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Gender roles, parenthood, and the ethics of care in pandemic media narratives pre- and post-Covid-19

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Keywords: pandemic narratives; gender; media narratives; TV; *Bird Box* (2018); *Anna* (2021); *Sweet Tooth* (2021–)

Abstract:

Crises have always brought along significant transformations in gender identities, roles, and relations: while so much has changed in Western culture regarding the role of women in private and public life, notions of masculinity that are a barrier to gender equality are also challenged, but this struggle often results in an effort to take back control of female roles, bodies, and sexualities. For example, Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream* (2008) has described the post-9/11 age as an era of the reconstitution of 'traditional' manhood, the redomestication of femininity and nuclear family 'togetherness,' and this retreat towards conservative mid-1950s culture has affected even the genre of dystopian science fiction. The question that lies at the basis of this paper is whether – and if so, how – culture, and particularly science fiction cinema, continues to respond to moments of crisis and vulnerability through the same old myth of protective manhood and feminine weakness. We identify two major cases of insecurity: climate change and the global coronavirus pandemic, and we propose a preliminary analysis of some recent films and TV series on pandemic outbreaks. We have chosen one film (*Bird Box*, 2018) and two TV series from the US (*Sweet Tooth*, 2021) and Italy (*Anna*, 2021), all adapted from novels and graphic novels. All three works break new ground – though not devoid of limits – with regard to family structures and parental care: while *Bird Box* proposes a mere reversal of gender roles, *Anna* elaborates on the notion of

motherhood by presenting unconventional models of mothering; in *Sweet Tooth*, the ethics of care is extended to the relationship between humans, animals, and the endangered environment.

Raffaella Baccolini and Chiara Xausa

Gender roles, parenthood, and the ethics of care in pandemic media narratives pre- and post-Covid-19

Crisis events have always brought along significant transformations in gender identities, roles, and relations. Consider, for example, a watershed moment that has shaken the confidence of many, such as September 11. A number of studies have shined a light on the gendered nature of the psychological response to the attacks. Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream* (2008) described the post-9/11 age as an era of reconstituted 'traditional' manhood, redomesticated femininity and nuclear family 'togetherness' (2008, 3). According to Faludi, American media, entertainment, and advertising reacted to the event by blaming women's liberation – and the subsequent feminization of American men that left the nation vulnerable – as the real culprit of the attacks (208, 23). The myth of cowboy arrogance and feminine weakness, revived every time the nation felt vulnerable, was restored once again "through fables of female peril and the rescue of just one girl," aiming at displacing Americans' insecurity (2008, 200). While American men were cast back to the role of heroes, the ideal post-9/11 American woman was instead "undemanding, uncompetitive, and dependent," and recast as a mere victim deprived of agency (2008, 131). This conservative retreat to the mid-1950s Western culture – and particularly to "John Wayne masculinity" – has also affected the genre of dystopian science fiction (cf. Baccolini 2018). What emerges from Baccolini's analysis of Steven Spielberg's 2005 adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1897) and John Hillcoat's 2009 adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), two films that have been linked to the post-9/11 cultural climate, is a gender narrative "split along the lines of invincible manhood – and more specifically manly protectiveness and fatherhood – and jeopardized femininity" (Baccolini 2018, 181). This narrative seeks to restore the traditional, nuclear family, and deliver a critique of the emasculation brought about by feminism.

The question that lies at the basis of this paper is whether culture, and particularly science-fiction media narratives, continues to respond to moments of crisis and vulnerability through the same old myth of protective manhood and feminine weakness. Drawing upon Christine Agius, Annika Bergman Rosamond and Catarina Kinnvall's recently published article (2021) on masculinity, climate denial, and Covid-19, we identify two major cases of

insecurity: climate change and the global coronavirus pandemic. The conceptual lens of ontological security refers to a person's sense of safety in the world; conversely, ontological insecurity has to do with "attempts to deal with [...] anxieties and dangers," where "identity and autonomy are always in question" (Laing 1960, 39, 42). According to R. D. Laing's discussion of ontological insecurity (cf. also Giddens 1999), individuals and groups tend to respond to such anxieties caused by a sense of loss of control by searching for stable anchors. Political leaders often convey nostalgic narrative imaginations of a secure and great past to calm down anxieties among the electorate. These narratives tend to identify those who have taken the stability away, such as immigrants, women, or the establishment.

Agius, Bergman Rosamond and Kinnvall also identify a link between widespread perceptions of crisis and the rise of far-right populism, and, following feminist scholarship on gender and nationalism, introduce the concepts of *gender populism* and *gender nationalism*. The gendered dimension of populism and nationalism is expressed by an understanding of gender as natural, as well as by a hierarchical and heteronormative vision of gender identities. If after 9/11 the real culprit of the attacks had been considered women's liberation and its feminization of American men, it is now "gender ideology" that constitutes a major threat to the symbolic order, in its weakening of the traditional nuclear family structure. The only possible solution is found in the figure of a strong male leader who is able to protect the country. Such politics of 'protection' – or, better still, 'attack' – "relies on gendered notions of weakness and strength, legitimating actions that seek to 'save' or 'protect' citizens, in particular women," while, at the same time, brings about a general backlash against women's rights, such as the restriction of abortion rights that has characterised Donald Trump's presidency (2021, 440).

