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THINK PIECES

After the next

Notes on serial novelty

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Abstract

The mass media fascination with mass death and mass disease has a long history. But what makes a disease communicable in our culture of media? In this think piece, I argue that the mass media has found in the idea of the next pandemic an ideal opportunity to corroborate its own discursive problematic.

Keywords

seriality, novelty, mass media, capitalism, crisis, catastrophe

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> [E]ach catastrophe is somehow new despite its repetitiveness.
> Mary Ann Doane, *Information, Crisis, Catastrophe*

1.

Let me start this piece with a series of headlines:

'Is Bird Flu the Next Pandemic?' – *National Geographic*, December 2004

'What Will the Next Influenza Pandemic Look Like?' – *Scientific American*, September 2011

'How One Scientist Is Preventing the Next Pandemic' – *Time*, October 2011

'Where Will the Next Pandemic Come From?' – *Wall Street Journal*, October 2011

'Anticipating the Next Pandemic' – *New York Times*, September 2012

'Is This the Next Pandemic?' – *Guardian*, March 2013

'Stopping the Next Pandemic Today'– *Washington Post*, June 2015

'The Next Pandemic Could Be Dripping on Your Head' – National Public Radio, February 2017

'How to Prepare for the Next Pandemic' – *New Scientist*, February 2017

'The World Is Not Ready for the Next Pandemic' – *Time*, May 2017

'Where Will the Next Pandemic Come from?' – *Wall Street Journal*, June 2017

'The Next Pandemic May Come from Bats' – *Salon*, June 2017

'Is It Possible to Predict the Next Pandemic?' – *The Atlantic*, October 2017

With Mary Anne Doane (2006, 264) we might say that each headline is 'somehow new despite its repetitiveness'. But what exactly makes a headline somehow new?

2.

The mass media fascination with mass death and mass disease has a long history, to be sure, but there is something more specific that needs to be said about the way that viruses are going viral today (Warner 2002). What makes a disease communicable in our culture of media? To address this question, we need to take into account what Doane (2006, 253) has said about mass media more generally: such media incessantly take 'as [their] own subject matter the documentation and revalidation of [their] own discursive problematic'. In this think piece, I argue that the mass media has found in the idea of the next pandemic an ideal opportunity to corroborate its own discursive problematic.

What is the mass media's discursive problematic? Focusing on the nineteenth-century detective novel, Franco Moretti (1983, 141) identified a norm, one that is at the heart of mass media communication more generally: 'It must tell ever-new stories because it moves within the culture of the novel, which always demands new content; and at the same time it must reproduce a scheme which is always the same'. The permanent production of novelty is at the heart of mass media communication. In the global health concern with emerging infectious diseases, the mass media has found a powerful resource for such novelty. Indeed, the trope of the next pandemic has become an important location for the production of content that is 'new despite its repetitiveness' (Doane 2006, 264).

Today's mass media fascination with the next pandemic is partly due to the fact that it operates as corroboration of the mass media's own discursive problematic: the necessity of creating and maintaining a constant sense of newness. The function of mass media communication, according to Niklas Luhmann (2000, 22), is to simultaneously 'generate and process irritation'.[1] Invested in the production, circulation, and consumption of irritation, mass media communication stimulates 'the constantly renewed willingness to be prepared for surprises'. The trope of the next pandemic, in this sense, is a fertile ground for the mass media and its discursive problematic.

This piece examines the permanent production of novelty and the continuous communication of discontinuity as a paradoxical feature of mass media communication. The observation that mass media communication is fueling fears about a coming global health catastrophe raises a number of questions: What happens with pandemic influenza once it becomes an occasion for mass media to document and revalidate their own discursive problematic? What are the consequences for other infectious diseases such as Ebola and Zika?

