

Contagion: The Compelling Thriller of a Prophetic Narrative during COVID 19

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Abstract

The trauma of the pandemic had raged sheer havoc for an entire year. In the light of the present predicament of this deadly pandemic COVID 19, the film *Contagion* (2011) seems both terrifying and prophetic. Although this thriller was released a decade ago, it successfully depicts with keen scientific precision and accuracy the destruction of devastation of human life as triggered by a virus. Much to the semblance of SARS CoV 2 that one has witnessed during COVID 19, the film evinces the sustainability of profound amidst disease, death and despair. Since it focuses more on facts rather than points of views and opinions, on sacrifices rather than avarice, heists and deceit, on selflessness rather than selfish motives, it stands as a monument of many exemplary that human beings can imbibe and embrace amidst a burgeoning crisis that threatens to annihilate the entire human race. This paper aims to seek novel perspectives on this film in the light of the present situation. Through a comparison with COVID 19, it is hoped that new insights to deal with the pandemic can emanate and help to restore the stability of life that we cherish.

Keywords: COVID 19, pandemic, human values, vaccine, disease, death

The global onset of the deadly pandemic COVID 19 since March 2020 has raged enormous loss of lives and taken a toll on the physical and mental health of people all over the world for more than an entire year. On the other hand, a vast gamut of the creative forms has articulated the general concern towards infirmities, healing or its apocalyptic consequences, even before the outbreak of this pestilence. Insights from the portentous but equally spine-chilling film *Contagion* (2011) can help allay our fears amidst this

crisis. The film projects facts with concise precision and abstains from dwelling on mere opinions or others' perspectives. Amidst the raging crisis, it upholds human values like altruism, unflinching support for the vulnerable survivors and the helpless. These are pitted against those who try to draw undue advantage of such a pitiable predicament. It would be rewarding to reflect upon these crucial messages that the film evinces without engaging in idle didacticism. An attempt has been made in this research to reflect upon the new perspectives that the film may bring into the pandemic and the post-pandemic era.

The film opens with the cough and a friendly conversation over the phone but intensifies in terms of action to depict the dissemination of a pandemic within a brief period. Much of the crucial information about the action or the occurrence in the film is revealed through a series of quickly flashing chyrons. It is interesting to note that the first scene of the film begins “Day 2” and not “Day 1”. The incidents of “Day 1” are revealed only at the end of the film which shows the first fateful transmission of the deadly virus, causing the pandemic from an animal to a human and the other humans. It is also devastating to see that the few “initially infected” persons are seen travelling through overcrowded modes of transit like an airport, steamer, taxi or buses. They are also found to be moving through overcrowded localities. The first few chyrons indicate that the country and its population. This shows the intensity of the possible transmission of the virus. The next set of chyrons indicates research laboratories in which specimens of the virus are examined and tested, particularly the Centre of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. The background score (non-diegetic soundtrack) features serious, fast-paced, low-pitched, electronic music that further shows the mounting of the crisis.

It accentuates the effect of the first few painful deaths that the victims of the virus suffer. The first twelve minutes of the film project six deaths in rapid succession in Kowloon, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Minnesota and London. The Centre of Disease Control and Prevention becomes the hub for scrutiny, debate, research and later even political conflict. It is evident that much of the scenes bear a striking resemblance to the global catastrophic occurrences and the consequent outbreak of Covid-19 has a deadly pandemic that capsized the lives of millions of people around the world. While a freelance journalist,

Alan Krumwiede (played by Jude Law), complains that the print media is dying, he shows how the posts on his blogs become crucial pieces of information for reliable news. It is also indicative of the role of the news media and social media in disseminating information during a crisis. It also shows how some bloggers generate misinformation through their rumour mills to earn millions of dollars at the cost of the gullible people who blindly follow them.

After the consecutive, abrupt and ghastly deaths of Elizabeth (Beth) Emhoff (played by Gwyneth Paltrow), her six-year-old son, Clark with whom she briefly comes in contact in her home, a butler in China (with a population of 96.1 million), a young woman in a hotel in London and a middle-aged Japanese man in a bus, the situation ceases to be just cases of encephalitis causing random deaths. It grabs the attention of doctors, researchers and important health officials from renowned establishments like the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva. To further aggravate the situation, the bereaved wife of the dead butler in Guangdong Province with the last remains of her husband and is found dead in a parked bus by a janitor. Kowloon is the most densely populated place in the world as projected in the film and Hong Kong is a harbour. After John Neale and his wife also get infected with the virus, the tone of the film becomes grim and depressing. The recent bout of rapidly spreading infections and consequent deaths prompt the experts at WHO to probe further to detect the possible spread through the recent travel histories of people. The local authorities quarantine the inhabitants in the Chrysanthemum complex in China (the butler's residence) and screen them for symptoms.

The research attempts by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention as well as the aggressive investigation by Dr. Erin Mears, an Epidemic Intelligence Service officer from CDC (played by Kate Winslet) bring renewed hope. Ever since her arrival after reporting to Dr. Ellis Cheever, a physician at CDC, she demonstrates her unflinching endeavours to bring the situation under control. Her overriding communication objectives was that they were "We're isolating the sick and quarantining those whom we believe were exposed" (*Contagion* 00:15:00, 599 -- 00:15:04, 126).

