Suicide, Social Bodies, and Danger: Taboo, Biopower, and Parental Worry in the Films *Bridgend* (2015) and *Bird Box* (2018)[1]

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Abstract: *In my article I study two Anglophone feature films, Jeppe Rønde's* Bridgend *(2015) and Susan Bier's* Bird Box *(2018), from the viewpoints offered by visual cultural studies and the theoretical domains of taboo and biopower. Both systems of control respond to risks and dangers to society, taboo through ideas of contagion and biopower through normative, especially medical discourses by authorized instances of knowledge production. They are reflected also in the audio-visual popular culture seeking to make sense of suicide through entertaining and artistic means. The two films I study present suicide as a contagion that has supernatural (*Bird Box*) and social origins (*Bridgend*), and as a force of nature that threatens individuals from the outside yet also from within as madness (*Bird Box*), or as irrationality or vulnerability of youth (*Bridgend*). By analyzing suicide's representation in both films, I discuss the ways western thinking trying to fathom voluntary death reflects senses of danger attached to suicide under taboo and biopower and in response to the humane emotions of love and fear of loss. I also discuss how taboo and biopower can be seen to generate this threat to individual lives by their suppression of living and dying.*

Keywords: *suicide, voluntary death, taboo, biopower, danger, suicide contagion, parental worry, contemporary cinema, Anglophone cinema, representation.*

Introduction

As Colin Davis (2004) writes, death "curtails our dialogue with the deceased as it removes their ability to speak with us" (p. 77). This might be clearest in the way that Western cultural discourses make sense of suicide, which is a self-inflicted death and a personally felt tragedy to many, direly asking for a dialogue between the living and the dead. As a voluntary death and a form of reflexive violence (e.g., Pickard, 2015), suicide possesses a sense of mystery in life-affirming and death-denying Western thinking. For instance, Patricia MacGormack (2020) recognized the pervasion of Western thinking by a binary between life and death, which has been laden with value by life's intertwining with "affirmation" and death's with "negation" (p. 139). Both the

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loss of life represented by self-inflicted death and its incomprehensible challenge to the central axioms dominating Western thought are reflected in the discursive sphere.

In the modern era, the philosophical and theological discussions of suicide (e.g. Minois, 1999) have been largely displaced by the discussion of suicide as a public health issue and a societal risk (e.g., Marsh, 2010). This transition in making sense of suicide is reflective of biopower, the practice of normative techniques aiming at human bodies' subjugation, including normative biopolitical discourses in the medical world and other institutions of knowledge. To biopower, that seeks "to foster life or to disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault, 1990, pp. 138-139), suicide appears a dangerous form of resistance. For that reason, Foucault cites voluntary death as a key factor in the transition from sovereign power's "right to kill" to the dominion of the discursive and normative processes (p. 141). Thus, instead of appearing simply as a danger to self, suicide represents dangers to the "social body" (Douglas, 1970), and this is reflected in the ways that the Western imagination makes sense of voluntary death. Very often, this imagination bears traces of suicide's connection to contagion, which necessitates its regulation as a societal danger both in real life and in the sphere of fiction, as in the response to the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* (Kosonen, 2020). Because of this contagious quality, suicide can also be related to the taboo, another system of control, as Douglas (1996, 2002) understands it.

Audio-visual popular culture also has been affected by fears of suicide and knowledges produced of its dangerous ontology. In this article, I consider two films, *Bridgend* (2015) and *Bird Box* (2018), which in different ways reflect both the individual and social danger surrounding suicide, including how they make visible the effects of biopower and taboo on how suicide is understood and made sense of. The two films, an art house rendition and a mainstream science fiction feature film, have differing plotlines, and they are dissimilar both in general and in their approaches to self-willed death. Yet they both offer an interesting way to reflect on suicide's relationship to danger, taboo, and biopower. The 2015 English-language Danish drama *Bridgend*, directed by Jeppe Rønde, studies suicide's uncontrolled transmission among the young of a dying Welsh town, despite the desperate efforts of the parents and institutions to find reasons for the deaths and a way to stop them. The 2018 sci-fi-horror *Bird Box*, directed for Netflix by Susan Bier, is an apocalyptic survival story of a young mother and two children in a dystopic wilderness where supernatural influence has caused humanity to self-destruct.

Both films interest me because they associate suicide with a contagion: in *Bridgend*, the contagion is social; the self-harm is transmitted by the vertical relationships of the young. In *Bird Box*, the source for the contagion is supernatural, with sweeping shadows and demonic voices carried by the wind that force people to see the invisible, and then, once they have seen it, cause them to kill themselves. In both films, suicide also takes the form of a mystery, reflecting the unknowable and fear-inducing qualities attached to the death and necessitating protection, as it is in varied ways related to madness, youth, religion, and addiction and in many places displaced to nature. In addition, what draws me to both *Bridgend* and *Bird Box* is the way they, in their depiction of societal protection and parental worry, not only reiterate the knowledges born out of suicide's threat to the social body, but also render visible the human forces that affect our understanding of self-inflicted death. Thus, the two films shed light on the human element behind the sense and discourses of danger emphasized in the taboo- and biopower-governed discursive sphere, and they show how lives can also be endangered by these structures' excessive suppression of the threats of self-harm and self-willed death.

