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Markets, Globalization & Development Review

Film Review

Steven Soderbergh, Contagion (2011)

Introduction

Rarely do works of fiction become relevant to future actualities – as Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film *Contagion* became – during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. The relation between fact and fiction is often retrospective; narratives that intend to interpret the historical events are naturally concerned with those of the past. There is a special hell – in the afterlife of narratives – for the ones that are written in future perfect tense, as 'speculative fiction'. This encompassing category of speculative fiction contains phenomena that do not exist in recorded history or in the current universe. Speculative fiction covers a range of genres such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, superhero fiction, alternate history, utopian and dystopian fiction, and supernatural fiction, as well as combinations thereof (e.g., science fantasy)".

What used to be called "science-fiction" and looked down upon by literary critics in modern times has gained a new form of legitimacy (and thus a new designation) over the past decades. This is not only due to excellent literary works produced in the genre starting from the 1960s, but also due to the cultural and economic shifts of the past few decades that made the world itself rather technological, rather 'futuristic', if not entirely 'scientific'. Yet, just like William Gibson's *Blue Ant Trilogy*, Soderbergh's film situates itself very close to the threshold of the genre that, in diegetic terms, is framed between the contemporary lifeworld and a possible/probable future. Gibson designates the genre of his trilogy as "speculative fiction of the very recent past" (Dueben 2020), a label that, *post facto*, describes Soderbergh's narrative perfectly. 'Contagion' is about what could have happened if an ultra-fast spreading and highly fatal new virus had led to a global pandemic in today's hyper-connected world.

Story and Plot

The story begins on the day after an American marketing executive, Beth Emhoff, contracts the virus on a business trip to Hong Kong. She dies two days later at her home in Minneapolis, after spreading the virus to her child and her former lover whom she secretly meets during her layover in Chicago. The film narrates the spread of the pandemic through several interconnected principal characters along a myriad of minor characters and plots. The connected plots include the following characters:

- The struggle of Emhoff's husband (who is apparently immune to the disease) in keeping his daughter isolated and surviving in course of the ensuing social unrest
- Dr. Ellis Cheever who directs CDC's (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) response to the pandemic
- Dr. Erin Mears who is an Epidemic Intelligence Service officer who contracts the disease and dies
- Alan Krumwiede who further elevates the social unrest with misinformation and conspiracy theories he spreads on his blog
- Dr. Leonora Orantes, a World Health Organization (WHO) epidemiologist who is kidnapped by poor villagers and ransomed for early access to the vaccine while tracing the origins of the virus in Hong Kong.

Soderbergh's critical commentaries are interspersed in various confrontations between the characters and along the composite plotlines: politicians prioritizing their positions against scientific advice and the public good, corrupt businessmen colluding with click-bait journalist/social media influencer for profiting from the panic, etc. Yet, beyond these customary and obvious criticisms of social and political institutions, an authorial statement on the human condition builds subtly throughout the story. The latent authorial-narrator voice is against the failure or incapacity of social institutions in responding to the situation, and affirms that what saves humankind is the compassion and reason that steer the principal characters' actions — neither their 'professional ethics', nor their 'scientific disciplines', but just practical reason guided by compassion. Soderbergh's epilog to the film, the short sequence that follows the finale, serves as a rather conspicuous statement pointing to another level of systemic failure. In a flashback, we see Chinese rainforests flattened by bulldozers, a bat flying from the razed palm trees and taking refuge at a pig farm, a piglet eating the infectious banana dropped by the bat, the piglet being slaughtered at the Macau casino by a chef, who Beth Emhoff congratulates after the meal by shaking hands with. This is the day one of the pandemic that the film skips in the beginning; such overwhelming cataclysm is not natural, it is not a matter of 'faith', it is the consequence of a chain of ecological disasters that is already underway, imposed upon us by unfettered global capitalism. The catastrophic 'event' starts way before the Patient Zero gets infected, Soderbergh reminds us.

