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Necropolitics and Pandemic Premediation in *The Fall*'s Neo-Western State of Exception

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Jared Muralt's ongoing comics series *The Fall* (2018–) depicts a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by a flu pandemic, in which the responses to and consequences of the fictional disease outbreak premediated the reality of the COVID-19 spread. While embedding the narrative in mainstream post-apocalyptic tropes and plot developments, Muralt adopts European western comic conventions and draws on specific representations of place, landscape, and social conflict to shape his take on a pandemic state of exception in different configurations in urban and rural contexts. Focusing on the first six issues of *The Fall*, this article demonstrates how the deathscape created by Muralt resonates with necropolitical measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the formation of fictional makeshift communities in the Alps in which rule is based on threats of violence and the marginalization of the sick and refugees.

Introduction

When the then-novel coronavirus spread across the globe in the first few months of 2020, millions of people around the world were forced to stay at home. As they tried to make sense of what was going on in the world outside, pandemic fiction such as Albert Camus's *La Peste* (1947) and Gabriel García Márquez's *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (1985) topped bestseller lists (e.g. Manikowski 2020), while viewership numbers for films and television series centering on epi- and pandemics soared (e.g. Clark 2020). Journalists and scholars repeatedly highlighted Steven Soderbergh's 2011 thriller *Contagion* for its uncannily anticipatory realism, which provided "grim reassurance… to viewers grappling with an emerging and uncertain viral situation" (Moore 2020: para 1), while lockdowns and stay-at-home orders resulted in desolated urban landscapes that were likened to post-apocalyptic scenarios imagined, for example, in zombie films (see Drezner 2020; Lino 2021).

Richard Grusin has described the process of popular culture (sometimes seemingly correctly) anticipating the future as "premediation." This phenomenon expresses "the cultural desire to make sure that the future has already been pre-mediated before it turns into the present (or the past)" (2010: 4). The understanding of current events often entails turning to the past in order to identify similarities between the past and the present. This is also true for how medical experts approach disease outbreaks: as Priscilla Wald reports about the SARS pandemic of the early 2000s, knowledge about how similar biomedical crises unfolded in the past "helped epidemiologists identify and respond to the problem" (2008: 1). However, premediation describes a different process, as it "seeks to make sure that the future has already happened by capturing the moment when the future emerges into the present, that is, the moment when the future has already become the past" (Grusin 2004: 37).

Awarded the Belgian Atomium Prize for "BD d'actualité" (comics about current issues) in the fall of 2020, Jared Muralt's ongoing comic book series *The Fall* (since 2018) represents an example of how premediation takes shape in popular culture. In fact, the issues published in 2018 and 2019 imagined scenarios and moods that would resonate with how the general public experienced the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Demonstrating how past real-life events inspire fiction—which, in turn, may premediate future events that become the present before transforming into the

[1] We reference the 2021 edition published by Image Comics, which collects the first six issues, using a slightly revised version of the English version published by Tintenkilby Verlag (translated from German by Franz He) to better adapt the text to the American audience. The volume includes an interview by Gisela Feuz ([142]) and collects the issues without any interruption in the pagination nor in the narrative, removing markers that acknowledge the original serial publication (e.g., the "to be continued" at the end of issues).

past—Muralt has revealed that the comic was originally influenced by the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, and that he also conducted research about the Spanish Flu while devising the story (von Törne 2020).

The graphic narrative starts with the catastrophic surge of a flu mutation. By highlighting a new virus strand as the cause of an infectious disease threatening human survival, *The Fall* is squarely situated in the discourse of the "next pandemic," which emerged in the early 1990s and suggests that the next catastrophic pandemic will inevitably happen, with the question being *when* rather than *if* (Lynteris 2020: 6). The fictional pandemic disrupts the daily life of a family composed of Liam, his wife, Marie, and their two children, teenager Sophia and pre-teen Max. Shortly after Marie falls ill and dies, the situation in Bern radically worsens and the surviving family members decide to flee in the hopes of reuniting with their relatives in the mountains, taking an abandoned baby with them. Liam gets injured and, while they find momentary respite at an abandoned hotel in a small mountain town, Sophia has to ensure the safety of her family while dealing with a local self-governed community. However, in the issues published since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (#7–9), the siblings embark on a search for their missing father and find themselves caught between factions in a civil war. The final issue published so far at the time of writing ends when refugees from all across Europe flee southward due to several nuclear incidents that occur north of Switzerland, and Max seems to have been kidnapped. The series thus episodically escalates the threats the characters face and cyclically returns to Sophia being separated from her family and companions. Such narrative elements attempt to create suspense and serially extend a narrative that seems to search for an ending—Muralt has remarked that "for how long I will stretch it, we'll have to see" (2021: [142])—while staying safely within the confines of mainstream post-apocalyptic fiction.

While the initial issues of *The Fall* outline the flu outbreak premediating the COVID-19 pandemic, the following story arcs imagine "what the world might look like *after* the virus has done its work" (Schweitzer 2018: 24; our emphasis) by (ab)using post-apocalyptic plots and tropes rather than maintaining the realistic aspects that characterize the initial publication. In this article, we focus on the first six issues of *The Fall* and examine how they premediated the COVID-19 pandemic through representations of urban disorder, as well as the characters' desire to leave the population-dense spaces of the city behind, hoping that survival in rural areas will be easier. Enriched by neo-western[2] aesthetics,

[2] We refer to the definition developed by the scholarship (see, among many, Borden and Essman 2000; Campbell 2008, 2013; Jacobs 2000) inspired by Gilles Deleuze (1989, 216–17), suggesting that the neo-western allows to "imagine, create and vary affects that are not already given" (Colebrook 2002, 103). Neo-westerns de/reterritorialize the traditional western genre, dislocating and relocating its narratives, challenging its tropes and established definition of a US

the deathscape created by Muralt resonates with instances of necropolitical measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, drawing on Christos Lynteris's thorough study of the role of photography in the context of the bubonic plague of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, we will look at how the comic book exploits the gaps between the popular visual imagination of pandemics as an ontology of what a pandemic "should be" and the representation of what a pandemic is (or "could be") in real life (2022: 20; 49). Furthermore, as its post-apocalyptic scenario—more or less consciously—connects to notions of states of exception and their representation, Muralt's pandemic reality feeds on popular representations of homelessness, as well as refugees and their condition, without truly exploiting the narrative potential of its premises.

