



Fortitude: Season 1 (UK 2015). Sky Atlantic 2015. Region 1. NTSC. US\$17.00.

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Equal parts police procedural, eco-terror, body horror and sf, the UK television production *Fortitude* blends genres. Foremost, *Fortitude* is Nordic noir, that is, crime fiction set in a bleak landscape with a morally complex plot and overall pervading darkened mood. The genre of Nordic noir emphasises a tension between the supposedly staid social life in Scandinavia (or some other northern country) and incidents of murder, rape or abject horrors that underlie a stable community. The setting of *Fortitude* is a fictional Arctic Norwegian community located on the Svalbard archipelago of the titular name. The show opens with a wildlife photographer capturing the flora and fauna of the Arctic, who encounters a polar bear brutally attacking someone. Presumably to protect himself, the photographer Henry Tyson (Michael Gambon) quickly exchanges a rifle for the camera but is intercepted by police chief Dan Anderssen (Richard Dormer), who

was already at the scene of the bear attack. The next scene follows two children, Hanna and Liam, wandering through a glacier and discovering what looks to be a large, prehistoric tooth in the ice. Simultaneously, a PhD student Vincent Rattrey (Luke Treadaway) arrives at Fortitude to work with Professor Charlie Stoddart (Christopher Eccleston) on research into aberrant and psychotic behaviour recently witnessed in apex predators, which is apparently caused by industrial chemical compounds. Stoddart, in the meantime, is conducting an environmental impact assessment for Fortitude's governor, Hildur Odegard (Sophie Gråbøl) who wants to build a glacier hotel in order to bolster tourism. Eccleston's character is found brutally murdered in his home by Rattrey, who is immediately jailed as a suspect in his death. Detective Chief Inspector Eugene Morton (Stanley Tucci) arrives in Fortitude to investigate these recent deaths. A rivalry emerges between Anderssen and Morton, because Anderssen doesn't believe his police department needs any additional support from the mainland in order to handle these investigations. Anderssen obstinately believes he has the resources to manage everything despite Fortitude having an armed population of 800, one doctor and only a handful of police officers.

Governor Odegard is implicated in Stoddart's murder because Stoddart was writing a report arguing against recommending the construction of an ice hotel when the possibility of a scientific discovery of such magnitude (the cache of frozen mammoth carcasses) was discovered. The carcass find is interesting, and it is here that the narrative crosses over into hard sf territory. The father of one of the children who discovered the tooth returns to the place where it was found and uncovers a complete mammoth carcass which had been preserved for millennia in the Arctic permafrost. With climate change causing permafrost to recede, bodies such as the mammoth's in *Fortitude* that would have remained undiscovered come to light.

Of course, in *Fortitude* the mammoth carcass is not the only prehistoric organism which arises from the frozen cold. Along with the mammoth, larvae which have never had contact with *Homo sapiens*, and have remained frozen for thousands of years, become reanimated. As they warm up, the prehistoric larvae seek new hosts and the warmest, most accessible hosts are the residents of Fortitude.

These two species have never existed simultaneously and reunited now, counter to evolutionary logic, they produce a host/parasite effect that ravages the residents of Fortitude. The narrative of *Fortitude* fuses into a hybrid of body horror and eco-terror. Psychotic behaviour and cannibalistic acts have now affected at least six characters in *Fortitude*, either as perpetrators or victims. The residents of Fortitude suspect a mass murderer, but Rattrey and another

scientist Natalie Yellburton (Sienna Guillory) frantically and pragmatically follow the scientific method in order to justify their hypotheses. The body count is high. The methods in which these characters die become abjectly horrific. Perpetrators who have come into contact with the larvae physically overcome their victims and vomit larvae into their body cavities, thus incubating more larvae. Stoddart's murderer is revealed to be Liam, one of the children who originally found the mammoth tooth. Fortitude's only doctor was attacked by her grown daughter, thus fostering a breeding ground for thousands of larvae. Hanna's father is zombified and overcome by larval infestation. Another supporting character, Elena (Verónica Echegui), is also a victim of larvae-induced psychosis resulting in uncontrollable murderous acts. The larvae emerge from host bodies in a way reminiscent of Wes Craven's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (US 1988) with insects erupting en masse from blemishes on people's skin. Along with body-horror, the show also displays elements of eco-terror in that nature presents a challenge to the human settlement in Fortitude. Threats from different aspects of the natural world; the reanimated prehistoric larvae; the effects of the infestation; the melting permafrost; and the always threatening sublime scale of the Arctic landscape, cause nature to become an inexplicable antagonist *vis-à-vis* the human characters.

