable disease. Showing the national authorities striving (in vain) to defeat the virus and individual citizens’ taking up the matters of their salvation in their own hands, the series lays bare the function of outbreak fiction as one that simultaneously reflects on and feeds into a greater cultural anxiety about the enormous geographic, political and social changes taking place in the contemporary world. Through the invocation of mythological and biblical associations of disease, the story depicts the possibility of a “frightening and enormous social change” (Schell 1997: 96) framing it as an apocalyptic event. Although popular understandings of “apocalypse” emphasise large-scale destruction and depopulation, the Greek word *apokálupsis* from which it derives, can be translated into English as revelation or unveiling. Accordingly, as James Berger argues, “the apocalyptic event, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end” (Berger 1999: 5). Announcing and describing the end, however, apocalyptic narratives seldom show the world irrevocably ending: “something [always] remains *after the end*” (ibid.: 6; original emphasis). Living through scenes of a swarming, panicked population, closed borders, blown bridges, riots, and quarantine, the characters survive but continue to be haunted by the losses the idea of lockdown represents. What can be lost in an epidemic, (and what in the end

remains) is a set of foundational social values and, as Wald reminds us, the image of a community predicated upon “the most anxious dimensions of national relatedness” (Wald 2008: 67). In the face of spreading precariousness, the relationships between the survivors and their envisaged future together are increasingly made dependent on the society’s most persistent fiction – the myth of patriarchal family. Opening up the affective horror of social collapse and overwhelming change the series thus ultimately inoculates these fears by recuperating community-as-family and family-as-nation boundaries.

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Notes

[1] By pointing out the formulaic structure of epidemic-themed accounts, Wald’s work reverberates with writings of, among others, Lisa Lynch (2001), Alexandra Semmler, and Heather Schell (1997) who, respectively, termed such texts as “epidemic-panic narratives” (Lynch 2001: 73), “medical apocalypse” stories (Semmler 1998: 154), and “emerging-virus narratives” (Schell 1997: 93). In the same vein, Charles Rosenberg’s classic 1989 paper “What is Epidemic” argues that epidemics always have a particular “dramaturgic form”: they “start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, follow a plot line of increasing and revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift toward closure” (Rosenberg 1989: 2).

[2] The TNT-PREMIER Studios and OTT platform are owned by Gazprom-Media Holding. *To* t*he Lake* was created in partnership with KIT Film Studio, which is also part of the Gazprom-Media Holding.

[3] Here and thereafter translations from Russian into English are mine.

[4] Although *Epidemiia* contains all conventional characteristics of an outbreak thriller, it is also a complex narrative that skillfully incorporates the generic strands of road movie, melodrama, and horror to appeal to heterogeneous audiences. Alternatively, one can suggest that the outbreak thriller itself is a hybrid genre, and the above elements appear in all texts pertaining to the genre, albeit to varying degrees.

[5] The recent American cinematic examples of the genre are *Outbreak* (Wolfgan Peterson, 1995, USA), *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011, USA), and *Antiviral* (Brandon Cronberg, 2012, Canada).

[6] See, for example, such popular productions as *The Walking Dead* (Frank Darabont, 2010-present, AMC); *The Strain* (Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan, 2014-2017, FX Networks); *The Last Ship* (Hank Steinberg and Steven L. Kane, 2014-2018, TNT); *12 Monkeys* (Terry Matalas and Travis Fickett, 2015-2018, Syfy).

[7] The authoritative *Guide to Apocalyptic Cinema* considers germ warfare/pestilence threat to the continuing existence of humankind as only one of doomsday scenarios, others being celestial collisions, nuclear war/radioactive fallout, alien device/invasion, and scientific miscalculation (Mitchell 2001). Lately, the list has been complemented with a new danger, that of ecological devastation and climatic change. One of the most known examples of the latter is Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004, USA).

[8] In *Illness and Metaphor*, Sontag showed how the metaphors surrounding certain illnesses, especially cancer, add greatly to the suffering of patients and often inhibit them from seeking proper treatment. By demystifying the fantasies surrounding cancer, Sontag argued that cancer was not a curse, or a punishment, but just a (often curable) disease. A decade later, in 1989, with the outbreak of a new, stigmatised disease replete with mystifications and punitive metaphors, Sontag wrote a sequel to her earlier work, extending the argument to the AIDS pandemic.

[9] Sontag argues that metaphors of radical diseases often expand on "the theme of the rejection of the city" (1978: 74). And so, in popular imagination the urban environment, seen as abnormal, unhealthy and disease-causing, is usually set off against the wholesomeness and healing capacity of the countryside. The series reiterates this opposition in episode five, suggesting that the citizens believe the epidemic originates from the "poisonous" urban environment characterised by deviant forms of cohabitation and "debaucherous" lifestyle. In the episode, little Anton is saved from death by a village nurse who hides him in her house. Later, however, in the absence of adults, he is evicted at the end of a pitchfork by teenage girls who were supposed to look after him but blame him instead for spreading the virus since he comes from Moscow.

[10] The series does not unveil who these illegal military formations are.

[11] Of course, one can argue that the confrontation of the group of privileged urban dwellers with "ordinary" country people is a theme replete with political connotations, and that these confrontations serve to illuminate the scope and degree of socioeconomic injustice characteristic of Russian society today.

[12] *Epidemiia*'s cultural specificity is once more underlined by its scriptwriter Roman Kantor, who, to the question about the series' 'couleur locale', answered: "In principle, we can imagine this story taking place in any country. But the heroes and their world need to produce a feeling that these events are happening here, now and to somebody who lives close to us; and in our country. It is important that the series is directed by Pavel Kostomarov who has a documentarist background and who is now especially capable of combining genre with documentary aesthetics." (Bondarchuk 2019)

[13] Simultaneously, *Epidemiia* builds upon the conventions of contemporary serial drama with its investment in the characters' psychological complexity and ambiguity to ensure affective engagement with the audience.

[14] In the 1970s, Boris and his family discovered the remains of a stranded military vessel on a remote Karelian island and refurbished it into a summer house (preserving the ship's architectural structure) where, for many years, they spent their vacations.

[15] For more on the role of myths in contingent historical situations, see also Turner (1974).

[16] One can argue that this incident epitomises the total dissolution of the believed-to-be-unshakable: society's ideological foundations. As the assumed carer and protector, the patriarchal father (who, tellingly here, also represents the military as the single protective authority on the national level) is shown as failing to perform his duties and exiting the disaster landscape by killing his family and burning the house. He dies before the fire can catch, and the hope for "resurrection" from the ashes remains unfulfilled.

[17] Visually the characters' psychologic multidimensionality is conveyed through the blurring and multiplication of their features by the transparent glass mosaic wall of Anna's isolation room. Seen through the ribbed glass tiles in the dimly lit space the faces of the sick woman and the people at the other side of the partition split and float making it impossible to concentrate on just one facet of the person's image.

[18] The blood theme is also present in the scenes depicting Leonid's car crash and Marina's losing her baby. The images of copious blood shed on the starkly white snow echo sacrificial ritual. After these scenes, the relationships within the family stabilise. In the ensuing episode this newfound spiritual balance is further solidified by a wedding ritual in an Orthodox church. When Leonid marries Marina and Misha marries Polina, the entire group become related through blood or/and marital ties.

Bio

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