The same gender logic that underscores far-right populism also informs responses to current cases of ontological insecurity, such as climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. Several scholars have linked misogyny to climate denialism: researchers at Sweden's Chalmers University of Technology, where the world's first global research network on climate change denial was established, have examined the link between climate skeptics and the anti-feminist far-right movement which has increased exponentially in the past few years. The rise of young female activists such as Greta Thunberg and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have generated a backlash among conservative men, who have mocked, criticised, and attacked the new global faces of climate activism. Having analysed the language of a focus group of climate deniers, Jonas Anshelm and Martin Hultman conclude that "for climate skeptics [...] it was not the environment that was threatened, it was a certain kind of modern

industrial society built and dominated by their form of masculinity” (2014, 85). This form of masculinity, defined as “industrial breadwinner masculinity” (Gelin 2019), sees nature as something that is possible to exploit and destroy; climate science, instead, is seen as feminised and must thus be rejected.¹ Furthermore, Cara Daggett has identified “petro-masculinity” as the “role of fossil fuel systems in buttressing white patriarchal rule” (2018, 25). Daggett’s article was written during the Trump era, in which the ‘Make America Great Again’ mission made “access to cheap and plentiful gas and energy [...] the *sine qua non* for American well-being” (32), and fossil fuels became a key part of identity politics and of the growing authoritarianism of the nation. Petro-masculinity describes the link between fossil rule and male-dominant authoritarian rule, as well as the relationship between climate denial and traditional masculinity. Trump’s campaign and presidency, once again, has been informed by climate change denialism and an emphasis on economic greatness: “the environment is something to exploit and retain control over to benefit American ‘greatness’” (Agius et al. 2021, 444).

With regard to Covid-19, much of the populist response to the ontological insecurity was to show strength and authority to the country, while dismissing the severity of the pandemic. Populist leaders’ longing for a return to “business as usual” clashes with the link between the spread of Covid-19 and human-driven climate change, a connection that asks for a deep transformation of global consumption and economic growth. As Agius, Bergman Rosamond and Kinnvall suggest, “there are close connections between climate change denial, the coronavirus crisis and prevalent myths about the strong male leader defending his nation and its economic growth in the face of climate change and other security threats” (2021, 448).

Coming to fictional representations of climate change and global pandemics, the politics of protection, “strongman” political leadership, and redomesticated gender roles stand out. In times of crisis and vulnerability, mainstream climate fiction cinema and pandemic fiction cinema tend to embrace the same old myth of manly protectiveness and dependent femininity that is employed in post-9/11 science-fiction cinema.² According to ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard, the “feminist fiction about climate change has yet to be written” (2017, 144–145). Several texts that are considered to be part of the growing canon of climate change

¹ The market research firm Mintel termed the disparity between the ethical choices made by men and women the “eco gender gap.” Research corroborated that men are less likely to maintain good environmental habits than women (Mintel Press Office 2018). Consequently, most eco-friendly products are marketed to women, and “green branding might as well be pink” (Hunt 2020: online).

² On post 9/11 film and TV, see in particular Pollard (2011) and Westwell (2014). For a focus on manly protectiveness and dependent femininity in post-9/11 media narratives, see Hamad (2011), Godfrey and Hamad (2014), and Baccolini (2018).

fiction are indeed male-authored and “non-feminist at best” and “antifeminist and sexist at worst” (2017, 145). Generally speaking, this resonates with the problem of gender, sexuality, and race in most post-apocalyptic mainstream narratives. As noted by Susan Watkins, contemporary white male-authored post-apocalyptic fiction “tends towards conservatism” (2020, 1) and a desire and longing for the confirmation of the status quo. Ideas of human civilization rely on traditional patriarchal and imperialist values, and gesture towards a future that is either a “restoration of what has been lost during the apocalypse” or a “nostalgic mourning for the past” (2020, 1). Conventional postapocalyptic imagination, moreover, cannot seem to move beyond traditional gender narratives, namely the protection of the heteronormative nuclear family unit and the obsession with the father-son bond.

Similarly, post-apocalyptic climate fiction tends to revolve around men: the protagonists with decision-making authority are often white male heroes, mainly research scientists and government officials. Kim Stanley Robinson’s trilogy on climate change – *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), *Fifty Degrees Below* (2005), *Sixty Days and Counting* (2007) – is one of the examples provided by Gaard. The ecosocialist scientocracy in the novels is not only overwhelmingly male-dominated, but also gives the impression that the problem of climate change can be solved without addressing social injustices. As for disaster movies about climate change, the vast majority depict white male heroes succeeding in the restoration of their love or life against a backdrop of environmental catastrophe, such as in *Waterworld* (1995), *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Elysium* (2013), and *Snowpiercer* (2013). If the “paradigmatic figure of the Anthropocene is the European or Western white male scientist,” as Andrew Baldwin suggests quoting Yusoff (2018, 218), then climate narratives become a useful entry point for conceptualizing the meaning of the Anthropocene. The theme of climate justice is almost entirely absent from mainstream cultural representations of climate change. Those, whose agency is most constrained, however, are also the most vulnerable to the violence of climate shift.