Neo-western configuration of the pandemic outbreak setting

Besides representations of specific historical epi- and pandemics and the spread of infectious diseases in fantastic settings such as zombie narratives, comics have used realistic pandemic settings as narrative pivots depicting viral spread dynamics, containment measures, and their consequences on people's daily lives, including—or even focusing on—social unrest. Examples such as *Batman: Contagion* (Grant, Moench, Jones, and Giarrano 2016), originally published in 1996, couple their fantastic genres with realistic details regarding pandemic outbreaks. While Batman/Bruce Wayne often faces more-than-human villains despite his lack of superpowers, in this story arc, he is forced to deal with a pandemic caused by a modified Ebola virus. The narrative shows how the virus is initially spread by travelers flying to Gotham City from an unspecified African country, unaware of being carriers. While the administration downplays the contagion, the public riots demanding clarifications and paramilitary groups wreak havoc. Similarly, the limited series *Surgeon X* (Kenney and Watkiss 2016) is set in a near-future United Kingdom in thrall to contagion waves and on the brink of medical collapse. While antibiotic supplies are apparently scarce, and the healthcare system is inaccessible for most of the population, the seemingly never-ending pandemic has become a political battleground, the city is ravaged by constant riots, and social conflict is pervasive. The widespread disease is never described in detail—despite the death of "9 million [people] a year" (Kenney and Watkiss 2016: [3]), and public health intervention measures are not clearly shown: few people wear masks and the state fails to address collective interests, favoring corporate and political profiteering while exerting structural and direct violence on citizens.

American national identity. Leveraging the transnational (and European) quality brought by revisionist westerns (Campbell 2008, 113–150), the neo-western reprises the basic elements of the traditional western while reflecting critically on its representations and values (Jacobs 2000, 60).

Likewise, in *The Fall*, no supernatural monstrosity emerges as epidemiologic avatar. The first few panels place the narrative in a global context that evokes the present historical moment: heat waves lead to water shortages, raising the specter of food scarcity, and a seismic recession has thrown several countries into states of anarchy. These developments outline the unfolding of an unprecedented global crisis, while national administrations insist on investing substantial resources to militarize borders and "attempt to secure state sovereignty" (5). *The Fall* draws on the vast reservoir of visual representations centering on the horrors of disease that have become ingrained in the popular imagination, as well as the notion that outbreaks of infectious diseases are not only health risks but also entail the threat of inevitable social disorder. The unfolding of the pandemic constitutes the disruptive background to the protagonists' personal trauma, relying on the notion that contagion is not just an epidemiological event and the spread of infectious diseases historically reveals "the simultaneous fragility and tenacity of social bonds" (Wald 2008: 13).

However, the development of the pandemic in a clinical sense remains ambiguous. Indeed, the disease is merely described as a "summer flu" (e.g. 6; 16) and "bird flu" (27), highlighting the public confusion about what kind of illness is taking such a human toll. Whether they are an extraordinarily dangerous mutant strain of influenza or the result of a zoonotic spillover, these viruses "are seen as enemies that necessitate a form of vigilance" (Lynteris 2020: 7) that becomes manifest in the form of urban militarization. The sole source of information about the disease seems to be a radio program whose hosts debate and present bits of information on the evolution of the pandemic that are never accompanied by apodictic statements, leaving the listeners—and the comic's readers with them—suspended in a state of uncertainty regarding the situation.

The story opens when Liam drives home after having been laid off, accompanied by radio commentary presented in captions discussing the current political and epidemiological climate (5–7). Apparently, the "summer flu" is a new wave of viral contagion that the government has sought to contain by implementing a vaccination program, which "experts warn … is too soon to discontinue" (7). Indirectly, dialogues between characters establish the public's confusion, doubt, and frustration regarding the ineffective measures implemented by the government: despite being vaccinated, Liam's family caught the flu in the previous wave, and people are wondering whether the vaccine works at all (11), evoking the real-world confusion about infection rates among people who received COVID-19 vaccines.

In the early stages of the resurgence of the pandemic, the radio show includes an interview with an epidemiologist, who appraises the audience about the evolutionary mechanisms of virus strains and explains why the vaccination campaign has failed to

prevent a new wave of the same virus (12–13; **Figure 1**).[3] Albeit scattered and partial, this kind of information helps outline the context of the story and provides details that could not be easily conveyed by visual means. The intradiegetic radio show demonstrates how sound in comics can play "a role in developing the reader's understanding of the narrative … allow[ing] for the insertion of new information without requiring the disruption of the mise-en-page" (Hague 2014: 78). In this case, the radio host's and their guests' voices are represented by captions whose placement distributed over the panels reinforces the idea that their words are, to an extent, in the background, accompanying the protagonists' experience of the beginning of the end of life as they've known it. Through the radio, the notion of a radically altered everyday life undergirds the pandemic setting and resonates uncannily with COVID-19 media discourses.