My article is a discussion of the complex relationship of suicide to danger. From the viewpoint of visual analysis of suicide cinema, I discuss suicide's dangerous ontology through

the diegetic and aesthetic choices by which the two films make sense of self-inflicted death. In particular, I consider this ontology of danger in relation to biopower and taboo, two systems of control that seek to domesticate threats like self-inflicted death, and in relation to how suicide is represented elsewhere in contemporary Anglophone cinema as a contagious death pertinent to "vulnerable" demographies, like the mentally ill or the young. Yet I also reflect on the human reasons that render suicide a dangerous death to be feared and regulated.

Bridgend: Suicide's contagion among the young of a dying town

The 2015 Danish production, *Bridgend*, is a lingering study of suicide's contagion among the young people of a dying Welsh industrial town. The story follows a teenage girl Sara (Hannah Murray) who moves to the area with her father, Dave (Steve Waddington), a new police officer in the local community. The town is haunted by an unspeakable menace, a series of suicides by hanging, which is mysteriously transmitted among the local teenagers. Sara becomes involved with the young townspeople, befriending them, and even falling in love with one of them, Jamie (Josh O'Connor), while Dave tries to solve the chain of suicides.

In *Bridgend*, suicide's status is that of inexplicable and ominous death, appointed to it by the living. Reflecting the sense of mystery and danger associated with it in Western culture, suicide is depicted as an unstoppable contagion pertinent to the youth subculture. The spreading death has caused over 20 young people to kill themselves, and it has left the village and its structures, the parents and their institutions, powerless and stagnant. A suicide pact between the young townspeople is suspected, but there is none to be traced among them, which renders the deaths ever more ominous: there appears to be no reason or cure for the multiplying suicides. The sense of mystery and danger also pervades the aesthetic feel of the film, whose lingering shots of wild nature and the desolate, night-speckled town, displayed without dialogue or music with a dark color scheme, resonate with the threat and unknowability of suicide. In the diegesis, the deaths cause the parents to try to shield their young in ways that drive them further into their own compelling rituals. In addition, Dave tries to protect his daughter with authoritarian measures that only pushes Sara into the community of the local young with their cultist and forbidden ways.

The young meet in a wild and ominous gathering by the lake, in the darkness of the woods and near an old railroad, where they take to prohibited pleasures, drinking alcohol by the fire, skinny-dipping in the lake, and delving into polyamorous relationships where the girls are freely exchanged among the boys of the lot. In the course of the film, their suicides leave the community mourning for three more young people, Mark, Thomas, and Laurel, the twenty-third, twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth victims to the mysteriously transmitted suicide. Their suicides are solitary, but their mourning is collective and loud, as the gang members bellow out their loss in their meetings in the woods. Shielded by nicknames – Lonewolf, Maddock, Wildkid – they also discuss the suicides and death's eminence in euphemisms in an internet chatroom, leaving a feeling of a suicide cult, with death settled among them in a code language no outsider can understand.

In the beginning of Sara's stay, the strange customs of the young townspeople scare her and cause her to flee their company. Distanced from her father and integrated among them, however, she eventually takes part in their celebrations, embraces a pseudonym for herself, and participates in their online chatroom as the ultimate token of her inclusion and belonging. Things develop and escalate, and after fights with both her father and Jamie, Sara tries to hang

herself. Yet, discovered in the dark night of the town by her desolate father, she recovers in the hospital. In the last scene, Jamie comes for Sara despite telling her he never loved her, removes her oxygen mustache, and takes her away from the hospital. The town is in flames. When they get to the lake, Sara removes her hospital gown, walks into the lake and starts swimming toward the burning town. In the last image, we see all the young people, swimming in a flock, with their heads bobbing above the dark waves that reflect the towering flames of the burning town.

As Davis (2004) reminds us, the dead, who no longer possess voices to speak, cannot answer the questions of the living. Thus, the living are left without answers, and the stories of the deceased are replaced by narratives born out of the flawed self-understandings of the living and the discourses authorized for defining suicide (e.g., Minois, 1999, p. 321). *Bridgend* reflects many of these discourses, born in the amalgam of folklore, myth, and popular culture (e.g., Alvarez, 1970), theological and philosophical discourses with their focus on moralities (Minois, 1999), and discourses by the institutions of Medicine and Science (Jaworski, 2010, 2014). All these discourses strive to understand and prevent suicide. Yet suicide's perceived negation of life, considered also by MacGormack (2020), renders voluntary death bad and threatening, and it colors many of these approaches. Thus, many of the conceptions of suicide offered in *Bridgend*'s diegesis and artistic execution recur also in real life. Because of its contagious nature, its association with cultist mindscapes, and susceptibility to influence by technology or peers, suicide is connected to danger. The danger is often framed as a danger to self, to individual somas and individual lives, rendered ever more vulnerable by the victimization of the ones who suicide. However, as *Bridgend*'s collective dismay makes clear, suicide particularly endangers the so-called social bodies of communities, nations, and the human species. This is emphasized also in *Bird Box*'s vision of human extinction, discussed in the next chapter. Seen from Foucault's perspective, suicide's threat to the society is even wider: as an act of free will, and as a decision made by the individual, self-inflicted death threatens society's power.