As for post-apocalyptic pandemic narratives, we draw on Carlen Lavigne’s analysis of American films and end-of-world television series between 2001 and 2016. She argues that most of her case studies speak to the ambitions and fears of a straight white male audience. A repetitive scenario unfolds as follows: in a devastated landscape, a straight white male hero arises as a natural leader, while “women, non-white characters, queer characters, and all those whose identities cross over and between those groups are side-lined in favour of the straight white male lead” (2018, 7). This “lingering patriarchy,” however, goes unacknowledged: what these shuttered worlds feature is a post-feminist and post-racial future, where “the

struggling hero claims leadership simply because he is the best person for the job” (2018, 7). In this way, gender binaries are reinforced, and those whose voices might challenge and disrupt the myth of heteronormative white patriarchy are excluded from the main narrative. The case studies that Lavigne refers to tend toward conservative narratives that preserve the patriarchal family and maintain heterosexual white male leadership, while reviving once again “the post-9/11 fantasy of the masculine American soldier defending the hapless women and children” (2018, 50).

In what follows, we will propose a preliminary analysis of more recent films and TV series – whose long-form narrative structure might be better suited to representing the complexity of gender roles and identities – on pandemic outbreaks. We have chosen one film and two TV series from the United States and Italy to decentre the imagination of pandemic outbreaks and also propose a viewpoint from the European South. All works have been adapted from novels (*Bird Box* and *Anna*) and graphic novels (*Sweet Tooth*).³ All original works were published before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, except for Susanne Bier’s *Bird Box* (2018), all other adaptations came out in 2021, a fact that makes them particularly interesting in terms of the way they narrate the pandemic.

We will look at gender relations, and more particularly at models of parental care and family structure (motherhood and fatherhood), guided by the following questions: to what extent is the representation of gender relations impacted by the pandemic and climate crises? In comparison with pre-Covid-19 mainstream films, do the more recent ones propose alternatives to the traditional nuclear family, gender essentialism, and non-normative formations of family and identity? Has Covid-19 brought along significant changes in narrative responses to pandemic outbreaks? All three works break new ground – though not devoid of contradictions – with regard to family structures and parental care. All present unusual changes to the traditional model of the nuclear family. While *Bird Box* proposes a

³ Our analyses are part of a larger project that also encompasses the Italian film *La terra dei figli* (*The Land of Sons*) released in 2021, directed by Claudio Cupellini and adapted from the graphic novel of the same title by Italian cartoonist Gipi. The film is set in a post-apocalyptic future that is a disturbing mirror of the present: in a world where both water and earth are poisoned and survival is almost impossible, a father and a son live in a shack on the banks of the Po Delta without ever exchanging affection. Women, on the other hand, seem to have almost entirely disappeared from the world. The father is harsh, of few words, choosing survival over tenderness. The son, who has not been given a name, fears him. Furthermore, the son has grown up without feelings and memory of the world before the apocalypse. By the end of the movie, however, we get to know that the tough version of masculinity, the father’s lack of empathy, gentleness, and caring, was just an attempt to prepare his son for the world. The father entrusts his thoughts to a notebook in which he writes every night. Far from containing lessons and rules, the notebook is a tender declaration of love and affection for his son. Due to space limits, we will not dwell on the analysis of this film in our paper. However, its numerous overlapping themes with *Bird Box*, *Anna*, and *Sweet Tooth* will be easily apparent.

mere reversal of gender roles, *Anna* elaborates on the notion of motherhood by presenting unconventional models of mothering, and *Sweet Tooth* extends the ethics of care to the relationship between humans, animals, and the endangered environment. Research has indeed corroborated that zoonotic diseases like Covid-19 are linked to humanity's tampering with nature. What is needed is a reconfiguration of our relationship with non-human nature from one of domination to one of interdependence. As ecofeminisms – and, more broadly, feminist ecologies – suggest is that humanity's exploitative attitude towards nature is also linked to patriarchal structures of domination. The analysis of *Sweet Tooth* will therefore draw on feminist and environmental humanities perspectives that have interpreted the current coronavirus and climate crises as crises of care, and have proposed an ethics of care based on the re-conceptualisation of the human/nature relation as one of interdependence rather than domination. Our analyses will eventually suggest that caring for the other (human and non-human), for the community, and for the environment, the recognition of interdependence, but also care in the form of storytelling and imagination, stand out in all three works to various degrees. They are some of the possible answers and strategies needed to respond to the insecurity caused by the pandemic and climate change.

The reversal of gender roles in *Bird Box*

Bird Box (2018; directed by Susanne Bier; screenplay by Eric Heisserer; based on the novel of the same name by Josh Malerman) is set in the United States in a not-so-distant post-apocalyptic future. The film moves back and forth between two main temporal frames, the post-apocalyptic world (the present) and five years earlier (the past), when the pandemic begins to destroy the world as we know it. It revolves around a young woman, who is pregnant when the pandemic spreads, and at present is a mother to both her biological and adopted child. The film stands out from other mainstream post-apocalyptic narratives, such as Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) or Mattson Tomlin's *Mother/Android* (2021). When pregnant women are present in such movies, the plot usually centres on someone's attempt to protect them. Pregnant women, in fact, are primarily important for their biological function, as they stand for the future that needs to be preserved. Women very rarely get to do their own saving and oftentimes they do not even have a round character. In contrast, *Bird Box* features a motherly figure who is very far from the traditional, nurturing, soft, and gentle mother. She appears to be an independent, harsh, and strong woman who has chosen survival at the expense of tenderness. The post-apocalyptic world is the result of a mysterious

pandemic that causes panic and chaos, bringing out – more often than not – selfishness and violence in those who survive.