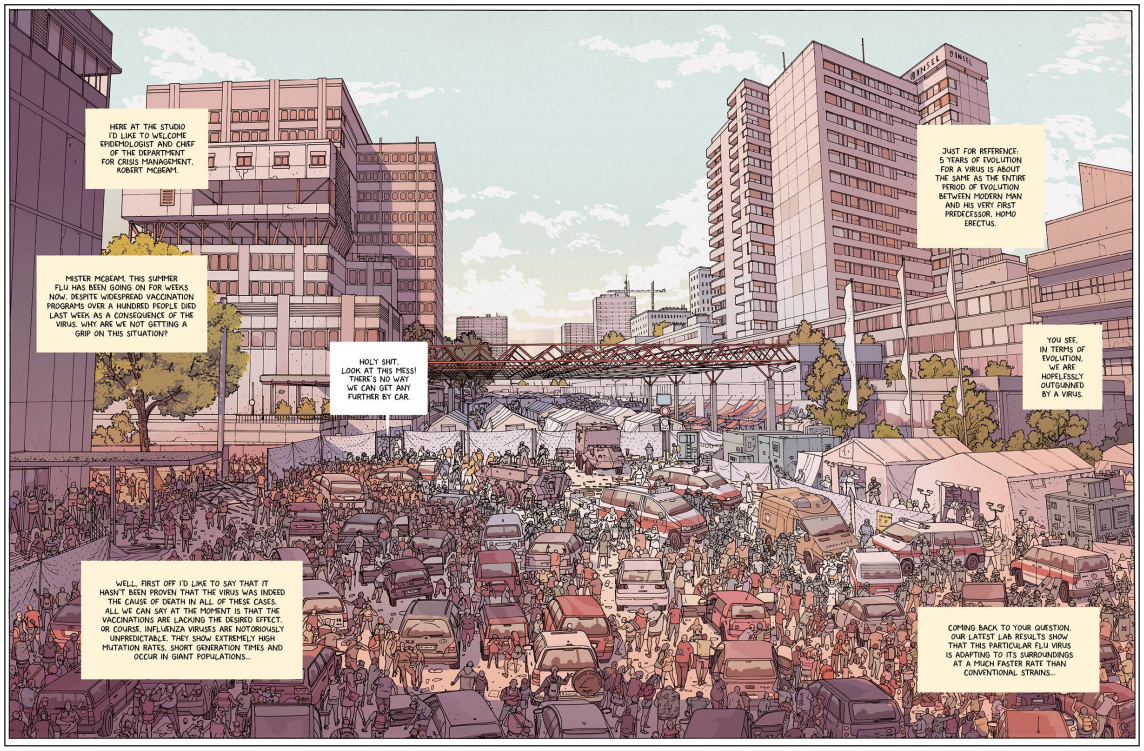

Figure 1: Liam and his children approach the hospital, accompanied by radio commentary that describes the unfolding of the pandemic. *The Fall* collected edition, 2021: 49 © 2021 Jared Muralt.

Muralt alternates a series of recurring panel structures throughout the issues, steadily reproducing the same, relatively simple page layouts that never quite challenge the left-to-right and down reading order despite the insertion of occasional three-panel

[3] We thank Jared Muralt for kindly granting us permission to use panels and pages from *The Fall* collected edition for this article.

interaction blockages. The narrative is linear and doesn't present any formal disruption. In most cases, the change of point of view is rendered using balloons that bridge between two panels, making patent the connection from one to the other, and then breaking it as the balloons return to be contained in a single panel (72; **Figure 2**).

Figure 2: The use of balloons to establish, for example, the containment of different conversations, *The Fall* collected edition, 2021: 72 © 2021 Jared Muralt.

Such a structure recalls Charles Hatfield's observations on the "tension between single-image and image-in-series" (2005: 41–46), as it plays with the contrast between the dialogues and the landscape evoking the antagonism between the two

parties involved—the military in charge of the boundaries of the city and the family escaping to the mountains. The full-width horizontal panel dividing the two speaks to the desolation of the new reality they all have to deal with, functioning as an establishing shot that locates the protagonists on their way out of the city. Furthermore, this panel paradoxically embodies both a symbolic division between them and the uncertainty that they all share, no matter the side they are forced to be on by pandemic circumstances.

In the last arc of the collected volume, the author starts to use overlapping or inset panels to convey the change in point of view, in particular emphasizing the conflict between the two opposing perspectives (129; **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Example of inset panel to convey opposite POVs, The Fall collected edition, 2021: 129

Visually, the disease, its direct consequences, and the epidemic containment paraphernalia are never represented overtly. Instead, *The Fall* relies on the depiction of semi-deserted urban and rural spaces, where abandon and neglect dominate, and where the disease is hidden in its absence, recalling the visual representation of real-world pandemics. Examining the coverage of the surge of the SARS pandemic in 2003, David Serlin notes that "the absence of actual humans suffering from SARS revealed … the presence of other forces at work" and disclosed "how deeply intertwined the containment of infectious disease was with the inner logic of contemporary global culture" (2010: xvii). The circulation of images centering on empty spaces and symbols of disruption has characterized the "branding" of twenty-first-century viral outbreaks, shifting the focus from the disease itself and its victims to the globally shared consequences for those who are not directly affected, to an extent downplaying the threat of the pandemic.

Furthermore, rather than reproducing post-apocalyptic visuals, Muralt's composition often resonates with western representations of human bodies confronted with an overwhelming landscape. This aspect is, perhaps, the most original element of Muralt's aesthetics in relation to a post-apocalyptic pandemic narrative, which suggests a technologic regression and coping with a "wilder" condition. Similarly, the city becomes an inanimate landscape as the buildings lose their connection to any urban texture or social function and stand like geological formations, unaffected observers of the chaos that its human inhabitants are struggling with. A neo-western mode pervades both the rural setting and, albeit more subtly, the urban narrative, marking the movement of the main characters through space. In western narratives, the frontier landscape facilitates "the opportunity for renewal, for self-transformation, for release from constraints associated with an urbanized East" (Mitchell 1996: 5). Such transformational function "can be easily projected beyond North America" (Fine et al. 2020: 5), reterritorializing and relocating the signifiers constitutive of the genre to different historical periods.

As Matthew Carter underlines when speaking of the legacy of frontier painting in western aesthetics, "Movement and landscape [were] aspects that would soon transmute into the visual signifiers of the cinematic Western" (2014: 50). In the case of *The Fall*, the succession of panels depicting movement through the landscape from different perspectives (e.g. 115; **Figure 4**) visualizes the scope of temporal unfolding—whereas dialogues usually mark relatively short exchanges. Long and extreme long shots in which the characters appear overwhelmed by the landscape are used to intensify the sense of impotence and isolation, consequences of the pandemic outbreak that gave way to institutional and social abandonment.

