



Films and pandemics: The poetics of perspective in *contagion* (2011)

Sapna Dogra¹

Abstract

Contagion (2011) is an American medical thriller about the spread of a deadly fictional MEV-1 virus and the struggles of researchers and health officials to identify, tame, and contain a fatal virus. The film brings forth everything that people around the world witnessed, be it quarantine, vaccine, social distancing, or isolation, to name a few, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper seeks to look at the film as a study of 'perspectives'. The poetics of perspectives runs through the film that lays bare different perspectives that individuals have towards the virus. The paper argues that given an existential threat, individuals lose focus and become slaves to political myopia. The film becomes important from a sociological point of view as a disaster movie that had an unsettling similarity with the onset of the 2019 Corona Virus pandemic. With a solid grounding in science, the film is a hyper-realistic and eerily terrifying premonition of what the world woke up to in post-COVID-19 times.

Key Words: *COVID, Contagion, virus, perspectives.*

Introduction

Contagion (2011) is a realistic American thriller about the spread of a deadly virus and global pandemic. Directed by Steven Soderbergh and written by

1 Dr.Sapna Dogra, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Government Degree College Sunni, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh University, sapnarm@gmail.com

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Scott Z. Burns, explores the spread of a virus that is transferred when ill people touch objects and leave the infection behind for others to catch. Following this are the hasty efforts made by public health officials to locate and control the illness, the chaos that develops during a pandemic, and finally the release of a vaccine to halt the spread. The film chronicles the struggles of researchers and health officials to identify, tame, and contain a fatal virus. It is an unsettling conjecture on the aftermath of a new airborne virus that infiltrates the human species and spread ruthlessly in a relatively short period causing widespread mayhem. As the real-life outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has expanded over the world there has been a surge of increased interest in the film. Since the discovery of the novel coronavirus in early 2020, Google searches for this spooky film's title have soared and have trended strongly on streaming platforms (Clark 2020).

The scenario that the film brings forth is already familiar to those who have witnessed the COVID-19 pandemic. Scott Burns, the screenwriter of *Contagion*, wrote in an email to NPR that the filmmakers wanted to tell the story of a “plausible” outbreak — “not a Hollywood exaggeration.” “We were trying to tell a story that was credible within the boundaries of scientific understanding, but also illuminate how our world might respond — that is why the poster of the movie says ‘nothing spreads like fear,’” he adds. (quoted in Kritz 2020)

The film brings forth everything that people around the world witnessed, be it quarantine, vaccine, social distancing, travel bans, testing, or isolation, to name a few, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nothing as such is alarming about the depiction of the pandemic in the film. Film critic Roger Ebert opines that,

The virus in “Contagion” is a baffling one, defying isolation, rejecting cure. This film by Steven Soderbergh is skillful at telling the story through the lives of several key characters and the casual interactions of many others. It makes it clear that people do not “give” one another a virus; a virus is a life form evolved to seek out new hosts — as it must to survive, because its carriers die, and it must always stay one jump ahead of death. In a sense, it

is an alien species, and this is a movie about an invasion from inner space.

Unlike the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) virus, MEV-1 (the name of the fictional virus in *Contagion*) baffles explanation. It is monstrous in its ability to defy cure and identification. It is clear that the virus in the movie is not human borne and seeks to move to the next host if the person dies. It clearly belongs to outer space and has alien features.

Poetics of perspectives

This paper seeks to look at the film as a study of ‘perspectives’. The poetics of perspectives runs through the film that lays bare different perspectives that individuals have towards the virus. The paper argues that given an existential threat, individuals lose focus and become slaves to political myopia. The film becomes important from a sociological point of view as a disaster movie that had an unsettling similarity with the onset of the 2019 Corona Virus pandemic (Sunder 2020). With a solid grounding in science, the film is a hyper-realistic and eerily terrifying premonition of what the world woke up to in post-COVID-19 times. The film has been compared to one of Soderbergh’s previous films, “Traffic”, which explored the illegal drug market through numerous storylines and from the views of many drug war players. (Kirsberg, 2011)

One of the major aspects of this heavily researched film is disorientation. The concerns of media, drug companies, and families are unfocussed. Even the subplot of the blogger, Alan Krumwiede is vague.