These prevalent conceptions can be seen as pertinent to the regulation of suicide under modern biopower and to its status as an enduring Western taboo. In Foucauldian theory, suicide as voluntary death represents the transition from pre-modern sovereign power to secular biopower, whereas its taboo is reflected in its abject, stigmatized, and silenced status. In particular, suicide is treated through discourses of danger, prevalent in both biopower and taboo, which revolve around risks and dangers to society. Mary Douglas, in her career-long rethinking of the colonialist concept of taboo, reframes the magico-religious concept first to danger (2002, see also Steiner, 1999) and then to risk (1996; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982) to society: "[T]aboo turns out not to be incomprehensible but an intelligible concern to protect society from behavior that will wreck it. … Danger in the context of taboo is used in a rhetoric of accusation and retribution that ties the individual tightly into community bonds and scores in his mind the invisible fences and paths by which the community co-ordinates its life in common" (Douglas, 1996, p. 4, 27-8). A similar focus on the social collective is reiterated in biopower, as well, seeking to control social bodies through normative discourses that encourage self-regulation, and which represents the power of the modern institutions of knowledge over individuals' lives and deaths (Agamben, 1998; Foucault, 1990, 2000).

The highest function of biopower and these biopolitical forms of knowledge production is, in Foucault's words, to "invest life through and through ... to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (1990, p. 138-139). Thus, suicide's subjection to this normative power represents the transition from earlier systems of power to modern biopower (Marsh, 2010). Suicide's regulation under biopower and under taboo's rhetoric of danger, if anything, mark it a danger that is societal

as much as it is individual. Although the harm is to individual somas, it is the social body that is in danger, and it is the social body, its workforce and its values, that the taboo customs and biopolitical discourses seek to protect. According to Foucault, the purpose of biopower is the disciplinary optimization of the human body's capabilities, usefulness, and docility (1990, p. 139). The taboo, instead, seeks to protect society's mores and those immaterial things that are valuable for the society to remain as it is (Radcliffe-Brown, 1979, pp. 52–56; Steiner, 1999, pp. 107–109). Cinema not only reiterates the discourses birthed under these two systems of control, but it also renders them visible, and this is so in *Bridgend*.

In the cross-cultural commonplace, taboos are marked by and subjected to regulation through fears of contagion (e.g., Lévy-Bruhl, 1987, p. 292; Douglas, 2002). This can also be seen in the medical theories of suicide contagion (e.g., Phillips, 1974) that Gijin Cheng and colleagues (2014) have criticized for the misleading use of the affective metaphor of contagion. In Douglas's thinking of the taboo, these beliefs withhold the moral component pertinent to social dangers: "Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion" (Douglas, 2002, p. 3). These fears are also associated with suicide, which has been seen to be transmitted through media discussions and representations (e.g., Phillips, 1974) and through both vertical and horizontal influence: from parents to children (e.g., Cerel et al., 2018) or within peer-groups (e.g., Randall et al., 2015). In particular, in considering the young individuals, the fear of suicide's contagion has been strong (e.g., Gould et al., 2003). In many senses, the vulnerability to suicidal influence might be stronger in youth, yet predisposition to self-harm and suicide is often represented as an essentialist, inherent condition pertinent to youth (Marshall 2006), or other victimized, marginalized and "othered" demography (Kosonen, 2017a; 2020, pp. 110-124). Tellingly, it is often related to girlhood (Gonick, 2006), homosexuality (Cover, 2013; Marshall, 2010), mental illness (Kosonen, 2020; Stack & Bowman, 2012), or any other qualifier marking divergence from the "universal human being" (Bauman, 1990, p. 8), constructed as white, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied and -minded, grown-up, cis man.

Suicide's rampant contagion among the young is a fear made manifest also in *Bridgend*'s diegesis where it is mixed with the fear of new media's incitement of the young to violence. The chatroom of the teens of *Bridgend*, in particular, creates a sense of danger lurking in the Internet. This is a well-known danger to Western culture, where new media have for long been accused of real-world violence and death through ideas of imitation and contagion (e.g., Ferguson & Faye, 2018). With its false identities, its euphemistic code language, and its digital memorial altar of the suicided teens and RIP-messages, the chatroom appears as a source of death, danger, and contagion. As it is in a wealth of other recent suicide films, such as *Cyberbully* (2011) or *Unfriended* (2014), the chatroom in *Bridgend* is the most telltale sign of suicide's unstoppable contagion among the young. The same is true in real life, where it is precisely young audiences who are treated as the demography that must be defended from suicide's contagion, for instance, in the media controversy surrounding the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* (2017) (e.g., Rhodes, 2017). In *Bridgend*'s diegesis, pervaded by the confusion and worry of the grown-ups, separated from the young by generational distance, youth suicide is glamorized and presented as essential. This is both manifest in the strange and transgressive community of the youth and in Sara's integration to their chatroom, where the pseudonym she uses (NakedChild) emphasizes her innocence, youth, and vulnerability to the death that is transmitted among the young with dangerous ease.

Bird Box: Voices no sane human can bear

Bird Box is a 2018 science fiction disaster film and a survival story directed for Netflix by Susan Bier. Based on a novel by Josh Malerman (2014), *Bird Box* is a fictional account of the end of the world in its current condition. It is set in the United States, where an inexplicable wave of suicides suddenly exterminates human civilization except for a few surviving communities scattered across the nation. The film follows Malorie (Sandra Bullock), a sharp-tongued painter and a single mother of two children, through two parallel narratives set five years apart.