Doane has shown why and how mass media are compelled by catastrophe in general, but in this essay, I examine one articulation of the catastrophic, tracing the shape pandemic influenza takes in our culture of media, as manifested in a series of articles published in prominent newspapers and magazines. Of anthropological interest is not the content, which

[1] As Wolfgang Ernst (2002, 628) points out, 'According to Luhmann, information only happens in the unexpected – namely, as the opposite of the redundant or predictable. In this way, the unexpected corresponds with the disturbance that is television proper; the paradoxical structure of the medium demands extraordinary events that can only appear within the ever same schematics; live broadcast would then be the condition of possibility of disrupting an otherwise imperturbably streaming flow'.

has a purely quantitative function (it literally 'fills' the page), but the form of the discourse.[2] The perspective presented in this essay reveals four formal characteristics. Today's mass media discourse about the next pandemic uses objective proclamations; it promotes its own consumption; it prevents the formation of a historical consciousness; it is incapable of closure.

3.

In July 2005, Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, published an article in *Foreign Affairs*, an influential US magazine, with the following title: 'Preparing for the Next Pandemic'. It stated: 'Influenza pandemics have posed the greatest threat of a worldwide calamity caused by infectious disease' (Osterholm 2005, 32). Drawing attention to the spread of avian flu in Asia, Osterholm suggested that a pandemic was imminent: 'The reality of a coming pandemic . . . cannot be avoided', he wrote; 'Only its impact can be lessened' (32). A global pandemic 'would trigger a reaction that would change the world overnight', he warned (32). The consequences would be catastrophic:

> Foreign trade and travel would be reduced or even ended in an attempt to stop the virus from entering new countries—even though such efforts would probably fail given the infectiousness of influenza and the volume of illegal crossings that occur at most borders. It is likely that transportation would also be significantly curtailed domestically, as smaller communities sought to keep the disease contained. (Osterholm 2005, 35)

Fear, panic, and chaos would be the inevitable result. 'Military leaders would have to develop strategies to defend the country and also protect against domestic insurgency with armed forces that would likely be compromised by the disease' (35). Meanwhile, the global economy 'would shut down' (35). It was time to take the threat seriously and launch a public health campaign to prevent the worst: 'Even if an H5N1 pandemic is a year away, the world must plan for the same problems with the same fervor', he wrote, and continued:

[2] To some extent, the content is irrelevant. The people, places, and events mentioned in articles change, but the story remains the same. Each article about the next pandemic says the same thing. And yet, each article creates a sense of newness. That is why in this essay I am not interested in the content as such. I present some of the content, but only to show how it helps renew the form.

> Major campaigns must be initiated to prepare the nonmedical and medical sectors. Pandemic planning must be on the agenda of every school board, manufacturing plant, investment firm, mortuary, state legislature, and food distributor in the United States and beyond. There is an urgent need to reassess the vulnerability of the global economy to ensure that surges in demand can be met. Critical heath-care and consumer products and commodities must be stockpiled. Health professionals must learn how to better communicate risk and must be able to both provide the facts and acknowledge the unknowns to a frightened or panicked population. (Osterholm 2005, 36)

For Osterholm, living in the present means living in anticipation of a catastrophic event. His aim was to convince public health professionals to perceive the present as a momentary suspension before the next pandemic struck. How much time before it occurred? How much time was left to prepare? Attuned to the temporal imperatives of pandemic preparedness, Osterholm (2005, 36) warned: 'A pandemic is coming. . . . It could happen tonight, next year, or even ten years from now. . . . Time is running out to prepare for the next pandemic'.

As a professor at the University of Minnesota, a member of the prestigious Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Science, and a bestselling author, Osterholm is a prominent figure with access to the media. Over the past decade he has become one of the nation's most outspoken public health professionals advocating substantial investments in preparedness, a concern representative of a broader global health apparatus (Caduff 2015; Lakoff 2017). To address the catastrophic event that was looming on the horizon, Osterholm founded his own research and policy agency, the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP). The agency features an online news division tasked with the publication of daily news updates on the latest disease event. Similar to the immune system, the job of the news division is to operate as a search engine.[3] It monitors global media sources on a daily basis, searching websites, news wires, and online discussion forums for important information.[4] Each 'news scan' offers a daily epidemic intelligence update on the infectious disease front. At the heart of these updates are often speculations about the future.

[3] For the idea of the immune system as a search engine of difference, see Napier (2012, 2013). Napier argues for a view of the virus as information; see as well his earlier work (Napier 2003).

[4] For an account of 'epidemic intelligence', see Caduff (2014).

4.

