

## COVID-19 and *Contagion*: Reassessing the Outbreak Narrative in a Post-Pandemic Vocabulary

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As COVID-19 first prompted lockdowns in early 2020, forcing billions across the globe into their homes, Steven Soderbergh's 2011 pandemic thriller *Contagion* surged in popularity. Many were stunned by the film's "uncanny" realism, while others were drawn to its exhaustive depiction of the pandemic experience (Moore, 2020). The film served as a representation of the pandemic arc, from discovery to response, that many in the United States had never experienced in their own real lives. While public understanding of pandemic life has developed significantly over the last two years, most of the common knowledge about viral outbreaks prior to COVID-19 was rooted in narrative: in films, television, books, and games, from the fantastical to the highly technical. Narratives such as these, including *Contagion*, were the backbone of our perception of the pandemic experience and played an important role in informing the public of pandemic preparedness and response strategies.

*Contagion* operates within two narrative spaces: what Priscilla Wald (2008), a seminal scholar in the field of plague fiction, terms the "outbreak narrative" and the more global and devastating "pandemic narrative." These narratives offer what Wald calls a "formulaic plot" detailing disease response and disaster within the professional and public spheres (p. 2). *Contagion* is both a reflection of this and more nuanced at the same time.

To interpret the role of *Contagion* in popular culture and narrative in the COVID-19 era, I will analyze the film through a contemporary socio-economic perspective that I call a "post-pandemic lens." This is not to be misconstrued as declaring that the COVID-19 pandemic is over. This is not a declaration over which I have any authority. Rather, I use the term "post-pandemic" to describe our collective state after having experienced pandemic life for the first

time, both at the beginning of the pathogen's outbreak and today. In its aggregate, this collective is the post-pandemic culture, in which our understanding of the pandemic experience is shaped as much by our own personal experience with viral spread as with narratives.

In this analysis, I will review some of seminal and contemporary literature in the field of outbreak narratives, through which we can analyze most works of plague fiction. Following this, I will offer a new reading of the film *Contagion* in the COVID-19 era using different scenes from the movie: disease spread, the role of professionals in outbreak mitigation, and the balance between a new and old world order. The results of this analysis, in my view, demonstrate that the pandemic narrative in the COVID-19 era is far more complicated than a more devastating version of the outbreak narrative. The reality is more nuanced, where the outbreak and pandemic narratives are balanced to create a new type of narrative. *Contagion*, in this sense, serves as a bridge between the pandemic narrative and its reflection in reality, where there are both parallels and contrasts between it and real pandemic responses.

## **The Outbreak and Pandemic Narratives**

### **The Outbreak Narrative**

Films and novels depicting infectious diseases are not a new phenomenon in popular culture. Outbreaks and pandemic responses have been the subject of novels as far back as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and more recent narratives such as Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* (2014), and the films *Outbreak* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1995) and *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011). However, extensive and comprehensive research of these works did not become more common until relatively recently. Priscilla Wald (2008) produced one of the seminal works in this field, using the term "outbreak narrative" to represent accounts of disease spread in fiction, science, and journalism. She defined the outbreak narrative specifically as a reference to the "paradigmatic story" represented in fiction and other writings, following a

“formulaic plot” that traces a disease’s identification to its eventual containment (p. 2).

Specifically, this plot begins with disease identification, follows the particular means through which it spreads, and traces the work of professionals (such as epidemiologists, bureaucrats, and others) as they respond to the virus, culminating in the eventual containment of the virus (Wald, 2008, p. 2). Within this plot, there are three major themes in the outbreak narrative. These are the use of a scapegoat, the balance between response and responsibility, and the representation of the development of a vaccine as the endpoint of a disease outbreak (McGuire, 2021; Kakoudaki, 2018; Wald, 2008).

Kelly McGuire (2021) discussed “plague narrative scapegoating tendencies” at length, using the film *Contagion* as the context for her analysis (p. 51). She explained how Gwyneth Paltrow’s character in the film, Beth Emhoff, who engages in an extramarital affair, is used as a scapegoat whose “moral failures” account for a cause of the pandemic arc where one is otherwise not visible (p. 55). She further contextualized this in the repetitive use of scapegoats in plague narratives, who have predominantly been women and minorities since the early twentieth century (p. 55).

Connectivity and collaboration among scientists is also a regular and necessary component of any outbreak narrative. Charles De Paolo (2006) echoed the importance of medical professionals and civil authorities in pandemic response narratives and termed the necessity of collaboration for managing the diseases in these stories as a “synergistic undertaking” (p. 172).

Even so, while outbreak narratives can display professionalism and the exceptionality of scientists amid an epidemic or pandemic, other scholars such as McGuire (2021) have noted their limitations. In particular, McGuire (2021) highlighted the phenomenon in *Contagion* of a vaccine being presented “as the end point of the arc of contagion,” which she claimed “conditions us” to believe that we can return to daily pre-pandemic life (p. 53). This theme is not only prevalent in

*Contagion* but in other narratives as well. Scott Mitchell and Sheryl N. Hamilton (2018) described a similar scenario in the video game *Plague Inc.*, in which players (who have created a disease to try to infect and kill every person on the planet) lose the game if a cure is discovered and distributed among the game population (p. 590).