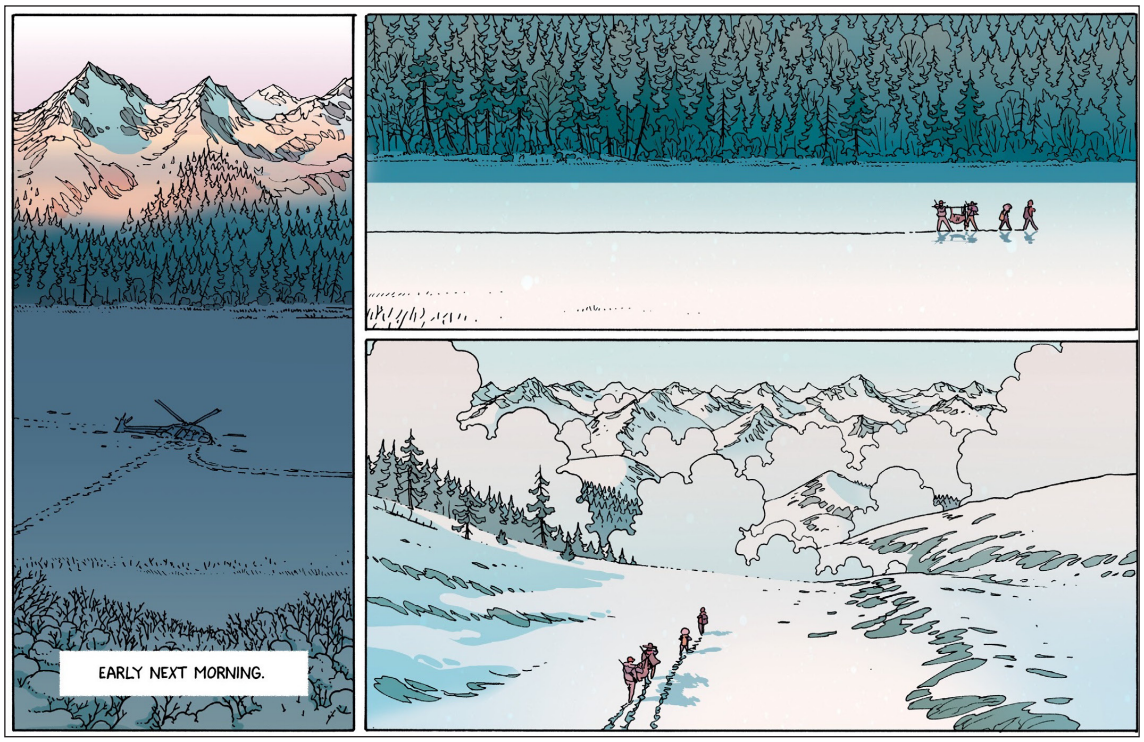

Figure 4: Example of the use of movement in the landscape as a marker of the passing of time, *The Fall collected* edition, 2021: 115 © 2021 Jared Muralt.

Sophia's seemingly organic association with wilderness evokes European revisionist western comics such as the well-known series *Blueberry* (1963–2007) or *Ken Parker* (1977–1984), whose protagonist is originally a trapper roaming the US heartland that was once the frontier—thus, in a way, echoing the comics' numerous references to both classic and revisionist western films. Just like Ken Parker (Marini 2021: 124–126), Sophia becomes the conflicted-yet-upright voice who poses moral questions to the characters she interacts with, countering their lack of civic sense and empathy that emerges from their actions and assertions. The contrast between the sequences in the mountains—in which Sophia tries to forage some food in the snowy landscape (e.g. 106–107, 115)—and the return to the town, where a warm orange and violet palette recreates a communal setting at night (117), is evocative of similar aesthetic and semiotic configurations of the contrast between exterior/solitary wilderness and interior/social conflict used in European western comics in particular.[4] Such a paradigm reiterates

[4] See, for example, Yves Swolfs's *Les chien meurent en hiver*, in which Durango goes from treading in a snowy winter setting to warm, crowded interiors where relatively hostile are sitting around a fire and conflict ensues (7–8). While Muralt layers as well violet hues that characterize his depictions of interiors and evening scenes, the construction of contrast resonates particularly with Swolf's pages.

a common revisionist western theme: the land and its climate are harsh and taxing, and yet the real dangers for the anti/hero lie in the frontier society and its conventions dictated by the inherent state of exception that life at the margins entails.

Once she embraces a rifle that she admittedly cannot even use (112; **Figure 5**) and dons a poncho and a cowboy hat that she found at her lost grandparents' chalet, Sophia also begins to blend in with the locals through her teamship with Paul and to partake in their wilderness-related epistemologies. The neo-western references shape the development of her character: as soon as she takes on the role of head of the family after her father is injured, she engages in activities that Muralt—drawing on the western tradition—codes as masculine. Albeit unconventional to some extent, Sophia becomes a neo-western protagonist in a pandemic Alpine scenario, demonstrating to be on par with the all-male cast of mountain leaders.

Figure 5: Sophia's transition as she turns into a neo-western protagonist, although she admits that she cannot use the rifle she now owns. *The Fall* collected edition, 2021: 112 © 2021 Jared Muralt.

Pandemic states of exception

The Fall engages with two different configurations of a state of exception, or the suspension of legality that becomes paradoxically institutionalized and for which a sovereign entity is, by definition, above the law (see Agamben 1995). A multifaceted political crisis such as a pandemic outbreak may trigger a state of emergency that configures a form of legality that is, in fact, a suspension of what the legal form would normally be (Agamben 2003). Reflecting on the initial weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, Arjun Appadurai echoed Giorgio Agamben when noting that "the exception is not the occasion for the seizing of special powers by the sovereign, but the concession … that

all national sovereigns are weak" (2020: 221). This scenario unfolds in *The Fall*, as the comic book depicts the quick transformation of the nation into a territory where safety and authority are contested and reshaped, and sovereignty is translated into the abandonment of citizens to their own means. Depending on the context, different groups, as Mervi Miettinen says about the archetype of the vigilante hero, "enforce the power of law—and paradoxically, [undermine] the very principles of democracy behind the law" (2011: 279). The neo-western visuals reinforce the construction of a state of emergency that echoes the legitimization of lawlessness that characterizes western and frontier narratives, in which sovereign violence is often rooted in the marginalization and institutional abandonment of frontier subjects (see, among many, Wing 2015). Left to their own devices in a now-liminal land dominated by a pervasive sense of uncontrolled disorder, citizens arrogate to themselves the right to break the law to guarantee their own survival and under the pretext to uphold legal order.