'We live in times', writes Brian Massumi (2010, 52), 'when what is yet to occur not only climbs to the top of the news but periodically takes blaring precedence over what has actually happened' (see as well Massumi 2015). This focus on the future has taken a particular shape in the historical present: to prepare for what's to come is to prepare for what's next. Massumi's observation points to the emergence of a persistent demand that is characteristic of a modern sense of time: the demand to consider what's next. The promise, which ostensibly makes this demand optimistic, is that a consideration of the next will permit people to prepare for the future. Those who take the necessary time to make the necessary preparations are presumably more likely to survive the shock of surprise. This compulsion can take the form of optimization: 'the moral responsibility of citizens to secure their "best possible futures"' (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009, 256).

Many scholars have examined regimes of anticipation over the past decade, but here I am concerned with the role of repetition in attempts to anticipate future events. To understand the logic of anticipation, we need to investigate the idea of the next as that which both disavows and thus makes possible repetition.[5] Instead of focusing on content (what is next?), I draw attention to form, highlighting a structure (the structure of the next) and a pattern (the serial nature of the next). This shift of focus from content to form moves the scholarly discussion beyond an epistemological concern with the production of knowledge that tends to dominate in the literature (Anderson 2010; Aradau and van Munster 2011; Barker 2012; Briggs 2011; Briggs and Hallin 2016; Lakoff 2007, 2008; Samimian-Darash 2009, 2013). Using a series of numbers to present a series of insights, this essay imitates the form that is under examination.

What, then, is the next? The next figures in the now not simply as an index of the future. The next is imagined in a particular way: it's what's immediately following or succeeding; it's what's coming after in a series or sequence of potentially surprising events. But the next has not only a temporal meaning: what's next is nearby and close at hand. Thus, the next has a distinct spatial and temporal meaning that makes it different from the more general idea of the future (which may be far away). The next, by contrast, is next. It's near, it's close, it's next.

[5] To understand why something repetitive can nevertheless appear new each time, one needs to understand the role of the word 'next' in the trope of 'the next pandemic'. Hence the focus in this piece on the word 'next'. The next is a form without content (it can refer to anything). It is a propulsion, a drive, an orientation.

Let's move on to the next then.

5.

What will you do when the next strikes? You need to already know how to respond when it happens. In the United States, government officials suggest that simulations, exercises, and drills represent essential techniques that enable the now to prepare for the next. Continuing participation in preparedness activities allows individuals, communities, and companies to be near to what's near and close to what's close. Borrowing from the military, officials have promoted these activities as contributions to the development of embodied dispositions, making the response to the next a matter not of contemplation and reflection, but of instinct and habit (Caduff 2015; Lakoff 2008; Masco 2014). From the perspective of preparedness, the next is preparable but not preventable. According to experts, the catastrophic event is unavoidable; the question is not whether it will happen, but how to respond to it when it does happen.

At the core of an expanding series of simulations, exercises, and drills for imagined events is the cybernetic vision of a nation ready for the next, a nation permanently preparing for discontinuity, that is, living in preparedness. What Luhmann identifies as an essential function of mass media – to constantly renew the willingness to be prepared for surprises – is also at the heart of preparedness and its key message: expect the unexpected. Preparedness for catastrophic events is not just a response to the experience of catastrophic events; it is also a response to the experience of the world as endless series of news, an experience that the mass media created.

6.

Are you prepared for what's next?

7.

Off to the next.

8.

In March 2007, Osterholm, the public health professional who claims to be near to what's near and close to what's close, published an update in *Foreign Affairs*. 'The facts remain incontrovertible', he declared in his piece titled 'Unprepared for a Pandemic' (Osterholm 2007, 47). 'Like earthquakes, hurricanes, and tsunamis, influenza pandemics are recurring natural disasters' (47). And so there is no doubt that a pandemic will happen: 'No one can

predict when the next pandemic will occur or how severe it will be', he writes, 'But it will occur for sure, and because of the interdependence of the global economy today, its implications will reach far beyond its toll on human health' (48). To concretize the certainty of impending calamity, he offers evidence that cannot be ignored: scientists are discovering more and more genetic changes in the avian influenza virus. The microbe was mutating, infecting more and more animals and more and more humans, making it, in the expert's view, the 'likely strain of the next pandemic' (48).[6]

Yet preparedness for the next pandemic had not made sufficient progress in the United States, he claimed: 'The issue has generated only limited attention in both the public and the private sectors . . . because preparing for a pandemic is a daunting challenge to begin with and because disaster has not yet struck' (Osterholm 2007, 48). But the fact that the inevitable had yet to occur was no excuse for the lack of immediate action: 'The opportunity to save millions of lives cannot be passed up. Even if such efforts come too late to stave off the next pandemic, at least they would help in the one after that', wrote Osterholm (2007, 48).