In the first flashback of the movie, we see news reports on TV about unexplained mass suicides that are quickly spreading across Europe. Although it “does not appear to be pathological or viral,” the pandemic’s estimated death toll is in the tens of thousands. People exhibit unusual behaviour, hurting themselves and others. The narrative does not linger on an explanation of the pandemic: it affects anyone who is unable to refrain from looking in the direction of mysterious entities and voices. After five years, those who have survived live isolated and wear blindfolds when venturing outside to protect themselves from the contaminated survivors who kill all those they encounter by forcing them to look, thus infecting them.

The protagonist, Malorie (Sandra Bullock), is an unenthusiastic, pregnant single woman who, deserted by the father-to-be, has doubts about her ability to bond with the child. While her sister Jessica (Sarah Paulson) attempts to reassure her by resorting to the traditional notion of women’s natural instinct, Malorie remains detached to the point of refusing to acknowledge her pregnancy in an exchange with her ob-gyn, Dr Lapham (Parminder Nagra), who ends their conversation by offering her a leaflet about the chance to consider adoption.

The flashbacks show how Malorie survives. Invited into a house for safety by an unknown, kind woman who is immediately infected, Malorie is helped by a passer-by, Tom (Trevante Rhodes). Together, they are let into a house where others are taking shelter. They form an odd community that, amid losses, fights, and compromises, sees Malorie, Tom, and the two newborns as the only survivors in the end. Five years into the pandemic, Malorie’s attitude towards motherhood remains ambivalent at best. Her unwillingness to name the children clearly represents her reluctance to embrace the norms of motherhood: the no-name children are simply called “Boy” (Julian Edwards) and “Girl” (Vivien Lyra Blair). However, the post-pandemic interracial family is not traditionally or strictly nuclear as most mainstream movies tend to show: Malorie is the biological mother of Boy; Girl is adopted; Tom, a Black man, is not biologically related to either child. And yet, the representation of the parents still follows a dichotomous pattern, only in reverse: whereas Malorie exemplifies a type of reluctant, harsh motherhood, Tom represents an unusual, softer form of masculinity, one that is characterised by empathy, tenderness, and paternal care.

We are often shown Malorie’s straightforward approach to life, which clashes with the conventional representation of maternal care. The opening scene shows the woman threatening to “hurt” her children if they disobey her orders. At another suspenseful moment,

she urges them to be selfish, to think about themselves and their own survival. Similarly, Olympia (Danielle Macdonald), Girl's biological mother, confesses to Malorie that too much love has made her "soft," thus conventionally equating tenderness with weakness in her attempt to get Malorie to promise to take care of her baby. As the narrative reveals Malorie's behaviour to be a kind of different, more pragmatic form of care, these early scenes make Malorie appear as a cold, harsh mother.

One scene in particular reifies Tom's and Malorie's different approaches to life. This scene also shows a reversal of traditional gender stereotypes, a reversal that is interesting but still rather problematic as it maintains a binary division between genders. Tom shares with the children a memory of his childhood at the lake. As he reaches the story's climax and having caught the children's attention, Malorie brusquely interrupts him and sends the children to bed, impervious to the three's plea to finish the story. The conflict that ensues is the occasion to show the adults' opposite attitudes. Where Tom tries to resist the effects of the pandemic with care, storytelling, and hope, Malorie counters the harsh reality of the post-apocalyptic present. Where Tom sees a story, Malorie sees a useless, if not dangerous lie. Where she only contemplates mere, but successful survival, he tries to inspire dreams and hope.

"Life is more than just what is. It's what could be. What you could make it. You need to promise them dreams that may never come true. You need to love them knowing that you may lose them at any second. They deserve dreams. They deserve love. They deserve hope. They deserve a mother. [...] You haven't given them names, Mal. Their names are Boy and Girl! Think about that."

Tom's moving speech about the importance of care, hope, and dreams to make life meaningful comes, nonetheless, with a reproach for Malorie's unconventional model of motherhood, one characterised by what seems like a lack of care. Whereas for Malorie successful survival appears to come at the expense of dreams and memories for herself and her children, Tom's belief in the importance of beauty and art makes him a "softer" – but also weaker – model of paternal care, especially when compared to the heteronormative notion of fatherhood. Such welcome revisions of traditional fatherhood are, however, readily corrected. In fact, he sacrifices himself for the safety of his family, thus updating and yet reiterating the trope of the "(white) male protagonist as protector."

Eventually, Malorie's and the children's adventure down the river is successful. They reach the community that turns out to be a former school for the blind. As she is welcomed by Dr Lapham, she finally acknowledges to be the children's mother by giving them a name. At the same time, she also recognises the significance of dreams and memories by finishing

Tom's story. Malorie thus recognises the importance of storytelling but also of kindness and care. Naming the children becomes a tribute to Tom and Olympia and to their merits. Malorie's gesture makes clear her change of heart – the realisation that memory, dreams, and hope are fundamental to a meaningful life, and that sweetness and care are essential values. And yet, the audience cannot help realising that Malorie's harshness has also been fundamental to their successful endeavour.

Bird Box then reverses the traditional narrative of climate and pandemic crises by showing a father who, while still capable of exceptional actions to defend himself and his loved ones, is also nurturing. The film partly shies away from Lavigne's "lingering patriarchy" that lies at the basis of many such narratives. But if the film shows interesting and unconventional examples of parental care, the impression remains that this is a mere reversal of traditional gender roles, which are not entirely questioned. So, if traditional gender binaries are not reinforced, and gender does not appear as natural, binaries are nonetheless present, even if reversed. It is refreshing to see an independent woman who does not embrace all the rhetoric associated with the conventional notion of maternity, but it is still problematic to see how the irreconcilable opposition between genders is maintained. The film also tries to update the image of the traditional family with one that is not strictly nuclear and recalls blended families. The pandemic has done away with certain rules and norms: there is no marriage to certify the union, nor blood ties to keep them together.