The beauty of *Fortitude* is that it unfolds into a bloodbath, albeit at a glacial pace. The sf and horror elements are unveiled incredibly slowly, not culminating in anything substantial or particularly otherworldly until the last third of the season. Red herrings permeate the plot. Like *Insomnia* (Skjoldbjærg Norway 1997) the Arctic landscape in *Fortitude* is an inverse noir. Rather than a darkened, ominous environment in which the events unfold, the landscape is light-filled, as exemplified not only in *Fortitude* and *Insomnia* but also in films and television shows such as, *Fargo* (Coen brothers US 1996), *Kumiko: The Treasure Hunter* (Zellner US 2014), *The Thing* (Carpenter US 1982) and *Trapped* (*Ófærð*) (Iceland 2015–19). The eccentricity of the characters and the narrative structure resembles *Twin Peaks* (US 1990–91, 2017) as well.

Northern indigenous cultures do not feature as prominently as they should in season one; the only mention of indigenous knowledge or culture is the presence of a *tupilak*, a shamanic talisman that, rather than having any significant effect on the plot in *Fortitude*, simply serves to reify the theme of nameless evil. The psychotic, zombified child Liam clings vegetatively to a *tupilak* which has been imbued with the blood of a murderer (Gambon as Tyson) as a fetish object of sinister consolation. In the second season, however, this omission is somewhat remedied by including Sámi characters and communities as part of the plot.

Perhaps the most prescient subtext of *Fortitude* is the cli-fi, anti-capitalist undertones expressed through the mindless, zombie archetype and the potential for impending apocalypse. Despite being highly multicultural, *Fortitude* has aspects of pre-modern society, in that it has a small police force, while everyone in the general population is armed and lives off the land. The plot is a murder plot intermingled with a romance narrative in which a transcendent goal, the salvation or survival of the citizens of Fortitude, is sought. All the antagonistic occurrences happen because of something external to Fortitude. For example, the thawing mammoth carcasses (whose reanimated, incubating larvae cause psychotic breaks in host bodies) become a stand-in for commentary on climate change because the larval infestation and corresponding social breakdown disproportionately affect communities that are ill equipped to counteract it. The effects of climate change do not coincide with punishment for the people (or governments, industries or multi-national corporations) causing it. The true consequences of climate change are spread across to everyone else, least of all those who have caused it. Just as the larvae infection seems to be spontaneous and random, it is initially blamed on everyone and everything aside from the most obvious and logical (but yet still unbelievable) source.

Fortitude demonstrates similarities to and differences from the zombie archetype, exemplified in the early films of George A. Romero. It differs from classic zombie films in that the source of the infestation is a central concern. In Romero, the source of the zombie infestation is never a preoccupation; rather it is the zombies' effect on social structures (such as consumer society, racial norms, oppressive social and state apparatuses) that remains the focus of Romero's zombie films. Here, climate change is the culprit and the harbinger of deranged zombie outbreaks in a community that is highly under-resourced and that purports to be the safest place on Earth.

In *Fortitude*, the landscape emerges as a character and is interwoven into the plot at certain intervals. The stark, omnipresent Arctic landscape shapes the psychology of the human characters. The protagonists are multi-layered anti-heroes whose interpersonal relationships are psychologically complex. The distinction between good and evil is blurred and individual characters veer in and out of suspicion while obscuring the true culprit, which becomes evident slowly as the show progresses. Despite moments of abject body horror, the show is subtle and deliberate in its narrative progress and plot progression. *Fortitude* deftly blends sf genres to the point of subversion but never proselytises about the imminently real issues it addresses.