9.

The next can strike anywhere, at any time.

10.

The next: closer than you think.

11.

In May 2013, Osterholm was back in the news with an update on the next. 'The Next Contagion: Closer Than You Think' was the title of his editorial in the opinion pages of the *New York Times*. Invoking an ongoing outbreak of avian influenza in China, the public health expert identified a new, 'and far more widespread, ailment that has gotten little attention: *contagion exhaustion*' (Osterholm 2013). The constant stream of updates, he argued, had led people to ignore recent developments and dismiss warnings about an impending calamity. In his piece, Osterholm addressed a key problem of mass media communication: how to make sure that the continuity of communications is not undermining the discontinuity of the content? Had the permanent reproduction of newness exhausted the novelty of the new?

[6] For a more detailed discussion of pandemic influenza concerns among experts, see Caduff (2015).

What happens when repetition of the message increasingly threatens the possibility of surprise? Had the constant focus on the next diminished its mobilizing power?

Officials at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were also worried about the fading interest in preparedness for the next pandemic. 'If the pandemic doesn't hit soon', an official told me, 'public interest is going to wane, congressional interest is going to wane, and we will lose the momentum because we will probably end up losing a lot of the funding, and we will lose the visibility, and we will lose the priority and status that we have'. The official went on, 'We tend to be complacent, we go back, we put our guards down. Unfortunately, I think this country has to go through a series of events in order to be at the level that it should be in order to respond and effectively recover'.

Struggling against the loss of interest in the next pandemic, Osterholm (2013) emphasized the stakes, arguing that the toll would be economic and not just human: 'Studies have shown that a severe global pandemic, caused by viruses like influenza . . . could bring the global economy . . . to its knees. When people are too sick or too afraid to work, borders are closed and global supply chains break, and trade falls. Over months, the economic costs could send the world into recession'. In today's world, a pandemic would bring the global economy to a halt. Avian influenza may seem far away in China, but tomorrow, he warned, it 'could be at America's doorstep'. What was happening now in China could be next in America.

12.

The next: Not a question of if, but when.

13.

'I waited for the next attack, and the next after that' (Brown and Brown 2004, 97).

14.

In the world of preparedness, each event appears as an episode, a variation of something that has already happened in the past and that will happen again in the future. However, with the exception of preparedness as constantly renewed willingness to prepare for the next (and the next after that), there is no overarching framework that would connect the series of events over time. The lack of a larger framework has profound consequences. Conventional narrative seriality defers the moment of closure. But this deferral of closure is precisely what enables people to expect an end. The lack of an overarching story that would connect the series of events is essential because it destroys the very possibility of entertaining the sense

of an ending.[7] In the world of preparedness, it has become impossible to even conceive of the possibility of an end. The next can always extend itself and move on to the next next.

15.

After the next, there is always the next after that.

16.

An orientation, which looks out toward the next, will always look out toward the next next (and the next after that). This potentially endless extension of the next remits it to the strange space/time of the after: the next comes after itself, both in relation to a past next and in relation to a future next. The next chases itself; it is after itself.[8]

17.

The next is next, no matter what.

18.

The next contains within itself a constant return to and renewal of itself.

19.

The constant release of updates makes people constantly and continuously expect a sequel. These sequels seem to follow one another in a series. What the idea of the next introduces into the political imaginary of our time is a sense of seriality.

20.

Serialization is a fundamental feature of modern mass production. When the mass media appropriated serialization in the nineteenth century, people learned to expect a sequel. Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* was a striking success, not least because the author

[7] What the lack of a larger narrative evokes is a sense of mythic time, a time in which an endless series of events seems to inexorably follow one another. On mythic time, see Buck-Morss (1991). See as well Gomel (2000).