At a larger level, the pandemic also has an impact on the type of society that remains. It is an ugly, violent world that can be resisted through the acceptance of diverse values. Survival is accomplished not solely through the acceptance of exceptionalism, but also of compromise. Both Malorie's practical severity and Tom's dreamy gentleness are needed to successfully resist the pandemic. In particular, care, storytelling, and solidarity allow the protagonists to survive and create a very fragile, temporary utopian space as the pandemic spreads. In both temporal settings, taking care of each other and recognising the importance of solidarity are the fragile premises to create potential utopian enclaves. They also offer a concrete answer to the insecurity generated by the pandemic.

A motherless world needs maternal substitutes: *Anna*

Where *Bird Box* offers an attempt at rethinking gender roles through its representations of parental care and an update of the traditional nuclear family, *Anna* does so by forcing a total redefinition of intergenerational and gender relations. Set on the island of Sicily in 2020, the series centres on the consequences of a flu pandemic that, by killing adults but sparing

children, has devastated the world. Its setting in the Italian south, moreover, counters the image of North America and Northern Europe as the epicentres of pandemic- and climate-related discourses, as mentioned in our brief analysis of pandemic fiction and climate fiction. *Anna* (2021, written and directed by Niccolò Ammaniti, co-written with Francesca Manieri, based on his post-apocalyptic novel of the same name, originally published in 2015) is an Italian television series that, at the start of each of the six episodes, informs the viewers that the shooting began six months before the Covid-19 pandemic. It centres on a 13-year-old girl, Anna (Giulia Dragotto), who struggles with the viral contagion and with the search for her half-brother, Astor (Alessandro Pecorella) four years into the pandemic. “La Rossa” (“the red” is the name of the flu in Italian) kills all adults, i.e., all those who have reached puberty. Like other works that present a post-apocalyptic future (cf. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* or popular adaptations, such as *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*), the pandemic caused the collapse of the social order, leaving a wild and violent world, where people struggle to survive and “the most vicious and calculating organise to impose their will on those either too weak or morally unprepared to fight” (Burnside 2017).

One limit of such entertainment media is what Susan Sontag has called their “extreme moral simplification.” In her essay “The Imagination of Disaster” (2017) she suggests that the “lure of such generalized disaster as a fantasy is that it releases one from normal obligations” – that rule of exceptionalism that is the traditional answer in times of crisis: “a morally acceptable fantasy where one can give outlet to cruel or at least amoral feelings” (2017, 193). Such rationale ends up justifying any behaviour as a return to our basic instincts and/or a painful but necessary choice for survival. Unlike mainstream disaster movies, however, Ammaniti’s series tries to present more complex storylines by developing backstories for both cynical perpetrators and ambivalent heroes and heroines, which is a common tendency in TV and cinema since the 2000s according to Steven Johnson (2006). While Ammaniti’s novel concentrates on how Anna “becomes a mother without being one” (Vivarelli 2021, online), the TV series further elaborates on the notion of motherhood by presenting different models of mothering. Besides Anna, the series presents at least two other mother figures: Maria Grazia (Elena Lietti), Anna’s own mother, a pragmatic woman who shares a no-frills approach to life and maternity with *Bird Box*’s Malorie, and Angelica (Clara Tramontano), a desperate, despotic queen who has built her kingdom on a lie.

As far as the pandemic is concerned, it is up to Anna’s mother to explain what happens. Everyone carries the virus. At first, it attacks only older people, but soon it becomes clear that even children host the virus at a dormant stage. The virus is awakened when they reach

puberty and it also prevents procreation by making people sterile. It manifests itself with red spots (hence the name), coughing, difficulty breathing, muscle pain, and then death. In numerous flashbacks, we see apocalyptic scenes of adults dying, long lines of corpses in the streets, clothes being burned, and chaos, violence, and destruction abounding. On the other hand, numerous scenes also show a resilient nature. The cities' destruction and the deaths are countered by images of fish, pigeons, dogs, and even an elephant reappropriating space. The rebirth of nature appears to be a visual "reproach" to the popular notion of the environment as something to exploit and retain control over for the benefit of humans.

The only biological mother is Maria Grazia, an independent, pragmatic, and unconventional woman who also seems to sacrifice tenderness to ensure her children's survival. Even if she often treats Anna as if she were older than nine, she refuses entry to her infected former husband and sends away her infected new partner in order to protect her children. As she lies sick, she matter-of-factly explains to Anna how she is dying and what the child should do. Despite her death, the mother is very present in the life of both her children – maintained alive through memory, but most of all through a notebook that she frantically keeps writing before dying, and that is conveyed through her voice-over segments in the episodes. It is the "Book of the Important Things," which includes all her lessons and rules – rules that need to be changed as, day after day, Anna discovers that the rules of the past no longer apply, and that she will have to invent new ones.

Among the teachings of Anna's mother, a couple stand out and are repeated in every episode's recap: one important thing "never to forget is that mother will always love you even if she's no longer here with you"; the other is that "outside the woods you will find dangers, but you will face them: you are siblings, you are a family" (our translation). Anna, thus, finds herself navigating the thin line between solidarity and selfishness, between keeping the promise made to her mother to protect her brother and finding sometimes morally ambiguous strategies to survive. The voice of Anna's mother becomes then a stern but hopeful reminder for both children that helps them survive. In the last episode, for example, she appears as an astronaut in Anna's vision, as a supporting light in the middle of darkness.