The first storyline follows the primipara Malorie, preparing to give birth to her fatherless child, go through the apocalypse. In the apocalypse, an outbreak of mysterious origin makes people take their lives. The cause for the suicides is — as in *Bridgend* — unknown, with both biochemical warfare and supernatural causes under suspicion, with the supernatural causes appearing more likely than the geopolitical ones. There is something moving outside that forces people to see visions that cause them to take their lives, and lures them to look. As one survivor proposes, the genocide is divine punishment for failed humanity. Yet this threatened humanity still tries to prevail. Even stronger than in *Bridgend*, where suicide threatens the community by slaying the future generations, suicide here appears as a societal danger, as it takes the form of a supernatural and unstoppable pandemic that wipes away most of humanity and forces those who remain to seclude indoors with windows sealed tight. The threat of suicide forces all nations to avoid open air and public places, with life and its possibilities left outdoors with the demons. There is no solution but sensory deprivation; the survivors must adapt to live blindfolded or die.

The first outbreak of the suicidal apocalypse bereaves Malorie of her sister, her only remaining close relative. A band of stray individuals takes her to a place of refuge at a stranger's house, where the individuals' personalities and their survival mechanisms add tension and cause unusual relationships to burgeon among the desolate refugees. Malorie makes friends with a misanthropic old man (John Malkovich) and another pregnant woman, Olympia (Danielle Macdonald). She also starts a relationship with one of the refugees, Tom (Trevante Rhodes). The two of them survive to establish a family, after all the other people in their small community have fallen under the influence of the fatal visions in a tragic incident involving a fugitive from the mental asylum. He, a "madman" immune to the visions' suicidal effect, settles among them under the pretense of seeking refuge. Yet he soon opens the blinds, thus inviting the demons in and trying to force everybody in the house to see the horrific visions, too.

In the second storyline, gaining more emphasis towards the end of the film, Malorie as the only surviving adult of the house. She and her two children who are called only Boy and Girl, are traveling blindfolded through the wild. They make their way on a boat to find another place of refuge after Tom's heroic death in an attack by a pack of mad fugitives. Malorie and the children carry a bird box, with two birds in it, which gives the film its name. It helps Malorie navigate among the dangers of the wild. Death is carried by the wind and the sweeping shadows, and it takes the form of voices that tempt the travelers to look at that which will cause them to take their lives. But the birds' chirping gives away these demons as they approach. Malorie and the children are not only threatened by these voices but also by a handful of individuals, who, like the earlier fugitives from mental asylums, are immune to the temptation to suicide. These individuals have embraced the horrific visions as beautiful, and they try to force the blindfolded survivors to see the demonic visions, too. Yet despite these dangers, Malorie and the two children reach the safe place they have been traveling toward: a school for the blind, where they are integrated into the community with a tentative hope for a future.

Like *Bridgend*, *Bird Box* considers suicide's threat to the futurity of a human collective – a failed humanity instead of a conservative coal-mining town. Despite this, and despite the fact that suicide has been defined as a phenomenon pertinent to the human world through anthropocentric understanding of cognitive processes such as reflexive subjectivity, free will, intentionality, and awareness of death (Pena-Guzmán, 2017), in these two films suicide is displaced to nature or the nature in humans. This can be seen to reflect suicide's ontology of danger and its marginalization (Kosonen, 2020) under the normative and classificatory process of biopower and taboo. The aesthetics of both films emphasize this. In *Bridgend*, the thematic analysis of suicide contagion is conjoined by sweeping pans of nature: of railway tracks leading to the darkness of the forest, or of the curve of a misty river enveloped by evergreen trees. In the cinematography, wild nature steals in from the perimeters of the decaying coal-mining town, but it also threatens the community through the animality of the young, who are shown transgressing the community rules. Intoxicated and bestial, they are depicted yelling by the roaring fire, like the wolves in the woods, and floating in the water naked like strange vegetation.

In *Bird Box*, the demonic voices are carried by the wind, visually marked by sweeping shadows and swirling leaves. Next to this, it takes Malorie both the journey on the river and a climax set in the woods to wake up to a thematically central notion that she loves her children, who are at this stage wandering blindfolded and lost in the lush nature symbolizing the threat of self-inflicted death. In *Bird Box*, too, the demons are allied with the mentally ill, who are given a "less-than-human" status under the objectifying treatment of biopolitical institutions (Marsh, 2010). Their status in the film is marked by the bestial swirling pupils they show in the moment of their mad destruction. This happens also to the suicide victims who are exposed to the virulent supernatural: as reason evades them, their eyes turn into black swirls that are both inhuman and nonhuman. This madness in *Bird Box*, along with the vulnerability of youth to suicide in *Bridgend*, is reminiscent of the othering and exotizing binaries between nature and culture, primitivity and civilization, irrationality and reason, that differentiate Bauman's universal human being from its "others" and help marginalize suicide under biopolitical discourses.