The appearance of Jory, Mitch Emhoff's teenage step-daughter, revives fresh rigour and energy in the film but also heightens the anxiety of the situation. The revelation that Elizabeth Emhoff was not a loyal wife before her death further upsets Mitch Emhoff (played by Matt Damon). The realism appears even starker when the unpalatable secrets of the Emhoff family, like Elizabeth Emhoff's relationship with her erstwhile lover, John Neale, are discovered by Dr. Mears who stumbles upon this fact while investigating Emhoff's death. Even a heavily populous city like Chicago (9.2 million) faces the hazard of such an infection. The Homeland Security suspects that someone would want to weaponise the bird flu.

The Department of Health in Minnesota is concerned about 47 cases and five deaths. Dr Mears who arrives there from CDC shares information about the nature of the virus which upsets the health authorities. They suspect that stern measures to contain the spread of the virus-like curfews may cause panic among the public. She explains the nature of the virus which is respiratory and transmits through "fomites" (*Contagion* 00:17:57-00:19:52) which refers to the transmission of the virus from surfaces. The reproductive rate of the virus (R_0) depends on the principle, for every person who gets sick how many more are they likely to infect. The reproductive rate depends on the incubation period, how long a person is contagious even without having symptoms and how large is the population of the people susceptible to the virus might be. This is closely similar to the growth of the virus during COVID 19. In the film, the virus rapidly spreads in schools and claims many lives.

By Day 8, the virus affected cities like Minneapolis, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston and Salt Lake. Within several weeks, WHO sends an epidemiologist, Dr. Leonara Ornates, (played by Marion Cotillard) to Hong Kong. She is commissioned to investigate the origins of the virus as Elizabeth Emhoff from Minnesota had travelled to Hong Kong (population 7.1 million) for her work. Dr. Ornates examines a two-hour security video footage on either side of the time of an ATM transaction that Beth Emhoff and had made at a casino in Macau. Irina, the Ukrainian returns Emhoff's phone which the latter forgets at the counter of the casino, then travels to London and dies there.

Dr. Ornates is abducted in the middle of her investigation by Sun Fing, a resident who faces a dire personal crisis as a result of the dearth of the vaccine. He takes her hostage for a ransom of the vaccine against the virus. (Soderbergh 2011) He knows that his village would be at the end of the line for receiving the vaccines. He takes this drastic measure to bring the last survivors of his village to the front of the queue.

Within the next few weeks, roadblocks are set up; trade and public transportation are shut down. The President is secretly moved underground. Congress in the US is figuring out ways to work online. The authorities are aware that once roads and transport will be blocked, the people in panic will queue up at the banks, gas stations and grocery stores wanting to hoard up their essentials.

Nobody can completely uncover how Beth Emhoff contracted the virus, not even her husband, Mitch, who stares sobbing at the pictures, she has clicked in Hong Kong with her digital camera until the fateful incidents of Day 1 are revealed in the scene. This makes it a high commendable thriller by a master-story-teller. Steven Soderbergh's magnum opus excels greatly in terms of cinematic appeal. The impeccable cinematographic appeal, the combination of long, mid and short bust frames and the judicious mix of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds make the film appear indubitably realistic. There is no narration in the film, but only chyrons and signages which speed up the pace of information, action and incidents in the narrative. The situations are viewed from the perspectives of multiple characters. For instance, Mitch Emhoff represents the heart-wrenching despair of an ordinary human being during the pandemic. The rapid spread of the virus is aptly justified by the choice of the genre and determined by the urgency of the narrative. The mis-en-scene of the film projects human actions and psyche very convincingly to the audience.

Scott Z. Burns, the scriptwriter of the film, claims 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" (Kritz Goats). This makes the film “an unsettlingly effective thriller” (Gleiberman PT) and a "pandemic procedural, one devoted to charting the how, when, where, why — and most importantly, what happens next" (Fear ET). Jeff Skoll, who assisted in financing

the film, perceived it as “an opportunity to raise awareness about pandemics so that medical experts could get more funding” (Farr EDT). Thus, apart from being entertaining, the film advocated a noble cause. Zhao, a researcher who documents his first-hand experience of COVID 19 in China rightly observes, “Health communication, in a consistent and rapid fashion, can efficiently shape the public risk perception” (Zhao 5).

The plausible details in the film had been augmented by the efforts of Burns who consulted the representatives of the World Health Organization in sumptuous detail about a contagious pandemic. Kate Winslet also worked with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to replicate the life and actions of an epidemiologist responsible for guiding the people through the pandemic (Rogers CNN).

There are several instances of wit, humour, repartee and irony in the film that offer light moments of comic relief. Dr. Hextal remarks about the virus: “It's figuring us out faster than we're figuring it out.” Dr. Cheever replies, "It doesn't have anything else to do," (*Contagion* 00:29:18 -- 00:29:20). Ian Sussman curtly tells Alan, “[b]logging is not writing. It's graffiti with punctuation,” (*Contagion* 00:22:09 -- 00:22:13).