In the city, the disintegration of the state develops while—or despite the fact that—the military still enforces "order": besides extrajudicial practices fostered by the military, it is the lack of institutional intervention that shapes the urban dwellers' experience of the pandemic. In such a state of exception, justified by the medical crisis, the city becomes a space where human rights are infringed upon by, and with the acquiescence of, the authorities, and the suspension of access to—and even existence of—basic services expedites societal collapse. In fact, the progressively anomic anarchy reigning in the pandemic reality of *The Fall* embodies the notion that "Un potere non cade quando non è più o non è più integralmente obbedito, ma quando cessa di dare ordini" [A power does not fall when it is no longer, or no longer integrally obeyed, but rather when it ceases giving orders] (Agamben 2017: 96). Despite the presence of the military in the city, the lack of a state power that implements and enforces norms leads to rampant vigilantism and rioting, general uncertainty, and a widespread sense of aimlessness beyond mere survival.

There is no sign of operations of actual epidemic control, disinfection, and/or viral containment. The visual ontology of the pandemic is conveyed through images that resonate with popular imaginations of societal collapse: public service fails, anomic behaviors become the norm, and groups of vigilantes and looters roam the streets freely, putting "honest" citizens in further danger. As the radio host mentions measures to contain the spread of the disease, including the prohibition of public gatherings (18), a curfew (41), and the establishment of quarantine zones (33; 36), they seem to be confined to the floating captions that contain them, like vacuous political phrases penned by spin doctors. The radio commentary accompanies visual representations that tell a markedly different story: masks are rarely seen, people gather and riot in

public spaces, and quarantine zones are either secured by the military or left unattended. Armed forces exert extrajudicial violence, for example shooting at and killing unarmed civilians in the streets to disperse them and to stop them from looting.

Despite the exaggerated violence, *The Fall* resonates with the first lockdown's consequences that people who were not employed in essential jobs faced globally. As every commercial activity is shut down, public transport is suspended and schools are closed while "the curriculum is continued online" (21), the internet repeatedly lags (33), phone lines are dead (57), heating stops working (53), power shortages occur (58), supermarkets are looted (36–38). Shocked by the unexpected dangers now posed by the once-familiar urban environment, Liam and his children decide to leave behind their home in an attempt to reach their relatives' mountain hut. The presence of military outposts, quarantine zones, and armed roadblocks at the margins of the city-as-they-knew-it define the external space as "distinct from the city, but it becomes so primarily through a sovereign act dividing the urban from the nonurban" (Diken and Laustsen 2002: 291). The mountains thus represent "a topographical contrast" and "a contrast in use" (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2015: 15), perceived by city dwellers as an idealized refuge where resources are plentiful and the environment safer.

However, the collapse of order is pervasive: there is no "outside" anymore, but rather a "zone of indistinction" (see Diken and Laustsen 2002) where the state of emergency unleashed by the pandemic has led to a ubiquitous suspension of law and willful abandonment by the government. Both inside and outside the city, citizens have become Hobbesian subjects without an apparent sovereign and have thus resorted to establishing new spatially circumscribed sovereign entities—that are "unconstrained by limits and accountable to nothing other than [themselves]" (Yar 2015: 36)—by creating zones of precarious safety. In the mountains, the protagonists face a state of exception in which norms are reestablished by self-appointed prominent members of a makeshift community who—thanks to specific resources they can provide, such as medical knowledge and hunting skills—assume a superordinate position and rule over a diverse cast of characters. Yet within this sovereign community, assuming power is driven by opportunity rather than civic sense, and these makeshift rulers use the threat of violence to exert control over the most vulnerable members—ill and older people, children, outsiders, and refugees.

Muralt's seeming preoccupation with place emerges from the western-infused placement of the main characters in the landscape, whether urban or rural; nonetheless, the pervasive references to the genre betray the function of each location. While the relationship between the city and the mountain town cannot be defined "colonial," the spatial and socioeconomic conflicts between the two emerge with force in the comic.

Drawing on Armando José Prats's notion that (traditional) western narratives are marked by the cultural power intrinsic to the act of making "the Other absent in the very act that purports to present him" (2002: 24), these characters function as synecdoches of the mountain community they purport to represent. Their characterization is mostly limited to their hostility toward city dwellers and xenophobia, which becomes patent when they refer to foreign refugees and is evidenced by Sophia's derogatory judgment: "I can't believe the kinda backwater hicktown we ended up in … damn hillbillies!" (117).

The community's resentful attitude echoes discourses that have been characterizing the debates on tourism development and sustainability for decades and anticipated issues that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated (Gallent 2020; Nikolaeva and Rusanov 2020). Despite mobility restrictions and especially during the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, rural areas and vacation homes represented a privileged escape for some city dwellers, as their function "expanded from recreational and tourism purposes to 'shelter from pandemics' and 'place for privileged teleworking'" (Zoğal et al. 2022: 126–127). However, this migration sparked "fears of urban dwellers spreading the virus to rural areas and exceeding the limits of the local health care capacity" (Pitkänen et al. 2020: 21) in rural communities. Even though second homes could provide safer spaces where social distancing was easier to implement and movement was less restricted than in urban centers (Bieger et al. 2021: 379), smaller communities struggled to cater to the needs and desires of both their members and second-home owners. In addition, they were confronted with the risk of virus importation "from the outside" and the potential inability to provide basic services in a pandemic crisis due to their institutional and infrastructural inadequacy. The inhabitants of *The Fall*'s fictional mountain town seem indeed to feel abandoned by the establishment and "invaded" by entitled city dwellers who have fled to their chalets—in an attempt to "tak[e] refuge away from populous places and the hardships of urban living" (Czarnecki et al. 2023: 150).