A Documentary-like Style

Soderbergh's narrative relies on a solemn cinematography devoid of visual rhetoric, and highly economical, 'montage-like' editing with intervening collages of news footage, chaotic riots, desolate urban landscapes, images of panic and misery. Oftentimes mainstream Hollywood studio productions incorporate elaborately designed artificial lighting setups, lens effects, and film colors and filters to infuse the intended emotional state into visual composition of the shots and increase the dramatic effect of the scenes — that is what we mean by 'visual rhetoric' above. Whereas *Contagion*'s camerawork appears to be devoid of such elements — which gives the film a documentary-like look (another example is the 1983 TV film about nuclear holocaust in a Kansas town, 'The Day After'; see Schofield and Pavelchak 1985). Such devices, of course, are not usually available to actual documentary productions that are shot in real locations (instead of studios or staged settings) and documentary camerawork entails filming of real-life activities (often quickly, as they happen, without the chance of a retake) with minimal staging opportunities. As a general rule, the editing of a fiction film does not only refer to bringing consequential scenes together with respect to technical and aesthetic principles of spatial and temporal continuity among the shots, but used as a device to establish a rhythm in the flow of narrative, by regulating the pace of the actions and creating 'punctuations' for dramatic purposes. Whereas in documentary filmmaking, although creation of a rhythm as such is still a concern, the editor works with available footage (rather than multiple takes of already preplanned shots), and editing process takes the form of 'montage', in which it is not always possible to create a seamless continuity between the shots against the pressing need of constructing a story from unplanned and usually singular takes of the shots and the scenes. The editing of *Contagion* deliberately (or due to the film's production conditions) carries the latter quality; we frequently notice rushed cuts between the scenes before the action finishes, or late cuts into an already started action, discontinuities, and jump-cuts. These deliberate choices have an effect on the language of the film: they recreate the particular form of realism that is familiar to the viewer from the visual aesthetics of documentary films.

Along the main plotline, parallel stories connect, briefly link to each other, and disperse again; each character is alone in her/his struggle while the catastrophic event gradually unfolds, envelops, and consumes all. Peter Andrews's camerawork stays close to Soderbergh's subjects, and creates a sense of intimacy. Sparing use of 'establishing shots' (that define the spatial settings of each scene to the spectator in

cinematography) and intermittent cuts between parallel plotlines cross different locations around the globe, as well as different experiential layers of the event (Emhoff's husband tries to survive with his daughter in suburban Minneapolis, whereas Cheever is one of the people who oversee the global response) creates a temporal unity and continuity that disregards the spatial distinctions. Soderbergh's unpretentious storytelling subtly breaks away from mainstream narrative conventions; the gradual unfolding of the catastrophic event does away with the structuring of the traditional story arch, and multiple characters and their varied concerns and viewpoints (besides the branching of the plot into side alleys and occasional dead ends) establish a polyphonic and dialogic narrative form in the Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin 1984). The finding of the vaccine towards the final part does not serve as a catharsis (in the way traditional Hollywood narratives would have treated it) but a sober defeat instead — there is no 'happy ending' in this story. These cinematographic and narrative devices Soderbergh brings in from his past as the poster boy of American Independent Cinema movement of the 1990s work towards creating a documentary-like filmic language, and sustain a sense of realism in the film, rather than the alienation effect (the breaking of the illusion of reality in film) they would provide in most other dramatic contexts.

Fast Forward to 2020

All these narrative layers (the documentary-like visual style, coupled with sound scientific research that underlies the story, expanded composite plotline, and the contemporary diegetic settings) provide *Contagion* with a sense of realism that immediately makes it relevant at this time of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Such relevancy inevitably lays a trap for the post-pandemic audiences of the film; how successfully Soderbergh predicted what could have happened? Well, a storyteller's work is not predicting, but imagining, and Soderbergh does that quite successfully. Still, let's play the game and compare the reality with its foretold story — not to judge the relevancy of the film on this basis, but as a thought exercise, which could be productive for getting a better sense of our contemporary reality, the crises that unfold at this moment, and the event it signifies.

First of all, the medical/scientific reality that we became familiar with in the course of the pandemic (in '*Contagion*') reveals a false logic underlying the main premise of the narrative; an ultra-fast spreading virus (with basic reproduction number of four — meaning, on an average every infected person infects four others) with a very short incubation period (the

disease manifests itself in three days), and with immediate hospitalization, and 25–30% mortality rate that occur within the next few days after the onset. Today we know that a virus with these clinical characteristics would be relatively easier to contain because of the quicker hospitalization period and high mortality rate, as it happened with the MERS epidemic that started a year after the release of the film, and various Ebola outbreaks since 1976, which have been controlled relatively successfully. The spread of Covid-19 has been due to longer manifestation and varying hospitalization periods, and comparatively lower mortality rates. Obviously, the clinical characteristics of the disease in Soderbergh's script were amplified to achieve dramatic impact.

The more interesting difference is the social impact of the pandemic — which leads to widespread riots and social unrest in the narrative yet took entirely a different form in 'real life'. Contemplating on this difference could be a productive discussion. In her *Illness as a Metaphor*, Susan Sontag discusses the cultural fantasies built around two illnesses, Tuberculosis (TB) and Cancer, that correspond to two different cultural epochs (Sontag 1978). The cultural and linguistic constructs surrounding the illnesses have very little to do with medical science, but reveal certain cultural patterns and provide us with clues about the social transformation that took place between the two epochs — TB had a significant presence in 19th century public life, which was replaced by Cancer in modern times. It is interesting that Sontag's long essay (which is a valuable source for considering the public perception of widely common diseases in a historical context) appears to be a less relevant source for considering the impact of current pandemic than Soderbergh's film. The reason is obvious; illnesses such as cancer or tuberculosis are medical events that happen on/to the individual bodies; thus, the metaphors and fantasies Sontag had been concerned with what were ideological projections or perceptions concerned with the social subject, imposed upon the sick body from the social space that surrounds it. A pandemic, by contrast, happens to 'social body' in its entirety; unlike regular illness, pandemic does not leave a social space outside itself; it envelopes the whole society. Everybody gets sick in a pandemic — clinically, or virtually in a Deleuzean sense (Deleuze 1994). That is what Soderbergh's film reflects so powerfully; no one, no 'body' is left unaffected.