The plot begins with Beth Emhoff coughing in an airport in Chicago on her way back to Minneapolis from a business trip to Hong Kong. She soon starts having convulsions and foaming at the mouth. Meanwhile, people all around the world – in Tokyo, London, and Hong Kong – are experiencing the same symptoms. The film has parallel plots threads located in:

- **Minneapolis:** Beth meets her family and infects her husband Mitch (played by Matt Damon) and son Clark (played by Griffin Kane). Gwyneth Paltrow plays Beth Emhoff, a working mother from Minneapolis who has travelled to Hong Kong for a business meeting. She stops in

Chicago on her way back. When she returns home to her husband Mitch (Matt Damon), she gets a fever, seizures, and a major brain haemorrhage that kills her. Soon after, his small son dies as well. Mitch vows to do everything in his power to keep his adolescent daughter (Anna Jacoby-Heron) safe from the virus.

- **Around the world:** Other unsuspecting victims succumb to MEV-1 all around the world, including a London woman who dies in her shower and a Hong Kong guy who collapses in front of an oncoming lorry.
- **China:** Dr Leonora Orantes (played by Marion Cotillard) of the World Health Organization (WHO) begins tracing MEV-1 back to its original carrier in China.
- **Headquarters of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):** Dr Ellis Cheever (played by Laurence Fishburne), the agency's director, begins responding to the outbreak in the United States.
- **San Francisco:** blogger and conspiracy theorist Alan Krumwiede (played by Jude Law) hatches a plan to profit from the sickness. a one-man online effort to reveal an alleged conspiracy between governments and pharmaceutical companies to conceal the truth and finally manufacture a cure for maximum profit, claiming to have a homoeopathic medicine. He gives his version,

“First there were two people, then four, then 16. In three months it's a billion. That's where we're headed. The truth is being kept from the world.”

This epidemic causes a brief breakdown in the social order. The film depicts a fight against a terrible virus which brings out the best and worst in people. The director's ability to focus on the societal consequences rather than the virus itself is what distinguishes this piece from others in the apocalypse genre.

According to Smith, et.al. (2011). Various scenarios of pandemic planning, including quarantine and isolation, mandatory social distancing, vaccine research, and prioritization for access to treatment and prevention are all accurately depicted. And so, chillingly, is the human potential for fear and self-in-

terest. We see misinformation, deception, crime in the pursuit of self-protection, and the governments of countries trying to evade economically devastating publicity by hiding the facts.

The plot of the film looks like a mosaic of various perspectives of apparent contradictory viewpoints sans the melodrama usually associated with the disaster movie genre. According to Jolin (2011)

There is another important element to Soderbergh's nightmare scenario. This is not only a viral contagion, but also the spread of something far more virulent: panic. Scenes of people coughing and stumbling blearily, with stylishly defocused POV shots, are followed by even more troubling depictions of law-and-order breakdowns, with food riots exacerbated by widespread emergency-service absenteeism.

The movie also portrays what harm fake news can do on a global scale. Fake news about the cure of the deadly virus is circulated which creates panic spreading like fire at medical stores and hospitals. This creates chaos and extreme distress for people everywhere. People find it difficult to maintain calm and even take recourse to crime, *Contagion* becomes a vehicle to understand how news is consumed in the times of medical emergencies and the resultant problems it can create if it caters to false, exaggerated and unauthenticated information.

The video is supported by a purposeful educational objective, which aimed to increase awareness about the rising threat of novel viruses and pandemics, as well as what a public reaction should look like (Moore 2020). According to David Fear (2020),

Despite the gruesome scenes of people dying and overall sense that society is just one viral video away from sheer anarchy, it's a hopeful movie. Trust in scientists, and the innate decency in people, and we will prevail. Things fall apart, and then you put them back together again. Use common sense. Pray to your respective gods but also, y'know, wash your hands. It will get bad, the movie tells us. But it will also get better. People are probably flock-

ing to this movie to see what may be in store for us in the next month or so. That last bit of optimism it offers us couldn't have come at a better time.

The fictional "MEV-1" virus was first discovered in a pig that ate a piece of banana that was dropped by an infected bat that was fleeing the destruction of its palm tree forest habitat in China, according to the film "Contagion"'s concluding scene. After that, the pig is killed and cooked by a chef who, without washing his hands beforehand, shakes hands with Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow), infecting her with the virus. Emhoff is now known as the "index case," denoting that she was the initial example to be found.

This film is nothing but a wake-up call to regular folks, scientists, medical workers, pharmaceutical businesses, researchers, government agencies such as the CDC, and international organisations in the face of a pandemic.

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