By resisting the invasion, the community invokes its independence from both the institutions and the tourism industry that they are—at least in "normal" times—economically dependent on. As Margaret Canovan has evidenced, popular sovereignty gives shape to boundaries that define both its territoriality and its members. The group that self-identifies as "our people" considers itself legitimately sovereign and "is distinguished from, and counterposed to, the power elite, from whom power is to be retrieved. But its sovereign independence of external powers also gives its territorial definition … while its essential unity narrows down its identity, making it equivalent to the nation" (Canovan 2002: 34). In *The Fall*, the mountain "people" are united by contingency and a shared sense of hostility toward urbanites, fueled by both resentment against outsiders and fear of the infection. The consequences are twofold: outsiders occupy the

lowest tier in the community's hierarchy and their vacation homes are looted, while other makeshift communities in the mountains are, in turn, identified as sovereign—and, thus, their sovereignty has to be breached in order to rob them of their resources.

The topic of sovereignty is reinforced by the reiterated idea that self-government is necessary for survival, implying the creation of community systems that exclude outsiders, protect their territory, and secure their resources. Confronted with dwindling numbers of game animals in the region, the mountain town leaders set out to find food, pillaging another nearby community. When Sophia grasps their intentions, she objects, but her companions stress that they are "procuring food for [their] people" (129). Similar to Liam, who let his neighbor starve to death before leaving the city (56), the rural community presumes to have the right to leave outsiders to their fates, hardening the lines between "us" and "them," which Dahlia Schweitzer considers one of the key characteristics of outbreak narratives (2018: 40). None of the mountain characters truly redeems their alleged backward nature, not even Paul, who becomes Sophia's temporary companion in the wilderness. He is depicted as gross, prone to harass her (e.g. 126), and the local embodiment of anomic behaviors. Motor sleds become their trusted means of transport to reach other sovereign communities across the seemingly infinite landscape, as contemporary western horses that also facilitate bonding and camaraderie among the members of the leading group.

Refugee imaginaries and pandemic deathscapes

The Fall avoids the representation of the spread itself in a medical sense and, rather, adopts the perspective of how the individual—or small social nucleus—experiences the pandemic. When the frame shifts from the overwhelming landscape to focus on interaction and dialogue between characters, the composition draws on common visual representations of refugees and homelessness. However, the connection to trauma and displacement becomes generic and uninvested, remindful of the numerous, nondescript images that news outlets reproduce when reporting on any "migrant crisis"; as Dominic Davies underlines, "[T]here are too many images of unnamed refugees, too many photographs of people contained within the frame and subject to the camera's gaze, yet deprived of access to accompanying explanatory or self-identifying text" (2023: 258). The (ab)use of refugee-related visual tropes marks a lack of insight into the fictional community and the interpersonal bonds that the comic book seems to suggest as a natural development in a post-pandemic world. Such dynamics are reduced to the deployment of trite mainstream post-apocalyptic tropes that point at new ways to survive when conventional social structures disintegrate, without truly imagining a revolution of the preexisting configurations.

The aforementioned double-page spread showing the chaos outside the hospital (12–13; **Figure 1**) represents the first instance in which the comic at the same time premediates the COVID-19 pandemic and inserts cues—both meta-representational and direct—related to migration and refugees. The sequence begins on the previous page, as Liam and his children rush to the hospital after having been informed that Marie is ill and has been quarantined. As they approach the structure, radio reports about "millions of refugees all across Europe" and the "dramatic increase in the number of refugees at the border camps" (11) influence the readers' understanding of the visuals. Although the images display the hospital's surroundings, this scene could just as well happen at a national border: the disorderly lines of cars and people pointed toward a barrier with a roadblock monitored by the military create a sense of suspension, as if people were unable to proceed or return (because, one would surmise, they are sick or want to get closer to their loved ones), and thus aimlessly move at the margins of the camp.

As Hatfield highlights when speaking of the interplay between word and image in comics, "words can be visually inflected, reading as pictures, while pictures can become as abstract and symbolic as words" (2005: 36). Making an implicit reference to the text in the previous page, in the spread verbal and visual elements are inextricably connected. While facilitating the conflation of the unfolding pandemic and the upsurge in refugees verbally, the captions hold visual relevance as a commentary superposed—both metaphorically and materially—to the image, which in turn depicts a dynamic scene that embodies the refugee condition. Furthermore, this double-page spread evokes widespread images of camps that premediate makeshift healthcare facilities in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Davies, it represents a "page of exception" that is purposely "cut partially away from, and yet still contained within, the rest of the graphic narrative" (2021: 13). The representation of this improvised camp embodies the societal collapse and suspension of legality that characterizes Muralt's fictional pandemic.

When they join the mountain community, the protagonists camp inside an abandoned building, as the other members of the group seem to be doing. Order is enforced by a group of men who, for one reason or another, held some type of authority before the pandemic; among them the veterinarian of the town, who keeps treatments under lock and improvises himself as "doctor," abusing the power his professional knowledge gives him. Echoing the archetype of either collectively chosen or self-appointed enforcers in western narratives, violence is condoned in order to police the boundaries of the makeshift community. Basic services are down and people are forced to fetch water from the nearby river, where women are seen washing clothes *en masse* (93; **Figure 6**), and to make do without angering these extemporaneous disciplinarians.

