

Spanish television series *The Barrier*: The once and future dictatorship

Joanne Laurier
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The Barrier (*La valla*), which debuted internationally on Netflix in 2020, is a 13-episode, Spanish television dystopian drama created by Daniel Écija.

The series, which imagines a dictatorial regime in Spain in 2045, is a valuable and convincing warning about the dangers of dictatorship and social inequality, and the terrible consequences of world war. It also clearly and deliberately calls on the memory of the Franco regime in Spain (1939-1975) and other authoritarian governments, including the South African and Israeli variants.

In the series' prologue, a Spanish president delivers a televised address in which he takes note of the disastrous situation facing the population: a Third World War has destroyed the environment, resources are scarce, the economy has collapsed and new viruses have emerged. He declares a state of emergency, and a dictatorial government assumes power.

In response, a family of four is preparing to flee. Soldiers come banging on their door. Hurriedly, the father implants a mysterious chip into each of his young twin daughters, Julia and Sara, before he is taken away, leaving the girls in the care of their mother, Emilia.

Twenty-five years later, "New Spain" remains under dictatorship. Its capital, a post-apocalyptic Madrid, has been divided in two by a heavily fortified wall, separating Sector 1—reserved for the wealthy and government officials—from Sector 2, where the poor and disenfranchised reside. Restricted movement between the two zones takes place through a military-operated checkpoint established from fear of political upheaval as well as the spread of a deadly norovirus.

The series' nearly 13 hours of politically driven, tension-filled drama have more than their share of twists and turns. Relying on the reader's patience, here

are some of the key ones.

In 2045, Sara, one of the twins mentioned above, has recently succumbed to the virus after having passed on her chip to Marta (Laura Quirós), her ten-year-old daughter. (We later learn the chip is effective against the virus). The young girl, together with her father Hugo (Unax Ugalde) and uncle Álex (Daniel Ibáñez) leave the Asturias region to move to army-occupied Sector 2 in Madrid, where matriarch Emilia (Ángela Molina) and Sara's twin Julia (Olivia Molina) live.

As Hugo, Álex and Marta register their change of address with officials, Marta tests positive for an unspecified blood type and is promptly whisked away. Officials tell Hugo and Álex they are taking her to a colony for the children of jobless parents, and that Hugo will need proof of employment to regain custody of his daughter.

Emilia contacts her former boyfriend Luis (Abel Folk), now the Minister of Health, living in Sector 1, who is looking for a married couple to serve as his house staff. Julia could potentially pass for Sarah, whose death-by-virus must be covered up. But Julia killed a high-ranking military officer in self-defense, and her boyfriend Carlos (Juan Blanco) is arranging an escape for the two of them.

It then comes to light that Marta has actually been imprisoned in a scientific institute headed by Luis' wife, Alma (Eleonora Wexler), who believes the poor must (literally) bleed for the rich. Alma and her staff are using children, who—by one means or another—have been kidnapped predominantly from Sector 2, as guinea pigs in their search for a vaccine. (Alma: "For every 10,000 kids, there may be eight special ones with enough antibodies to become vaccines.") Many children die in this brutal process of selection.

Unbeknownst to both Alma and Luis, their daughter

Daniela (Belén Écija) is aiding the political opposition. When Luis becomes aware of his wife’s medical experiments with children, he describes the operation as “genocide as [in the guise of] salvation.” Moreover, he now denounces the authorities and his own role: “What we did isn’t right. Everything we’ve built, the government, the regime, none of it works. Most people live in poverty without rights.”

The drama escalates as Emilia and Álex, who is enamored of Daniela, begin to organize the parents of the disappeared children. The fascistic president contracts the virus and goes to great lengths to recapture Marta.

An inevitable confrontation takes place between an insurrectionary population and military shock troops. Among the protesting throng is Luis, who cites the words of Spanish poet-dramatist Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936)—murdered by fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War—in his play *The House of Bernarda Alba*: “There are things enclosed within the walls that, if they suddenly went out into the street and shouted, would fill the world.”

The series ends on a somewhat bitter note, suggesting that a revolutionary overthrow may merely result in another authoritarian regime taking power.

On the whole, Season 1 of *The Barrier* is a hard-hitting, politically astute and moving series. It portrays the ruthlessness of the powers that be, the terror and intimidation of the general population and the manner in which harsh repression either crushes or twists people, or both, destroying some, turning others into informers and traitors. Conversely, it also traces out how the most courageous and principled elements become radicalized and ennobled, how opposition arises and mass resistance is generated.

The series has been carefully and artistically assembled and mounted, with a superb and obviously committed cast, resulting in an unusual work in which form and content correspond.

In an interview, creator Écija explains that “we studied what the great threats were and what it seemed could happen. The bad news is that one of those threats [the coronavirus] has occurred.” To his credit, the director wanted to recall and work through the “nightmares” that plagued the 20th century. The experience of the Franco dictatorship and the current efforts by the political right in Spain to rehabilitate that

filthy regime and bring back its criminal methods clearly weigh on the creators’ minds.

One of the things he definitely wanted to do, explains Écija, was “to play with memory in a series about the future. It is a series that tries to talk about memory, about not losing it.” It worries him when people don’t stop and remember. We must try “not to repeat mistakes. I’m terrified that we might forget. We should have learned a great deal from the conflicts that have occurred in recent times.”

In another interview, lead actress Molina, who plays Julia, asserts that “you have to hold this mirror up and be vigilant so that this does not happen.” Écija adds that “it was very difficult for us to achieve the state of well-being that we have, and today all that is threatened.” He rhetorically poses the question, what happens when a government and the ruling class take everything away from you—economic security, food, health and education?

The Barrier draws material from real life to portray a fascistic dictatorship and the spread of a deadly virus, produced by the warmongering of the political elites. The “barrier” is part of the apparatus for imposing social apartheid, monitored by military checkpoints, reminiscent of the Israeli-occupied territories, along with Donald Trump’s border wall. The disappearance of children, on whom medical experimentations are performed, and torture and extrajudicial murder are all past or present capitalist realities. The series deserves a wide audience.



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