Besides the aesthetic and diegetic means that displace suicide to nature and human nature, and *Bird Box*'s biopolitical storylines of madness, the two films feature cultist and supernatural explanations for suicide, quite familiar from their history and domestication as a taboo (Kosonen, 2018) and pertinent to suicide's representation in contemporary cinema (Aaron, 2014, pp. 42–47). In *Bridgend*, under scrutiny is a cult in which suicide is not just imitated by the young. This is implied by the ominous, affective resonance of the film and the strange ways the young are depicted. This suicide contagion appears to be generated, like a curse or a contagion, in their rituals and code language. Moreover, the chatroom is involved in the genesis of the suicide contagion and depicted through cultist imagery, where the young, lit with shamanistic neon colors by their screens, sit powerless against the pull of their digital community: each individual simultaneously hunter and prey. Cultist connections also prevail in *Bird Box*, where the connection to suicide is supernatural, and the mentally ill are depicted as worshipping the creatures. They see the visions as beautiful and as trying to "convert" the blindfolded to their faith through any means, including violent ones.

In both *Bridgend* and *Bird Box*, the cultist elements and the untamed qualities of human nature are intertwined in such iconographies that tease out from the narratives elements pertaining to addiction. In *Bridgend*, intoxication plays a role in the rituals of the young, and it is emphasized in the film's atmospheric depiction of life in the stale community. Also associated with youth is the fear of addiction to online technologies. Their addictive and cultist nature are

depicted in the imageries of the young logged into the chatroom, also representative of their own community, or "cult," and its death-bound fate, under the neon-lit pull of the computer screens. In *Bird Box*, the connection between addiction, cultist mentality, and madness is instead drawn by the frenetic, obsessive-compulsive behavior of the fugitive from the mental asylum. The madness of the one who invades Malorie's community is especially marked by the art he spreads out on the furniture before he opens the blinds: similar drawings in uncountable numbers, representing the demons, drawn with frantic lines. In this sense, the dangerous and mysterious nature of suicide is, in the two films, enhanced through references to nature and lack of reason, as it is depicted in relation to madness, intoxication, youth and cultist mentality, and their many addictive and neurotic qualities that participate in suicide's marginalization (Kosonen, 2020). Suicide's threat is also enhanced when it is, through the lingering shots of untamed nature, given the sense of being a "force of nature." That metaphor frequently pervades discourses related to other socio-cultural threats such as migration (Arcimaviene & Baglama, 2018). Suicide's threat appears ever more dangerous, as it is depicted in both *Bridgend* and *Bird Box*, as threatening the archetypally vulnerable and often passivized figures epitomizing the futurity of the society – a young heterosexual woman and a single mother of two children – who eventually prevail against it.

If these elements mark self-inflicted death as an irrational mystery under the life-affirming and death-denying Western values, it could be argued suicide's position as a death regulated by biopower is especially visible in its widespread connection to mental illness. This is reiterated in *Bird Box*'s demonization of the mentally ill as the villainous accomplices of the supernatural creatures. Ian Marsh (2010) notes the wealth of different kinds of discourses that present suicide as the "tragic act of a mentally unwell individual" (p. 27), as a manifestation of suicide's knowledge production under Western biopower. This biopower works through normative discourses produced by jurisdiction and punition, university, military, writing, media, education, and healthcare (Foucault, 2000, p. 131). In a variety of discourses, the suicidal persons are characterized, in the words of Timothy Hill (2004) "as in some way morbid, anguished, isolated and driven to end their life by some peculiarly internalized torment" (p. 2). Katrina Jaworski (2014) recognizes suicide's increased connection to depression under "psy-knowledge" (Rose, 1998), that complex of discourses produced by the various professionals of the mind, where suicide is often represented as the "most serious sign and consequence" of depression (Jaworski, 2014, p. 95).

Similar depictions of suicide also permeate Anglophone cinema: most films *with* or *about* suicide (Aaron, 2014, p. 47; see also Kosonen, 2015) have adopted the medical institutions' view of suicide as proliferating diagnoses and as assignment of these diagnoses to "the vulnerable" (Kosonen, 2020). A wealth of movies portray suicide in medical terms. They frame suicide as an anomaly of the mind through diagnoses and stereotypical – even pejorative – depictions of a variety of mental illnesses from depression to psychopathology (Stack & Bowman, 2012), institutional settings, survival stories aided by medical professionals, and juxtapositions between reason and its lack (Kosonen, 2020). Also, *Bird Box*, with its stereotypical depictions of the mentally ill who are immune to suicide, and with suicide's genesis in the hallucinations caused by the supernatural creatures, and causing unbearable pain to the characters who see them, reiterates suicide's connection to depression and psychopathology. Of course, unlike films such as *Sixth Sense* (1999) or *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), the depressed or the mentally ill in *Bird Box* are not particularly vulnerable to suicide. Instead they endanger the passivized figures and the social body to self-inflicted death as pejorative epitomes of villainy.