If Maria Grazia is the biological mother, Angelica chooses to become a mother to a community of children. Angelica is a desperate, despotic queen-mother who rules with cruelty and lies to the occupants of an ancient villa turned into her kingdom. She is the queen of the Whites and the Blues, to whom she promises salvation through the kiss of the "Picciridduna" (Sicilian for "big girl") – the only adult human being to have survived the disease, whose kiss

is said to cancel the effects of “the red.”⁴ To enter the court of the queen, children must bring food, sweets, or batteries, and are subjected to terrible tests. Angelica’s culture is based on what she remembers of reality shows, turning her tests into deadly games. Although she shows signs of sadism even before the pandemic, the current situation and her impending death make her even more vicious. Since she is destined to die, she is determined to bring down as many as possible with her. Angelica represents the traditional “wicked stepmother” who enjoys exerting power over her children, as when she hugs Astor, Anna’s brother, in front of her, thus ensuring his loyalty.

Finally, Anna is forced into motherhood before her time, becoming herself an independent, pragmatic, young woman who, like her own mother, is capable of both tenderness and strength. She becomes a sister-mother out of her promise to defend and take care of her brother, a young post-apocalyptic heroine who must grow before her time and learn to survive through difficult situations. In her struggle for survival, she ends up forming a small community that stands opposite Angelica’s. Together with her half-brother, Pietro (Giovanni Mavilla), a kind boy she encounters, and Coccolone, a Maremma sheepdog she rescued, they represent a miniature sample of a hypothetical proposal for a new society (Comberati 2021, 108).

And yet, Anna is far from the conventional, romantic image of motherhood. She often resents her role, at times she acts selfishly, but she is also capable of imagination and tenderness. Like Tom in *Bird Box*, she believes in the art of storytelling as a strategy to resist the violence of the virus, the ugliness of the present, and the desperation of no future. She resorts to imagination in at least two significant moments, one with her half-brother and one with Pietro. At first, Anna lies to Astor in order to protect him. She tells him that they are the only survivors and that the monsters that live outside the woods cannot hurt her because she has magic powers, and this magic will pass to him when she dies. In the fifth episode, on the other hand, Anna shortly breaks her search for her brother to accompany the infected Pietro to the Etna volcano, where he believes that the souls of the deceased descend into the crater and reach another, better dimension. She lies to him, telling him that she sees the souls and that they are beautiful, like glowing jellyfish. Anna’s use of imagination becomes an act of resistance to the insecurity of the times.

⁴ Whites and Blues are groups of children divided by age, whose bodies are painted with the two colours. While younger children’s bodies are painted blue, those of teenagers are painted white to cover the signs of “the red.” The character of the Picciridduna (Roberta Mattei) is developed in the fourth episode, which reveals that she survived because she is an intersex person.

As in all post-apocalyptic narratives, the epidemic has an impact on the society that remains. And yet, unlike most mainstream pre-Covid-19 narratives, Ammaniti's story goes beyond simple gender stereotypes while showing that survival is accomplished by mediating between exceptionalism and selfishness and care, memory, and storytelling. The memory of the mother and her own reminders (her notebook) guide the young protagonists who are ready to write their own story in the end. If the story never allows us to forget what desperation can make people do, or how false hopes can deceive us, it also reminds us of the importance of storytelling to counter death and despair, as means to care for the other.

As the children are ready to begin another life, they are accompanied by the words of Anna's mother that conclude the series: "What sets human beings apart from all other animals is their ability to imagine and tell stories. For it is only through stories that nothing ever truly dies. The unbelievable can happen, the chaos of the world can make sense, and what seemed like the end of everything can turn out to be an extraordinary new beginning." Despite the uplifting message, Maria Grazia's words unfortunately insist on a hierarchical separation between humans and the natural world, whereas the narrative has shown that survival is not dependent on humans' superiority. Rather, determination, storytelling, memory, and most of all solidarity and care allow Anna and Astor to survive and make them more multifaceted characters:

"The challenge, then, at a time when post-apocalyptic entertainments are more popular than ever, is to show all this chaos, random violence and pointless cruelty with some kind of honesty, allowing the perpetrators to become more complex, and more interesting, than the usual zombies and gibbering sadists, while revealing similar depths and ambiguities in the apparent heroes." (Burnside 2017)

The analyses of the American film and the Italian TV series have revealed different attempts at rethinking gender roles through their representations of parental care and updates of the traditional nuclear family. The first offers a fresh change from the narratives that see a pregnant woman in need of protection because she is ultimately only important for her biological function. In *Bird Box* the protagonist does her own saving. On a similar note, the representation of her partner's fatherhood makes room for care and tenderness, which have been conventionally associated with femininity and weakness. These challenges to tradition are nonetheless reduced by the film's ultimate maintenance of a reversed gender binary. *Anna*, on the other hand, eliminates adults and thereby does away with biological parenthood, and resorts to representations of different communities. While some are based on cruelty and

despotism, Anna's own embryonically interspecies community is characterised by care for each other as a way of responding to insecurity. But such a narrative is still characterised by a separation between the human and non-human world, as both the images of nature taking over and Anna's mother's last words suggest. *Sweet Tooth*, our last example, will take this discussion one step further.