[8] My thanks to Maria José de Abreu for her insight into the next that is always after.

managed to publish the novel in weekly installments. At the time of the first edition, the publication of the novel progressed in parallel to the development of the story. The suspension of the novel's publication was simultaneously a suspension of the narrative. While the suspension of the publication created expectations of continuity, the suspension of the narrative created expectations of closure. For the reader, the promise of continuity came with the promise of conclusion, of learning how the story ends.[9] Yet the end of the story could also potentially frustrate the reader's desire, a desire stimulated by constant delays and deferrals. What the mass culture of modern capitalism detected in techniques of strategic interruption – ideally at moments of great narrative tension – was the possibility of drawing readers into the temporal unfolding of the narrative itself (Wu 2016). Delays and deferrals contributed to the expansion of the market for novels by virtue of incomplete narratives, discontinued stories that called for continuation. Such stories attached readers to the next.

The fragmented nature of a publication released in regular installments reveals its material existence as a commodity, a commodity promoting its own consumption. The material fragmentation of the commodity extends the time of its consumption, and thus its commercial value (Hagedorn 1995). Moreover, each installment is also a new beginning. 'We shall keep perpetually going on beginning again, regularly', declared Dickens at the end of an installment of the *Pickwick Papers* (Dickens 1868, xiii) (see as well Hayward 2015). Each episode offered the opportunity of continuing and of starting again.

As a form of suspension, serialization is a manipulation of time. It is a mediation of experience, a transformation of human sense perception, which has profound implications for subjects of desire in economies of mass production. In such economies, desire takes the form of an expectation. The purpose of an episode is to 'promote continued consumption of later episodes of the same serial' (Allen 2002, 28). Serials are self-promoting; they create the conditions for their own consumption.

21.

In September 2014, Osterholm returned with a sequel. This time it was an epidemic of Ebola in West Africa. The disease offered an opportunity to continue and start again, with something that was new despite its repetitiveness: the next pandemic. In a *New York Times* article, Osterholm promised to reveal a dark secret: what public health professionals were afraid to say about Ebola. 'What is not getting said publicly, despite briefings and discussions

[9] Fiction is based on a fantasy, the fantasy of beginnings and endings. See Kermode (2000).

in the inner circles of the world's public health agencies', announced Osterholm, 'is that we are in totally uncharted waters and that Mother Nature is the only force in charge of the crisis at this time' (Osterholm 2014, 31). According to the public health expert, there was the possibility of a sequel to the Ebola story 'that should keep us up at night': the virus could change and become airborne; 'If certain mutations occurred, it would mean that just breathing would put one at risk of contracting Ebola' (Osterholm 2014, 31). For Osterholm, the threat of an Ebola virus transmitting rapidly through the air and not just through direct contact was real: 'until we consider it, the world will not be prepared to do what is necessary to end the epidemic' (Osterholm 2014, 31). Only the possibility of an airborne virus would force people to face the reality of the devastating epidemic and do something about it.

Experts in the United States dismissed Osterholm's speculation about an Ebola virus speeding through the air. 'We have observed that existing viral diseases like influenza, polio, hepatitis C and H.I.V. have not evolved to change their established route of transmission. So why does Dr. Osterholm see this as a possible path for Ebola?', two microbiologists wondered (Sifferlin 2014, 20). They continued: 'In our opinion, virologists are not "loath" to discuss this idea; it just seems highly improbable and, on top of that, an unproductive use of everyone's time' (Sifferlin 2014, 20). Osterholm's vision of the next was a distraction from the now. 'Raising the specter of new routes of virus transmission only distracts from the urgency of addressing what our nation and others must do to contain this Ebola outbreak' (Sifferlin 2014, 20).

The CDC released an information sheet, explaining why Ebola was unlikely to become airborne. Osterholm pointed out that he was not concerned with what was happening now but what might happen next: 'It hasn't happened yet', he said, 'but what would happen if we had respiratory transmission?' (Osterholm 2014, 31). The virus could mutate today and change into an airborne infection tomorrow. Invoking the vitality of the virus, its ability to change, Osterholm suggested that his account was inspired by the self-propelling force of the situation itself (Mayer 2013a).