Addressing dangers to self and society, from the prison of parental love

Both *Bridgend* and *Bird Box* are interesting in their manner of reiterating the dangerous ontology of suicide, created and reinforced under taboo and biopower, but also in their manner of studying the senses of danger and mystery related to it beyond their influence. In some sense, they even reflect the dangers *of* subjugating life under biopower and restricting suicide's representations under biopolitical knowledge formation. These two films present suicide as if as an epidemic and a contagion – with supernatural (*Bird Box*) or social origins (*Bridgend*) – and as a force of nature that threatens individuals from the outside yet also from within as madness (*Bird Box*), or as irrationality or vulnerability of youth (*Bridgend*). Mystery and danger are painted over both films: diegetically, there are no reasons and thus no rescue, and the ominous atmosphere of the films, created by the soundscapes and the looming imagery of nature, emphasizes the unknowability and unstoppability of self-inflicted death. In both films, suicide is surrounded by a general sense of incomprehensibility and dismay. In particular, it is expressed in *Bridgend* through the adults' confusion over their children's suicides: there is a language of death that is beyond knowing and decoding. As Sara recovers from her attempted suicide in a hospital, next to her bedside the local priest prays for guidance and understanding: "Ask him forgiveness, ask him for meaning, ask him why, please, please help me, help us all." There is no meaning offered in the diegesis of the film, which paints life in *Bridgend* as incomprehensible and purposeless as death.

As proposed in the earlier chapters, marked a demographic threat and a social danger, suicide is prevalently defined, represented, and understood through such proliferating discourses that seek to confine suicide's threat by medicalizing it (Marsh, 2010). That can be traced back to Foucauldian biopower, which seeks to "invest life through and through" (Foucault, 1990, pp. 138-139). Suicide is also surrounded by discourses of risk and danger. Mary Douglas (1996, 2002) recognizes them as pertinent to taboo and able to help explain the fear of contagion that both manifest as key dangers in suicide and to explain the regulation of both voluntary death and its representations. There are many such elements in *Bridgend* and *Bird Box* that speak of the influence of taboo and biopower on the dominant truths in defining and making sense of suicide (e.g., Jaworski, 2014; Marsh, 2010). Both the contagious genesis of suicide and the objectified and passivized demographies suicide tends to "stick to" – in the words of Sara Ahmed (2014) – from the vulnerability of youth to the danger of mental illness, are reiterated in their diegeses. Both these choices and suicide's depiction through natural cinematography also speak of the rendering of suicide as something not entirely human (if humanity is defined through its ideal form), which might express its dangerous, fear-evoking, and unthinkable ontology.

Critically analyzed, suicide's ongoing displacement to this "less-than-human" status, which permeates *Bridgend* and *Bird Box*, illustrates biopower's paradoxes, with particular types of bodies rendered more valuable than others. Giorgio Agamben (1998) has made sense of biopower's functions by distinguishing between "privileged" and "oppressed" life with the Greek concepts *zoe* and *bios* – "bare life" and "qualified life" (pp. 1–12). Agamben discusses the *homo sacer*, someone who has *zoe* yet not *bios* and that "can be killed but not sacrificed" (pp. 111-15, see also Radomska & Åsberg, 2020, p. 41). Moreover, in cinema it appears suicide is made visible – partly as an act of denial, partly out of the spectacle of the forbidden – through these types of "thanatopolitics" (Esposito, 2014), where society's rule over individual deaths is made knowable by expending lives invested with lesser value. In cinema, suicide is frequently displaced from Zygmunt Bauman's white, male, middle class, heterosexual, cis, and able-bodied and -minded "universal human being" (1990, p. 8) to the "less valuable" bodies: feminine, homosexual, objectified by medical institutions (Kosonen, 2020). Rendering suicide "mad" and "feminine"

(and also juvenile) through these cinematic thanatopolitics is apparently intended to counter the glorification and romanticization of suicide (e.g., Samaritans, 2002, pp. 10–11). Yet these strategies for representing suicide are not without problems. They might enhance prejudices and make it harder for those living with mental illness to seek medical help (e.g., Shapiro & Rotter on video games, 2016). Some reviewers have – for good reason – criticized *Bird Box* for its pejorative and hurtful stereotypes of the mentally ill (e.g., Russo, 2019). There are, so to say, dangers also in some of these prevalent ways of taming suicide's socio-cultural danger by means of cinematic fiction.

This also pertains to warding off suicide's dangers by associating it with youth, which, like childhood in looking at the less fatal societal dangers, enhances the perceived threat of self-harm by pairing it with epitomes of vulnerability and threatened futurity (e.g., Edelman, 2004, pp. 2–3; Jenks, 1996). Here, suicide's representations sacrifice to this death not only the abject outcast (the "madmen," who "can be killed but not sacrificed"), but also the prime sacrificial victims – the young, whom the social bodies most try to protect and that also make the social body vulnerable in representing its uncontrollable future. The young, too, could be seen as part of the thanatopolicital strategy in which suicide's thinkability and desirability, and thus its threat, is diminished by calling out figures devoid of reason, closer to nature and an animal state. In the ongoing discourses, their vulnerability often justifies the need to contain suicide and its dangerous contagion (e.g., Bridge et al., 2019; Gould et al., 2003). In that case, youth appears as instrumental to the systems of control that seek to keep voluntary death at bay (see Douglas, 1996, p. 13, Kosonen, 2017b, for similar use of childhood innocence elsewhere). There is a similar case with femininity and the two childbearing mothers in *Bird Box*. But reducing youth to vulnerability, or madness, or femininity (see Kosonen, 2017a), can also be considered objectifying and passivizing. In the representation of queer youth suicide, Daniel Marshall and Rob Cover criticized similar victim tropes, where suicide and queerness as vulnerable conditions produce "an essentializing notion of victimhood" (Marshall, 2010, p. 70), and where their resilience and survival are rendered "external and to be fostered socially" (Cover, 2012, p. 3). As Joan Meyer (1996) argues, these types of representations have "the tendency to remove any sense of agency from that group as a whole" (p. 102). Suicide's connection to youth, however, is quite easy to understand: to those worrying over them, the threat never ceases to be real.