Slugan describes *Contagion* as “a film about a global outbreak of an airborne virus relatively similar to Covid-19” (Slugan 1) The film prophesizes many issues that can be seen during and as an aftermath of the pandemic and bear a striking resemblance with the situation during and after COVID 19.

A lot of verified and unverified information and opinions get disseminated worldwide through the internet. Secondly, faced with the uncertainty of the availability of essentials people ransack and scuffle for resources, vaccines and even survival. Thirdly, hospitals are seen running out of capacity as well as medical staff and resources. Medical staff for health workers are underpaid and overworked; nurses go on strike. A large number of geopolitical powers came into play to decide about the distribution of vaccines and the priority of inoculating populations in their respective countries. It is challenging for patients to remain calm in the dire situation of scouring for vacant beds or a place in the ICU or waiting on long queues for medicines. The film also shines a light on the bitter fact that a government can rescue

Congressman on a holiday who has fallen sick by flying him home but cannot give any assistance to an emergency health worker (Dr. Mears) who was on the front-line duty and contracted the fatal infection. Such instances have also been witnessed during COVID 19 pandemic in large numbers.

The reactions of people in the middle of the pandemic and the burgeoning crisis offers a profound study of human nature and is a close representation of the calamitous predicaments during COVID 19.

Many connivers organise heists or use the crisis to their advantage. In the middle of a continually burgeoning crisis of the pandemic, some people lose faith in themselves and abandon the simple virtues of life that make them humane. For instance, freelance journalist Alan Krumwiede represents the community of people who spread misinformation, conceive and disseminate conspiracies theories about the pandemic that generates panic and desperation among the people. He falsely indicts the government of concealing important facts from the public to use the situation to their advantage. He broadcasts over the web that forsythia is the panacea for this pandemic and its demand causes chaos in the medical stores. He fakes the illness, consumes forsythia, proves through his blog that he is alive and thus convinces his 12 million followers on his blog, about the medicine which is not scientifically proven against the virus. Fearing to be exposed, he refuses to help a pregnant journalist with the medicine and the latter eventually dies. When Krumwiede is proven wrong, he is arrested on charges of deception and fraud. It is found that he had never really contracted the virus at all. However, he gets bail despite manufacturing rumours about the epidemic, false allegations about CDC, WHO and Forsythia and makes 4 million dollars.

On the other hand, the film projects a small minority of struggling individuals who altruistically give up their last resource or put themselves at risk to save someone else from the clutches of death or danger. This has also been noticed during and after COVID 19. For instance, in the film, Dr. Cheever, Dr. Erin Mears, Mitch Emhoff, Dr. Ally Hextall and Dr. Leonara Ornates are shining instances of this as they sacrifice their vaccines or resources for the benefit of others.

Dr. Cheever gives away his vaccine to Antony who is the janitor, Roger's young son. Dr. Erin Mears, on her deathbed during the final moments of her life, gives away her overcoat to another ailing

patient who is craving for a dry blanket. Dr. Orantes is shocked when she is told that the ransom given to her abductors and their villagers were just a placebo instead of the real vaccines. She knows that they would probably be the last recipients of the vaccine if at all they receive it. Without a second thought, she instantly heads back to her abductors who were direly in need of vaccines in a rural suburb of Hong Kong.

Dr. Ally Hextall is a key scientist at the Biosafety Level 4 Laboratory in CDC. When she is clueless about the nature of the mutating virus she sends the specimens to Ian Sussman, a well-known scientist of San Fransisco. Fearing media controversy, she requests him to destroy the samples, at Dr. Cheever's behest. However, Sussman observes the enormous potential of the rapid spread of the virus among unsuspecting people and continues his investigation without expecting any reward in return. He also sends some valuable inputs to the CDC without disseminating it among the public or selling his findings to the news media which could have been extremely lucrative for him. This shows his firm sense of integrity and research ethics.

Dr. Hextall also courageously tests the efficacy of the vaccine she invented on herself which is appallingly hazardous before releasing the vaccine for use from her lab. But she does it for the benefit of the others so that the approval of the vaccine may be hastened to meet the desperate demand for it. She does not even go to claim her share of the vaccine nor does she make tireless efforts in her laboratory in the hope of any acclaim. She derives inspiration from her ailing father and doctor who had provided unflinching care to his patients when he was well.

The frame narrative of the film is very matter-of-fact and prudently restrains any quintessential melodrama or loss of momentum. The number of characters is very large but their presence in the film is determined only by their relation to the pandemic. The dialogues are succinct and the description of scenes and facts are very precise. This makes it a very concise and well-edited film. The crumbling down of the social, political and economic order under the weight of a lethal virus can bring apocalyptic consequences. In the history of the apocalyptic genre of films, *Contagion* will remain an exemplary creation of a proven and plausible pandemic. Bearing a close resemblance to SARS CoV 2 that was found during COVID 19,

the film depicts the profundity of humanitarian values and an elaborate sociological study amidst disease, death and despair and hence it has resurfaced as ever more pertinent in the present day.

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