From the nuclear family to “promiscuous care” and interdependence: *Sweet Tooth*

The analyses proposed in the previous paragraphs have revealed an attempt at rethinking parental care and gender roles in recent films and TV series about pandemic outbreaks. *Sweet Tooth* (a streaming television series premiered on Netflix in 2021, developed by Jim Mickle, and based on the comic book of the same name by Jeff Lemire) expands such reconfiguration of care and looks at the broader endangered environment. We will examine the show through a post-humanist framework that goes beyond humanism's restricted notion of what counts as the human. Our analysis will also encompass the transformation of gender roles and parental care, and will expand to include a possible re-conceptualisation of human/nature relations.

Sweet Tooth is set in the U.S. about a decade after the Great Crumble, a viral pandemic that killed most of humanity and led to the emergence of babies born as human-animal hybrids, feared by most humans and hunted and exploited by a militia group known as the Last Men. The plot revolves around a half-deer hybrid named Gus (Christian Convery) who is raised by his father Pubba (Will Forte) in an isolated cabin in Yosemite National Park. After Pubba's unexpected death, nine-year-old Gus steps outside the fence in search of the mother he has never met. Under the reluctant guardianship of former football star Tommy Jepperd (Nonso Anozie), Gus heads on an adventure to Colorado. Eventually, he discovers that he was created in a lab by a scientist named Birdie (Amy Seimetz).

The Great Crumble is introduced through several flashbacks, showing grim TV news reports about the spread of H5G9, which quickly became the “deadliest virus since the Black Plague.” “If you don't pray, now's a good time to start,” says the U.S. president. As the world slipped into chaos, something extraordinary happened: human-animal creatures appeared who were birthed by human parents. It is billed as the greatest mystery of the 21st century: “Which came first? The hybrids or the virus?” As the first episode of the series makes clear, the source of the outbreak is human exploitation of natural resources: “Once upon a time, bad people ruled the Earth. Doing what they wanted, taking from the planet. They were greedy things, self-destructive, only out for themselves.” Before the virus came, “grownups” and

their selfish needs ruined the Earth, leaving the planet with nothing but water and skies filled with trash.

Furthermore, the collapse of society known as the Great Crumble is directly linked to climate change: in the big revelation episode “When Pubba met Birdie,” we are taken back in time to see the beginning of the outbreak. Right before Birdie’s experiment goes extremely wrong, we see a TV news report about climate change. Both the H5G9 virus and climate change are therefore seen as the consequences of humankind’s endless tampering with the flow of life; both are the by-products of capitalism as well as human exceptionalism. In other words, nature seems to retaliate against human beings: “Nature made everyone sick”; it “doesn’t want us back. We never gave her a good reason to keep us around in the first place.” Similarly, research has corroborated that outbreaks of zoonotic diseases like Covid-19 are on the rise and that these animal-borne pandemics are most certainly linked to human-driven environmental change, the destruction of animal habitats all over the world, the intensification of farming practices, and the global biodiversity crisis. In other words, “the real source of this crisis is human, not animal” (Van Dooren 2020).

In *Sweet Tooth*, hybrids are the consequences of human exploitation of global ecosystems. The biggest hints at the origins of the virus come from Judy (Jodie Rimmer), a woman who worked with Gus’s “mother” at Alaskan Fort Smith Labs, where a group of scientists found unique microbes that they were planning to use to create vaccines by growing microbes inside chicken eggs. Gus – whose name stands for Genetic Unit Series – was the unexpected outcome of this project. Whilst Birdie hints that if the wrong microbes were grown inside the chicken eggs “all hell would break loose,” the first season does not unequivocally connect hybrids to the virus; instead, they are described as “two sides of the same coin.” Bear (Stefania LaVie Owen), the leader of the Animal Army – a group of teenagers who act as an eco-group by rescuing and protecting hybrids like Gus – is clearly disappointed when she realises that the hybrids were not the “miracle of nature” she committed to save but rather, using Rosi Braidotti’s words, a “trans-humanist delirium of transcendence from the corporeal frame of the contemporary human” (2013, 197). Jepperd clearly describes the hybrids as the by-product of human greed and the manipulation of natural resources: “Why did they make a deer-kid baby in a lab? To see if they could. Anyway, does it even change anything? It does, doesn’t it?” After the virus took over the world, the hybrids become the main target for further exploitation: not only are they considered as the direct cause of the virus and therefore hunted by the Last Men, but they are also experimented upon to find a cure for the plague.

The very first episode of *Sweet Tooth* could give the audience the impression of the beginning of a story of a father and son surviving after the fall of civilization in a world where women seem to have disappeared almost entirely, like in *The Road*. Pubba and Gus live off the grid in the wilderness, where the father teaches his child what he needs to know to survive, instilling in the boy a fear of the outside world but also a restless optimism. Pubba's attitude towards Gus is a caring and empathic one, not far from Tom's soft masculinity in *Bird Box*. The two create a tender world for themselves in Yellowstone National Park, made of stuffed pets and illustrated stories drawn from classics such as *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. After Pubba's death, a second father figure takes over to help Gus on his adventure.