Yet, what escapes from Soderbergh's solemn imagination is the form of the body and the form of the affliction that the pandemic causes. Albeit capturing how pandemic invades the whole social body and its collective soul, the social form Soderbergh's film reflects is composed of social subjects that are not too distant from Sontag's affected bodies. That

is one of the points where the contemporary reality revealed by the 2020 pandemic significantly diverges from Soderbergh's fiction. Indeed, everybody gets sick in Soderbergh's film (again, literally or figuratively), but all in the same way, with the same intensity, as individuals — the fate and concerns of the janitor who cleans Cheever's office are the same as the fate and concerns of Dr. Cheever. Whereas in today's reality, although everybody still gets sick this way or that way, some lives are more disrupted, and some die more alone than others. The fact that black and latinx populations in US have higher rates of infection reflects only one aspect of how unequally pandemic afflicts different sections of the social body; the intensity of the social and economic disruption it causes vary profoundly among social classes.

In Sontag's analysis, the culture producing the fantasies around the illness changed between the time of TB and era of cancer, whereas the social construction of the corporeal body that fell ill remained the same. This had been the human body conceived as an 'affective vessel' in a truly Spinozist understanding; the individual corporeal body was affected by the disease on the one hand, and by the social fantasies built around the disease on the other. Such conception of body as an affective vessel becomes crystalized in the avant-garde artistic and social practices at the time of Sontag's writing, particularly in the performance art works that emerged in the same period. For performance artists such as Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and Carolee Schneemann among the others, the body was conceived as a corporeal machine that produced emotional, physical, and social effects and affects, and it had to be put into work in order to experience and explore the range and limits of these impacts. The body had to be used up in the process of experiencing the limits of what life has to offer, and the creative work had been derived from those experiences. Experimenting with drugs, sexuality, and foreign and alternative social situations and settings that characterized the cultural era was a general extension of the notion that became crystalized in such performance art practices; life as an affective experience, corporeal body as the site of that experience that is exhausted in the process.

What Soderbergh's film misses, and the reality of the current pandemic displays with clarity, is how such conception of body has been transformed from an "affective vessel" to an "economic vessel" in the higher biopolitical order of postfordist capitalism (Foucault 2007). As clearly expressed in the everyday practices of today's 'creative types', human body is now primarily a vessel of economic production which has to be well taken care of and protected from those sorts of external affections (and afflictions) — in a disciplinary and disciplining fashion — in

order to be 'productive'; eating healthy/organic food, exercising physical maintenance activities at the gym — or holistic versions of such physical maintenance (such as yoga and pilates), spending the leisure time with recreational activities rather than challenging explorations, etc. Such maintenance is not only a physical requirement; one has to take care of her/himself mentally as well, and avoid negative feelings, social confrontations, sadness, pain, and other kinds of potential emotional disturbances. Our bodies today are foremost perceived to be put into work at the office, or in the factory, to produce economic value in various forms, rather than producing social, physical, and emotional experiences out there in a wide-open world. In fact, they are not to be affected at all – in order to be able to sustain such economic productivity – neither with sadness, nor with joy.

Our collective response to one of the greatest imaginable afflictions has been conducted on these grounds and bares open the biopolitical nature of our contemporary social order. People did not riot in panic as in Soderbergh's film. Instead, they rebelled against not being able to work, or not being able to conduct business, in a semi-orderly fashion. For most, and certainly for the government institutions and markets, the pandemic appeared, first and foremost, as a global economic crisis that has to be tackled with economic means. Ongoing loss of lives at massive scales, the social and humanitarian crises that follow, have merely registered as triggers of (or "collateral damage" from) such global economic disruption. At the height the social and humanitarian crises (at the moment this essay is written, some countries, including US, are reporting highest daily infection rates since the beginning of the pandemic) finance capital is already looking ahead by trusting the economic measures being deployed, stock markets have already mostly recovered their losses. Soderbergh's film, in its excellent survey of the human condition, surely failed to anticipate the 2020 pandemic as the general injection and infection of the insidious 'homo-economicus' virus, pervasively and deeply, into the Body Politic and the Body Social; but, then, who could have?

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