It was important, he argued, to take the possibility seriously and 'do what we are not doing'. A massive international intervention was required: Osterholm proposed that the UN Security Council pass a resolution giving the United Nations 'total responsibility for controlling the outbreak, while respecting West African nations' sovereignty as much as possible' (Osterholm 2014, 31).

The Ebola virus did not mutate and become airborne. Whatever the scientific evidence for Osterholm's claims in the *New York Times*, he relied on the idea of mutation to produce another sequel and speculate one more time about the next pandemic.

22.

In the world of preparedness, the present appears as a palimpsest, a page where each instance of writing overwrites the writing before it. The logic of the palimpsest refers us to a logic of spatial superimposition. The palimpsest is a layered page containing a series of subsequent episodes, where each episode is placed on top of another. All episodes are assembled on the same page, which has been overwritten and which will be overwritten, again and again, just like an online newspaper website, where each day the same page will contain new content.

In the palimpsest, the now is ready to receive the next. This perception of the present as palimpsest is how the now has learned to make room for the next. Here, the subsequent is never really an extension; it is always a superimposition.

The palimpsest prevents the formation of a historical consciousness because it entails a process of systematic erasure.[10] What this erasure engenders is a fantasy of the blank slate, a fantasy that is fundamental for any serial narration. Ruth Mayer (2016, under 'Serial Production'), in her brilliant exploration of serial narration, observes how in this type of narration 'individual parts seem to follow the logic of the blank slate – every time we encounter the same cast or characters plus numerous others in the exact same basic situation that then branches out in a seemingly endless array of options'. The process of systematic erasure, which constitutes the palimpsest, makes it possible for individual episodes to follow a logic of return and renewal: each episode presents the same basic situation with the same basic enigma that unfolds in seemingly endless ways, before it returns to the starting point from where it will take off again. Seriality is compelling 'because it promises a perpetual renewal of the same moment', notes Mayer (2016). 'Serial figures are back again with every new installment, and they experience with great reliability the same situations and conflicts as in the first place' (Mayer 2013a, 211). The recursive process of systematic erasure, of systematic self-aggression and self-destruction, enables perpetual renewal. Episodic forms of seriality lack an overarching narrative connecting each episode. The result is not a sense of narrative progress but of 'episodic stagnation' (Wu 2016, 7). At the end of each episode, 'everything returns to a state of equilibrium, in which characters and setting remain unchanged' (Wu 2016, 6). Each episode of the series contains the same scenario 'in which a conflict arises, escalates, and finally resolves itself' (Wu 2016, 15).

[10] For a similar observation, see Guyer (2007). The evacuation of the present, to use Guyer's terms, is here analyzed as a palimpsest.

23.

Season One

Season Two

Season Three

24.

When you think it's over, it starts again.

25.

In January 2016, Osterholm returned to the *New York Times*, and started again: 'How scared should you be about Zika?' According to the expert, 'every time there is a major infectious disease outbreak that scares us . . . government leaders, the public and the news media demand explanations, guidance and predictions, and often express indignation that not enough was done to prevent it. Today everyone is asking about Zika: How did this crisis happen, and what do we need to do to make it go away? We immediately forget about the outbreak that came before it, and don't plan for the ones we know are on the horizon' (Osterholm 2016, 5). Rather than responding to the latest and getting caught up in the now, scientists, journalists, and officials should prepare for the next: 'Instead of devoting ourselves to a comprehensive plan to combat microbial threats, we scramble to respond to the latest one in the headlines. There are lessons from previous infectious disease outbreaks that could and should have left us much better prepared than we are' (Osterholm 2016, 5).

So what is next? Next is a 'planet-wide catastrophe caused by influenza', declared Osterholm (2016, 5). For the public health professional, a pandemic of influenza was (again) imminent. People must pay attention now, so that they will be prepared when it happens. The crisis was 'largely predictable and we can do much in advance to lessen the effects and diminish the spread'. Boldly claiming to 'already know which pandemics are on the horizon', Osterholm continued to palimpsest the now with the next, creating a series of substitutions, where each episode seemed to be somehow new despite its repetitiveness. Turning pandemic influenza into a serial figure that was bound to return, again and again, the public health professional created the conditions of possibility for the figure of the expert itself to appear as a serial figure, always available for another publication, another communication, perpetually going on beginning again, regularly.