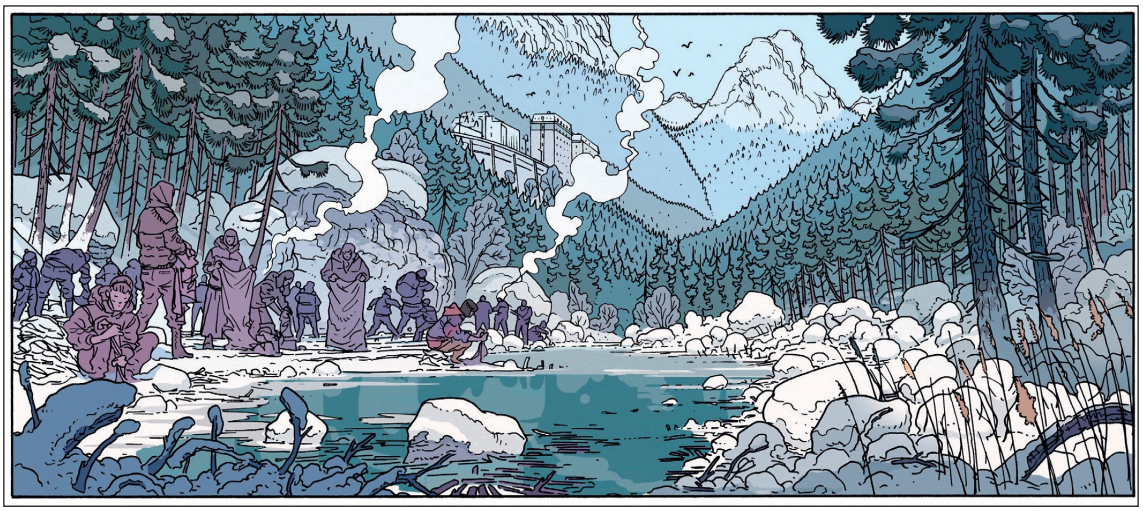

Figure 6: Migrant women and Sophia washing at the river, *The Fall* collected edition, 2021: 93 © 2021 Jared Muralt.

The presence of "actual" refugees—such as the Syrian doctor who helps Sophia by taking care of her father (e.g. 94)—contribute to the diversity in the cast of secondary characters, even though the suggested parallel between their harrowing experience before the pandemic remains unarticulated. A sense of stasis characterizes these figures that seem to be suspended in both the uncertain pandemic aftermath and their undocumented status. With the exception of a child that Sophia and Paul rescue from a helicopter crash in the mountains, the refugees are stuck in the community where they are considered as infrahumans and largely ignored besides occasional denigratory remarks. In the precarious situation shaped by the pandemic, everyone is stranded and displaced, geographically and/or metaphorically; however, only Sophia has real agency and thus can be the neo-western, post-apocalyptic heroine. No other female character stands out and the refugee women end up being little more than props, rather than lending depth to Muralt's narrative.

By adopting a naturalistic style that often provides reportage comics with a claim to "truth" in their depiction of historical events (see, among many, Schmid 2021), Muralt focuses on groups of people and community-set sequences infusing them with a documentary sense that bears a detached, rather than invested, visual witness. The superficial deployment of the refugee theme and images that reprise common stereotypes of migrants fails at characterizing the comic "as somehow a more affecting and effecting visual form than the photograph" (Davies 2023: 261). The visual semantic connection between the presence of foreign refugees, the protagonists' condition of forced displacement, and a generic sense of squalor, dirt, and regression doesn't quite help, either. Even the woman taking care of her father remains fairly nondescript and

bereft of any real agency, seemingly in thrall to the mercy of the townspeople who allow her and the other migrants to stay while they contribute to the community.

By his own admission, Muralt also makes a direct reference to a story that he saw in the news about "how refugees try to cross the alps [sic] in sneakers made from cloth, then being rescued in the most dire situations by French citizens, which in turn are being dragged to court" (2021: [142]). In reality, the news referred to a Guinean teenager—part of a group of refugees crossing the Alps from Italy to France—who, unprepared for the winter weather, "had to walk the snow with plastic bags on his sneakers" (Dambach 2018: n.p.). Muralt's reductionism comes through his words on the characterization of the sequence, in which the reference is conveyed by Sophia's incongruous exclamation—"You wanted to cross the Alps alone and in sneakers?!"—in front of a helicopter crash in which five people died and two are at risk of freezing (112).

In the city, a few sequences deploy the same type of visual construction to represent homelessness and squatting as signs of societal collapse, blurring the comic book's notion of "refugee" and "homeless" statuses. Furthermore, whenever homeless people and squatters appear, the setting cues pandemic death in the form of corpses. The disease becomes a catalyst to unleash a reversal of progress and the effective fall of civilization, transforming a familiar urban space into a "city of the dead: fire-scorched ruins, shattered buildings, empty workshops, heaps of meaningless refuse" (Mumford 1961: 53). Filth, waste, and death are thus associated with the mephitic stench that the characters mention repeatedly (e.g. 28; 48), a symbol of abandon and apparently deliberate negligence by the authorities. The policies formally introduced when the outbreak worsened have no concrete repercussions and reveal their necropolitical nature. Indeed, the policies that the fictional government has apparently implemented produce what Achille Mbembe calls a kind of "social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (2003: 40; emphasis in original).

While the characters are uncertain where the stench emanates from, to the eyes of the reader its origin is quite evident: the neglected urban space is filled with increasing amounts of garbage and wreckage. Furthermore, corpses lie in the streets and inside buildings (e.g. 30) or are amassed and carried away in trucks (49, **Figure 7**).

Abandoned or piled-up corpses are always shown as Liam is looking at them, so that the reader looks at the character observing the horrifying consequences of the necropolitical handling of the spread. As Hilary Chute comments examining the function of the representation of piles of corpses in Francisco Goya's plate "Para eso habeis nacido" (1810–1815), this type of image makes us witnesses and "aware of ourselves as viewers, looking and looking at others looking upon horror" (2016: 60). The graphic

rendition of the amassed corpses and the urban encampments blurs once more the lines between the notion of necropolitical collapse, displacement, and homelessness.

Figure 7: Liam looks on as a military truck carries piles of corpses away, *The* Fall collected edition, 2021: 49 © 2021 Jared Muralt.

