



Pauline Picot // Viruses know no borders; nor does Formula 1 – or at least, not until now. The first ever international racing competition was officially launched in 1950 with the British Grand Prix, taking place at the Silverstone circuit. Since then, it has come to be known as a world-wide circus: a glamorous contest bringing together thousands of crazed fans around the world, but also raising legitimate questions regarding its financial and ecological ethics, and the ambiguous relationship between death and this high-risk sport.

Since the onset of racing competitions, death has indeed played a prominent role as cars raced wheel to wheel from 173 mph (in the 1950s) to the current top speed of 233 mph. However, the spectacular initial death toll of Formula 1, which summed to fifteen casualties in the first decade of the sport (fourteen in the 1960s and twelve in the 1970s), steadily decreased with the progressive improvement of medical care and safety measures on track. Particularly important was the recent addition of “the halo,” a head-protecting (and thus live-saving) structure, to the cars in 2015.

Apart from the passing of F1 French driver Jules Bianchi in 2015 and F2 French driver Anthoine Hubert in 2019, which were perceived as horrific abnormalities belonging to a bygone age, the general association between Formula 1 and death has undoubtedly faded. Bleacher Report journalist Matthew Walthert had indeed noted in 2013 that “the spectre of death no longer hangs over every GP [Grand Prix]”. But while he admits that “this is certainly a positive development” for the sport, he also boldly recognizes that “it has robbed GP racing of some of its essence”, and that “the biggest problem with Formula 1 [...] is the lack of danger”[1]. In his provocative article, Walthert plainly wrote what a vast majority of F1 fans, very active in the Formula 1 YouTube Channel ran by Liberty Media, have only been whispering about: while nobody would want a driver to die on track, Formula 1 is not fun anymore because the high-adrenaline risk of grievous injury has been minimized.

This paradoxical statement illustrates Formula 1’s ambiguous relationship with death: it has always been at the core of this extreme sport to challenge it, as if F1 drivers were supermen bound to risk their lives to prove themselves to the public. It seems no coincidence that in the 1950s (the first decade of Formula 1), several comics were published featuring actual racing drivers heroically endangering themselves (*Michel Vaillant* by Jean Graton, 1957) or superheroes both channeling and mirroring their powers by racing fast cars in their daily life (Hal Jordan in the second version of *Green Lantern* by John Broome, Gil Kane and Joe Giella, 1959; Johnny Storm in *The Fantastic Four* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, 1961). The most blatant example of this connection between the superhero figure – who essentially can’t die – and the manly display of driving at top speed can be found in *Robotman* (Arnold Drake, Bob Haney, Bruno Premiani, 1963). In this comic, the aptly named F1 racing driver Clifford Steele barely survives a terrible crash, after which his brain has to be transplanted into a robot, and he keeps reliving his accident through nightmares. Both mythologies thus feed themselves, building a figure of a superhero who sustains high levels of adrenaline in his down time and a racing driver who achieves the super-heroic fantasy of defeating death.

Paradoxically, while Formula 1 no longer has to deal so frequently with death, the staging of the racing driver as an immortal man voluntarily putting himself in danger has not disappeared. In this regard, no less than three documentary films or series re-emphasizing the dangers of the sport or nostalgically looking back on the perilous years of Formula 1 have been produced in the last decade. The titles *Grand Prix: the Killer Years* (Bigger Picture/BBC, 2011) and *1: Life on the Limit* (Paul Crowder, 2013) speak for themselves, whereas the current Netflix series documenting the ongoing

Formula 1 seasons has oddly been titled *Drive to Survive*, although the stakes of the sport no longer involve any actual *surviving*.

The 2020 Formula 1 season has officially been put on hold in mid-March by the FIA until further notice, due to the Covid-19 crisis. Since then, the community of F1 fans has been stunned and silent. The F1 teams, however, have not been. This is the first time that Formula 1 – along with every sport, for that matter – has confronted a crisis of this scale. Covid-19 has interrupted for the very first time the ritualized championship calendar; it challenges the sport to face death a different way and to take a public stand on the matter of actual *survival*.

On March 27th, Project Pitlane was officially launched in response to the UK Government's call for assistance, uniting seven UK-based F1 teams along with engineers at University College London (UCL) and clinicians at UCL Hospital, around the design and production of respiratory devices. Highlighting the fact that they are addressing the matter in their own way by doing what they do best – speed up – Formula 1 has publicly declared that “it took fewer than 100 hours from the initial meeting to production of the first device”[2]. To this day, the staff members of the seven teams are relentlessly working to honor an order of 10,000 respiratory devices.

Harnessing Formula 1's expertise in high-technological engineering and uniting teams in a collective effort to outpace death is one way to react to the crisis. Helmut Marko, former driver and current advisor of the Red Bull Racing Team (a participant in Project Pitlane), chose another.

As a guest for “Sport am Sonntag”, a TV program aired on Austrian National Television, Marko proclaimed on March 29th that since the F1 season was on hold, he intended to hold a kind of camp where Red Bull drivers would get inoculated with coronavirus, recovering in time for the championship's delayed start. This declaration appeared in The Guardian and The New York Post and spread widely throughout the sports community. By April 1st, Red Bull Racing had officially rejected this project with a statement dismissing Marko's provocative announcement as empty words, and by April 2nd, Marko had himself retracted his statement, emphatically declaring that he would never “send [his] children to war voluntarily”[3].

Whether Marko's assertion was merely a joke or referred to a serious initiative does not make much of a difference. In the sheer idea of braving a mortal disease rather than cautiously avoiding it, the fantasy of the superhuman racing driver resurfaces. Though death may no longer be an inherent part of the ongoing myth of Formula 1, the *hubris* of boldly – and in this case, stupidly – challenging death still finds ways to linger on.

[1] Matthew Walthert, « Formula 1 and the Relationship Between Death, Danger, Safety and Popularity », December 5th, 2013, *Bleacher Report*, accessed March 27th, 2020, <<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1888781-formula-1-and-the-relationship-between-death-danger-safety-and-popularity>>.

[2] Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile, “Design of New Breathing Aid Developed by Mercedes to Be Made Freely Available”, March 30th, 2020, accessed March 30th,

<<https://www.formula1.com/en/latest/article.mercedes-to-begin-delivery-of-10-000-breathing-aids-to-nhs-as-part-of.2xDeE5gsLUrSX7zmE4MeCx.html>>. Note about the article's title: "Project Pitlane" is largely led by Mercedes-AMG Petronas Formula 1 Team.

[3] James Benson, "Red Bull advisor Helmut Marko denies he wanted Max Verstappen and co to catch coronavirus", *Express. Home of the daily and Sunday Express*, April 2nd, 2020, accessed April 4th, 2020, < <https://www.express.co.uk/sport/f1-autosport/1263364/Red-Bull-Advisor-Helmut-Marko-Denies-He-Wanted-Max-Verstappen-Catch-Coronavirus-Covid-19>>.

Special thanks to superhero-lover Aurélien Lemant for his precious knowledge on the subject.

Cover Picture by Pauline Picot

Proofreading by Aude Claret