Both of these aspects connecting suicide to youth – its instrumentality and worry – are reflected in *Bridgend*'s diegesis and in its reception. The film is a loose rendering of a real-life occurrence of a wave of suicides in *Bridgend*, a real industrial town in southern Wales, where, after January 2007, 79 people –mostly teenagers between 13 and 17 years old – took their lives by hanging (e.g., Luce, 2016). In in its premier, Rønde's art house drama was deemed spectacular, exploitative, and lacking truth (e.g., Bevan, 2016) in its portrayal of the tragedy personally felt by the Bridgenders. By contrast, a 2013 documentary of the same tragedy, directed by John Michael Williams and similarly named, gave voice to the parents and peers of the suicide victims. Both films deal with the traumatizing effect of suicide on parents: the frequent uttering "my child would never have committed suicide" in Williams's documentary and the diegetic and cinematic choices of Rønde's fictional film both emphasize suicide as an inexplicable tragedy no parent wants to face, underlined by a sense of threat that necessitates protection. Yet in William's documentary, the suicidal youth are absent – quite different from their centering in Rønde's depiction. In the documentary, as in Davis's (2014) and Marsh's (2010) analyses of biopower, the suicidal and the dead are muted under the objectifying and passivizing gaze of the institutions of knowledge. Rønde's *Bridgend*, by contrast, approaches parental worry by focusing on the

terrifying agency of the young. It is no wonder the art house film had a bad reception, although it conveys of the same heartfelt tragedy and sense of danger that the documentary gives voice to: it appears that the crux of the issue lies on whose point of view is centered – that of the parents or that of the young – instead of truth. And this same danger, slightly external to the ones defined by taboo and biopower, which are involved with protecting the symbolic body, also stands out in *Bird Box*.

Thematically, *Bird Box* is a study of the fear of loss and of living, whose dangers the demonic voices and the suicidal apocalypse represent. These fears are manifested in Malorie's unwillingness to love and give proper names to the two children whom she might lose any minute. Her inhibitions are mirrored from her opposite, Olympia, the other pregnant woman, with whom Malorie shares her last months before birth and from whose conservative values and romantic worldview her own wariness and insurgence towards the heteronormative family values are reflected. At the start of the film, just before the apocalypse, Malorie's fears about motherhood are revealed at an appointment with a doctor who points out the tension between her sharp-tongued escapism and the reality of her pregnancy. The doctor reminds her about the option of giving the child she does not want for adoption. As we learn from discussions between Malorie and her sister, their relationships with their own mother has been difficult. However, her romance with co-refugee Tom allows Malorie to experience a family life she did not know in her dysfunctional home. The narrative here is notably similar to another disaster film where humanity is threatened by suicide: in M. Night Shyamalan's 2008 science fiction feature film *The Happening*, a quirky young wife to Mark Wahlberg's math teacher, Alma (Zooey Deschanel), learns to settle down in an apocalyptic event in which a survival mechanism by the vegetable kingdom causes humans to suicide.

Yet in *Bird Box*, there is more than a heteronormative lesson to learn for fearful Malorie. In the film, Malorie tries to shield her children by keeping them in a figurative bird box, like the two birds she carries with them on the river. Under Malorie's strict loving, the children cannot experience the world in its highs and in its lows. Excessively she tries to protect the children; she denies them even the dreams of a better world with play and laughter and no demons threatening their lives. Her fears of losing the children she has learned to care for hinder her from communicating lovingly with them, the girl birthed by deceased Olympia and her biological son. They fear her because of her strictness, and they call her by her first name instead of mother. Similar to *Bridgend*'s allegorical interpretation of life, penetrated by a thematic focus on parents' inability to protect their children, the lesson in *Bird Box* also pertains to fear-driven parenting and suppression of living. By the end of the dangerous journey that Malorie and the two children make, Malorie learns, after a lesson offered to her by Tom: "Surviving is not living. Life is more than what is: it's what it could be, what you can make it." At the end of the film, Malorie and the children reach a haven from the dangers they have faced, an institution for the blind where they may relax in a safer environment.. The doctor from the beginning of the film finds Malorie there and delights in seeing her alive. She asks Malorie for the names of her unnamed children, and Malorie names them, as if finally accepting both her responsibility and the children's individual subjectivities: "Your name is Olympia. Your name is Tom. And I am your mother." Her gesture, allowing the two children individual identities, implies her acceptance that she must love something that she cannot protect or keep, and that she must allow to live in the dangerous world as autonomous beings.