26.

At its root, the world of preparedness entails a political form attuned to economies of mass production. It thrives on serial figures that are proliferating in technomediated milieus. Today, the next pandemic has become a serial figure. Such figures are 'never quite exhausted by a single, definitive instantiation but always at least potentially available for yet another serial iteration' (Mayer 2013b, 2). Serial figures appear in ever-shifting shapes. They travel across space, but they never evolve. They branch off in different directions, but they never grow, age, or die. Nothing changes, essentially, and there is no significant development from one episode to the next, save for what is needed to capture the imagination of those who have grown weary of the last episode (Hagedorn 1995). Each repetition amounts to a renewal. With each new episode, serial figures are granted the privilege of a new beginning.

The pleasure that serial figures offer is in the movement and the variation; such movement and variation draw attention; they are irresistible and inexhaustible. What will happen *this* time? What will happen *next* time?

27.

The world of preparedness is a world where pandemics are perceived as presumably inevitable events that will happen. These events are inexhaustible; they will keep perpetually going on and beginning again, regularly. Preparedness is based on the normative assumption that we have no choice but to recognize the reality of the presumably inevitable: It's not if, but when. Deprived of any historical dimension that would introduce a sense of radical alterity, pandemics 'can only come from eternity: since the beginning of time' (Barthes 1957, 165). They transcend their instantiation, are given the 'simplicity of essences', and take on the quality of myth, in Barthes' sense: 'Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact' (Barthes 1957, 165).

28.

In March 2017, Osterholm was back in the news, proliferating across media channels. With Mark Olshaker, the public health professional coauthored a book titled *Deadliest Enemy: Our War against Killer Germs (Osterholm and Olshaker 2017).* Continuing his mission, Osterholm emphasized that 'infectious disease is the deadliest enemy faced by all of humankind' (*Osterholm and Olshaker 2017,* 1–2). The book was another attempt at serializing the author

and his message. But to make the message new, entertain the public, and sell the book, it had to outbid itself through multiplication, intensification, and exaggeration. To draw attention to itself, the publication had to tell stories that were somehow new despite their repetitiveness. Was *Deadliest Enemy* a response to the threat of infectious disease? Or did it respond to the discursive problematic of mass media communication? To what problem is the idea of the next pandemic a response?

29.

The logic of seriality is one of sedimentation and proliferation, a logic of space attuned to the age of global capitalism, where capital, as a form of investment in the future, is always in pursuit of the next.[11] The notion of the next is a response to the 'experience of novelty and change in a capitalist culture in which change is paradoxically constant and novelty permanent' (Ngai 2008). The notion of the next embodies the 'capitalist oxymoron of serial novelty' (Ngai 2008, 812). Mayer (2013, 192) points out that the '*temporal* logic of narrative seriality needs to be complemented with the *spatial* logic of spread. Serial narratives reach out, take over, invade and impose' (emphasis added).

What, then, does it mean to be next to what's next? The persistent demand to consider what's next reflects a modern culture of mass production founded not simply on serialization, but on the serialization of serialization. It has established mass media for the serial proliferation of information, prompting people to expect a sequel. Today, we are used to exploring all sorts of scenarios and find all kinds of pleasures in variations of the same. We enjoy the 'seriality of the series, not so much for the return of the same thing . . . but for the strategy of the variations . . . the way in which the same story is worked over to appear to be different' (Eco 1991, 92).

Serial figures come with the promise of making repetition a moment of renewal. They transform the future into a series of provisional ends that can be survived (Weber 2017). These provisional ends come with the promise that life will continue. . .

What, then, is the next, structurally speaking? Like the event of death that is always impending yet always exceeding, the experience of the living subject, whose very life opens

[11] 'Anticipatory regimes, like those of capitalism, tend to work through logics of expansion, in which new territories for speculation must be continually found to keep the anticipatory logic moving' (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009, 250f.).

only against the horizon of death, unfolds and reinvents itself by virtue of a constitutive reiterative openness that never brings rest to the now.[12]

30.

And so with this essay: It ends here, but it could just as well move to the next, and the next after that, and begin again, regularly.

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[12] I am indebted to Maria José de Abreu for this formulation.

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