In one of the last episodes, we learn that Pubba (whose real name is Richard Fox) is not Gus's biological father, but a janitor who worked at Alaskan Fort Smith Labs where Gus was developed, and who ended up raising the boy through sheer chance. While he is not prepared for parenthood – “I don't know anything about babies” – Birdie, the virologist who made Gus in a lab, is not prepared for saving the world – “I don't know anything about saving the world!” Eventually, they both commit to the roles of caregiver and scientist-saver respectively, reversing the traditional narrative of climate and pandemic crisis where male research scientists are often the main protagonists with decision-making authority. At the end of season one, the role of Birdie remains uncertain, but the last time we see her she asks Richard – a man she has basically just met – to take Gus so she can return to the lab to destroy her research.

The traditional image of the family, furthermore, is updated multiple times throughout this Netflix series, not only via the characters of Pubba and Jepperd who accept to take care of a hybrid child who is not their biological son, but also via the teenager community of the Animal Army and the storyline of Aimee (Dania Ramirez), a former therapist who finds new purpose by creating the Preserve, a refuge for the hybrid children.

Most importantly, *Sweet Tooth* extends the ethics of care to ecological relations. This resonates with feminist and ecofeminist responses to the Covid-19 pandemic: in the midst of a global crisis, which is simultaneously a crisis of care, it becomes increasingly important to expand our understanding of kinship from the labour of social reproduction often performed by women within the family, to a more “promiscuous care” that rejects market logics and puts care at the centre of our relationship to the natural world (The Care Collective 2020, 33). On a similar note, *Sweet Tooth* suggests that organic and inorganic relations and the interdependence of the human and the non-human are at the core of the survival of the planet.

As a new form of coexistence between the human and the non-human, hybrids like Gus represent an alternative to human exploitation of the planet's natural resources, and once they were born the Earth could start to heal: "Hybrids are how the Earth survives," as they can live without taking, and therefore keep the Earth alive. Their stories force the audience to imagine a rupture and address the crisis at its root causes, shifting the focus from a mere return to normality or 'business as usual' to an act of reparation towards damaged "natural-cultural" ecologies, to borrow from Donna Haraway (2016). Instead of using a trans-humanist framework, in which technology is used to allow human beings to develop beyond their natural capabilities, we propose a post-humanist reading of the hybrids as an attempt to go beyond humanism's restricted notion of what counts as human. Such a perspective is no longer adequate to understand the human's entangled relations with animals, the environment, and technology. The hybrids, as symbiotically altered creatures, also resemble the generations of Camilles that Haraway envisions in the last chapter of *Staying with the Trouble* (2016): symbiotic beings with the traits of humans and other non-human beings. In her collective speculative fabulation, humans have been implanted with the genes of an endangered species – in this case, the monarch butterfly – as *sym-poiesis*, or making-with, rather than *auto-poiesis*, or self-making. This is what is required to live and die together on a damaged earth. Restoring and repairing the world requires learning to live and die with one another in varied multispecies ways that are not prone to disaster, and to address our current state of urgency in relational, rather than dialectical, ways. Interdependence, in other words, is the only possible form of survival: the profound planetary rupture made visible by the climate crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic indeed ask for a re-evaluation of care from a feminine and unproductive sphere to the cultivation of a caring politics for the community and for the environment.

Conclusion

We illustrated to what extent recent films and television shows about pandemic outbreaks manage to go beyond gender binaries and offer something more than the typical narrative of manly protectiveness, victimised femininity, and the restored heterosexual family. *Bird Box* and *Anna* centre on female protagonists and the role of motherhood, whereas, at a first glance, *Sweet Tooth* is yet another post-apocalyptic story in which women seem to have disappeared almost entirely. A more thorough analysis, though, reveals an attempt at rethinking family structures and parental care as a form of coexistence with the non-human world. All representations of motherhood and fatherhood are "imperfect," complex, and they never offer a simple celebration of the two roles.

None of the examples, however, present a feminist perspective that is devoid of contradictions. Pre-Covid *Bird Box*, despite proposing a reversal of gender roles, maintains the gender polarities and the representation of male and female spheres as opposite and somewhat essentialist. *Sweet Tooth*, on the other hand, could be interpreted as a reassuring representation of diversity, with the monstrous Other embodied by a lovable half-human and half-deer boy. With regard to gender roles, the Netflix series proposes a post-humanist reconfiguration of parental care, but it gives the impression of being yet another story of a father and a son surviving the apocalypse. The one example that really breaks with the simplification of conservative pandemic narratives is *Anna*, which is also the most morally ambiguous among the films and TV series analysed. None of the examples reinterpret gender relations in a “revolutionary” way, but mothering and fathering often go beyond blood relations. The traditional nuclear family is extended to include interspecies interdependence, and different models of community are proposed. In all three, interdependence, storytelling, and kindness are possible answers to viruses that bring out selfishness and violence in most people. What is still missing is an insight into how pandemics and climate change can lay bare the differences and deepen the pre-existing inequalities and forms of discrimination, as dramatically emerged during the Covid-19 crisis.

To sum up, updating and addressing Gaard’s claim that feminist fictions about climate change and post-pandemics are yet to be written, we can say that *Bird Box*, *Anna*, and *Sweet Tooth* may not yet revolutionise such narratives, but are nonetheless a fresh start in an encouraging direction. They may not provide a dramatically transformed answer, but attempt to update a traditional narrative. Needless to say, Covid-19 is still a threat to all of us, and we will need more time and distance before the narratives may change. But unlike the Spanish flu, which does not openly appear in the literature of the times (Outka 2020, 1–7), post-apocalyptic dystopian movies and TV series are turning to narratives of contagion to explore the world and, in particular, what happens to individuals and families and, therefore, to gender relations.

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