There is a connection between *Bird Box* and *Bridgend*, where an authoritarian police father tries to cage her daughter in her room and in a boarding school to keep her from bad company

and from the looming suicide connected to the mystery of youth. In *Bridgend*, a curious dynamic reigns between Sara and her father, a family of two. There is no mother, not even to speak of or to mourn, and as Dave parents Sara, Sara parents Dave: in an early kitchen-table discussion, Sara tells Dave to drink his milk, and Dave tells Sara to wipe off her make-up. Caring is here contrasted with protecting, which Dave tries to do, as he tries to shelter Sara by containing her in childhood through locked rooms and prohibitions. In both films, suicide epitomizes the dangers of the wide world to children: It appears as a form of reflexive violence, of violence towards the self, and it represents mental suffering no parent can shield their children from because it pertains to life that cannot be left unlived, a theme familiar from *Sophie's Choice* (1982). In *Bridgend*, the culture built by the adults is everywhere surrounded by nature where the young go to escape the strict community, and in *Bird Box*, the visions the demons force the people to see are both beautiful and horrifying – and cannot be unseen. How may a parent ever shield a child from such: the temptations and horrors of the world? Thus, suicide appears as a loss greater than no other, and it warns that the dangers interpellated by the usual strategies of taboo and biopower – seeking to protect the social body and the individuals from themselves – are built around the danger of losing a child, losing kin, losing a loved one.

These systems of control encourage self-regulation and the containment of individuals through normative discourses and knowledges, and through ideas of danger and uncontrollable contagion. That these strategies are fragile is what probably draws me to *Bridgend* as a researcher of suicide cinema and of these two systems of control. There is an element in the film, expressing the worries and dangers related to suicide, that renders institutional biopower visible and questions the parents' diegetic measures. As the film proposes, the institutions of the conservative coal-mining town – police and religion – representative of the community and life built by the older generations, are all helpless in trying to understand and stop the deaths of the young. "Why have we lost another vibrant young man? Why are the youth so troubled in our community?" they ask in *Bridgend*'s dialogue, but they cannot find an answer. Against the easy causes considered by the parents and police, the life these instances represent is even depicted as part of the problem. Falling in love with Jamie, Sara wakes up to the dangers of staying in the decaying town, with the cult of the young townspeople responding to the lack of prospects in the stale and pressuring community. In the rose-tinted reverie of the young couple, "leaving town" is their dream and an escape from the imminent death that is the only prospect *Bridgend* appears to offer them. Here, no contagion through new media or a cult causes an individual to take their life, no matter how young or vulnerable. However, a lack of futurity and the pressure of the customs and restrictions of the old generations may do that.

"Leaving town" is also a euphemism used by the young for killing oneself, in *Bridgend*'s diegesis. In this aspect, suicide has an element of resistance that marks it as a threat to disciplinary biopower in Foucault's theory – the same resistance that makes it a danger to the social body to be addressed (Foucault, 1990, pp. 138-139). In the film, suicide appears as subcultural resistance to the ways of the stagnant community to which the young are expected to comply. For Sara, alienated by her father's strict rule over her, its pressure makes her vulnerable, leading to her eventual suicide attempt. The same dangers prevalent in the cinematic fiction's pejorative and victimizing stereotypes of suicide are also evident in these diegetic counteractions against the power of the community, which seeks to protect the young from suicide by making them vulnerable. As Chloe Taylor (2014) proposes in her Foucauldian analysis, biopower also produces the suicidal subjectivities it seeks to contain, and Rønde's *Bridgend* reflects this view. The dangers to self and dangers to society are in this sense joined by the dangers by the society

– and by one's own kin, as the suppressive element of parental love in *Bird Box* and *Bridgend* is studied. It is also the social body that fatally endangers the individuals in various ways.

Conclusion

In the unthinkable denial of life that suicide represents both to the systems of power and many people, there are both dangers and senses of danger, created by love and warred against by taboo and biopower. They are even generated by their suppression of living and dying. Studying *Bridgend* and *Bird Box*, two quite different Anglophone productions, offers ample illustrations of the cinematic ways making sense and seeking to contain self-inflicted death in continuum with and in relation to two systems of power that deal with dangers to bodies that are both corporeal and symbolic, individual and social. With the films' diegetic and aesthetic references to contagion, madness, youth, religion, and the terrifying wilderness, both *Bridgend* and *Bird Box* can be seen to reflect the biopolitical, normative discourses and representations making sense of suicide and reiterating such conception of suicide that are related to its history, ontology, and status as a taboo. In both films, the human component related to loss and the fear of it also is present. This makes them interesting instances to discuss, as suicide's intermingling with danger is considered.

As an example, the recent scandals in the reception of the widely discussed Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* (2017-) suggest that the sense of danger surrounding suicide and its artistic and entertaining representations make it hard to speak or "repeat" against the grain. There is a persistent truth-value appointed to the authorized ways of containing this danger, which often appears as an unstoppable contagion that – it is feared – will be unleashed when representations stray from the authorized, often medical frames for discussing and depicting suicide. Ian Marsh (2010) presents a similar notion in the introduction to his book about the knowledge production of suicide, where criticizing the medical (biopolitical) knowledges about suicide is rendered difficult "as the 'truths' of suicide tend to feel particularly real" with death and suffering in question (p. 6). This sense of danger is also reflected in both films, as they reiterate the parents' and institutions' confusion over voluntary death and display their struggle, where suppression ensues from love and fear of loss. The dead are not there to explain themselves, and the reasons to take one's own life cannot be fully known, so the parents are left to protect their young, sometimes by desperate means.

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