As the comic book often shifts between the detached observation of the events that unfold through visual references and the protagonists' personal perspective, most of the premediating elements emerge through the latter. For Liam and his children, the pandemic's reality truly becomes tangible when their wife and mother doesn't return home from her shift as a health professional in the local hospital's ICU. Her death represents an individual fate and its impact on people who are close to her to exemplify the larger emotional, social, and economic toll taken by the fictional pandemic. The panel in which her body is interred (20; **Figure 8**) functions as an uncanny premediation of the mass burials that briefly became one of the measures many governments resorted to when trying to cope with the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. To respond to the sudden spike in seasonal deaths, governments around the world exploited already existing mass grave areas—for example Hart Island in New York City, where inmates were employed to inter COVID-19 casualties (Raudon 2022)—and created spaces where bodies could be buried quickly and with the fewest resources possible.

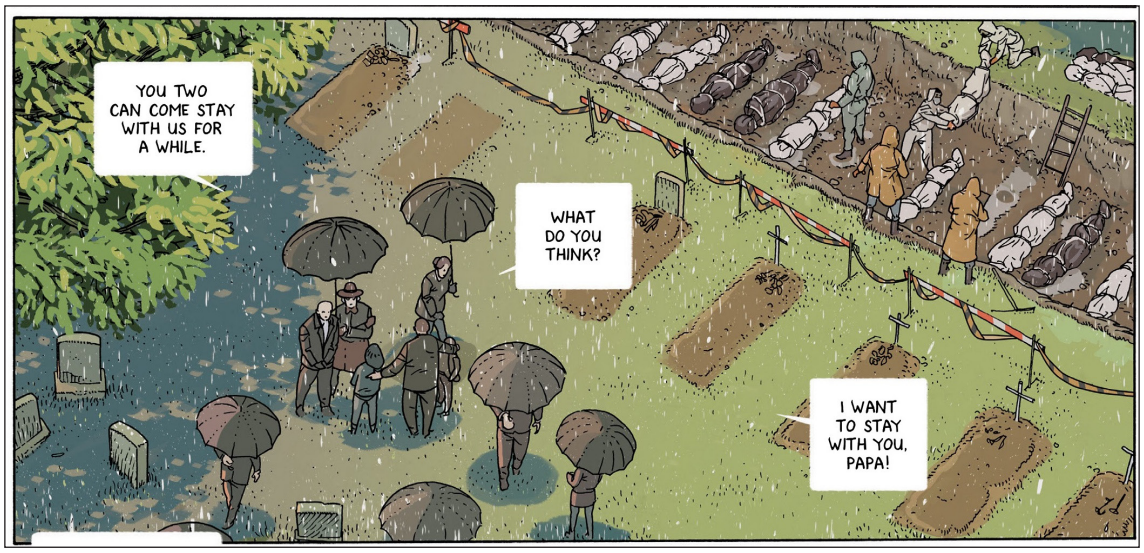

Figure 8: Marie's death is visually put into the context of the flu pandemic's death toll, *The Fall* collected edition, 2021: 20 © 2021 Jared Muralt.

This sequence introduces the reader to pandemic deathscapes in which death becomes visible and normalized. Whereas, at the beginning of the surge, Liam and his family can still provide funerary service and a memorial to their deceased relative, abandoned and amassed corpses increasingly pervade the cityscape as the story progresses. While the comic book takes the matter to the extreme, accelerating the societal collapse that leads to a total neglect of its ill and dead citizens, these images anticipated the shock provoked by the visibilization of death and the sudden transformation in funerary practices that took place during the first wave of COVID-19.

The shocking onset of the virus spread, Becky Alexis-Martin observes, "reconfigured our relationships with death" (2020: 11.3). The pandemic disrupted traditional funeral practices as death, memorialization, and mourning were transported into the digital domain, allowing the bereaved to cope while commemorating individual deaths and the pandemic at large. Interestingly, although *The Fall* maintains traditional funeral practices through Marie's burial, additional practices of memorialization remain sparse. The children mention their mother a few times after her death, and Max wonders at one point, "Why aren't there any photo albums of us?" When his father responds, "You've got your smartphones and your clouds!" (35), the comic acknowledges how digital media and platforms have replaced analog forms of memorialization, but it simultaneously highlights the ephemerality of digital memories. Indeed, the gradual failure of digital means of communication and storage impedes the establishment of new ways of ritualizing death and sharing memorialization in the storyworld. The catastrophe unleashed by the pandemic thus becomes intricately interconnected with "technology and its … collapse," which confronts people with death (Doane 1990: 229).

Conclusions

Despite its dystopian turn, *The Fall*'s depiction of quarantine, disruption of services, and medical crisis—as well as the uncertainty, fear, and confusion many lived globally at the onset of the first lockdown wave—resonates with the reality that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly imposed. Returning to Grusin's reflections on premediation, the type of futuristic post-pandemic narrative that *The Fall* builds around a fictional outbreak "seeks to prevent the future by premediating it—to make sure, in some sense, that the future never happens" (2004: 36). The comic book premediates the future by remediating the past of popular (re-)imaginings of post-apocalyptic worlds and pandemics, in fiction and other media. The story, however, becomes ensnared by its own attachment to the popular representations it deploys.

The neo-western echoes throughout the comic book, evidence how "The more-than-human world is reduced to threat to be dominated and transformed into resource," revealing "the mythologising genre elements that connect to global and not only national histories of domination" (Hanley 2020: 157). The relocation of the genre devices to the Alpine environment and in the present day successfully references the European western comics tradition, and helps the development of Sophia as a young protagonist in search of her role within a post-pandemic world. The integration of western aesthetics and transformational patterns differentiates *The Fall* from the mainstream post-apocalyptic narratives it also draws on; however, the comic never truly exploits the potential of such an inspired framing.

The suggested connections to documentary comics and themes of displacement, homelessness, and loss of security are not quite explored and vulnerability is hinted at, rather than adequately described and articulated. The conflictual relationships and debates that surge at every occurrence within the makeshift mountain community demonstrate that it is, indeed, a diverse group formed because of contingency rather than a spontaneous social network developed out of affinity, empathy, and communication. Political leadership and institutional structures are rendered useless by the state of emergency. The pervasiveness of states of exception, albeit configured in urban abandonment and the self-identified rural sovereignty, is depicted effectively—and the neo-western features definitely help the construction of landscapes that become indeed transformative and facilitate the progression of the story.

Editorial Note

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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