Additionally, McGuire (2021) described the vaccine in *Contagion* as a “gift,” decoupling it from medicine and science (p. 51). Alex de Waal (2021) characterized this phenomenon as the “magic bullet,” where the vaccine emerges, the pandemic is contained, and all is “alright in the end” (p. 220). This vocabulary is a prevalent theme within outbreak narratives, where the science is cast aside, much like scapegoating is a commonality within outbreak narratives (McGuire, 2021, p. 51).

### **The Pandemic Narrative**

The outbreak narrative is not the only disease narrative, however. Mitchell and Hamilton (2018) drew a contrast between the outbreak narrative detailed by Wald (2008) and presented an increasingly common, contemporary alternative: the “pandemic narrative.” Mitchell and Hamilton (2018) described the pandemic narrative as “apocalyptic rather than redemptive,” a display of enduring diseases rather than overcoming them (p. 590). These narratives are, as Kevin C. Moore (2020) put it, “implicitly global,” while otherwise generally sharing the same characteristics of Wald’s outbreak narrative (p. 3).

However, while the difference is seemingly insignificant, Moore (2020) noted that films such as *Contagion*, which take on a global-scale outbreak and engage in the pandemic (rather than the outbreak) narrative, read as a post 9/11 crisis response artifact, characterized by meetings, bureaucracy, and considerations of bioterrorism threats (pp. 3-4). Mitchell and Hamilton (2018) also described this dynamic of the pandemic narrative as relying upon “biosecurity” — a massive professional undertaking — while also pointing out that the

“heroism” of scientists containing the spread of a disease is now “dated” as pandemic narratives depict more profound devastation (p. 590). Kakoudaki (2018) acknowledged this contradiction as well, describing the professionals in *Contagion* as “people whose actions combine duty and belligerence, professionalism and self-interestedness” (p. 319). According to these scholars, the pandemic narrative, rather than the outbreak narrative, offers a more nuanced representation of the spread of and response to a disease. Professionals still drive the response to and eventual containment of an outbreak, but they are imperfectly represented and finally achieve containment after much devastation has already occurred.

### **Dynamics of Response and Responsibility**

Despina Kakoudaki (2018), in a piece analyzing the use of melodrama in *Contagion*, went even further than McGuire (2021) by noting Emhoff’s sexual infidelity and her connection to the company whose deforestation practices led to the film’s pandemic. Kakoudaki emphasized this “narrative of moral responsibility” that falls principally on the individual but also implicates the corporation (p. 322).

Kakoudaki (2018) also observed elements of response in the film, where medical scientists are portrayed as heroes because of their work to prevent further spread, to help individuals in hospitals, to develop a vaccine, and to engage in basic acts of goodness such as giving one’s blanket to another for their comfort while they are sick (p. 319). However, she also emphasized the unique nature of outbreak narratives, detailing how *Contagion* interrupts the “network narrative” — whose plots rely upon global connectivity to drive a resolution — by creating a narrative in which connectivity itself is not only the network through which a virus may be contained, but is also the cause of the spread of disease (p. 320).

## **Balancing the Outbreak and Pandemic Narratives: *Contagion* Before and After COVID-19**

Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* offers a unique glimpse into the dynamics of the outbreak and pandemic narratives. The film presents a disaster scenario of the rapid spread of a contagious virus, called MEV-1, and tracks the social and economic fallout of the pandemic amidst a rapid public health effort to combat the disease and develop a vaccine.

Kakoudaki (2018) notes that the film utilizes a “self-conscious tone that emerged in action and disaster films” following 9/11, in which the events depicted in these kinds of films increasingly developed a sense of “political relevance and responsibility” (p. 317). I argue that *Contagion* goes even further and engages in a new narrative form, combining elements of both the outbreak and pandemic narratives, which has echoes of our experience with COVID-19 because it does not firmly rely on either narrative form for its structure. The following scenes that I present and explain are examples of this.

### **Initial Outbreak**

The balance between the outbreak and pandemic narratives is apparent from the very first scene of the film, which opens to the sound of Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) coughing in an airport in Chicago. Meanwhile, she eats from a community bowl of peanuts while she talks on the phone with the lover she just met on her way back from Hong Kong. Immediately recognizable are the elements of responsibility described by Kakoudaki (2018), as well as the “moral failures” that McGuire (2021) described when explaining Emhoff's role as a scapegoat for the cause of the pandemic arc in the film (p. 55). This kind of scapegoating operates firmly within the outbreak narrative. However, Kakoudaki (2018) also explains how *Contagion* goes even further. While Emhoff is the individual who bears responsibility in the film for the beginning of the pandemic, we see in the film's first sequence numerous shots with the logo of Emhoff's company, AIMM Alderson, prominently displayed on the documents Emhoff and

other early disease victims carry (Kakoudaki, 2018, p. 318). This places a broader sense of responsibility on the company, and although Kakoudaki (2018) argues that the film fails to fully develop this corporate condemnation by placing most of the blame on Emhoff (p. 322), the film's very inclusion of a larger political critique within its plot goes beyond the framework of the outbreak narrative.

Looking back on the film through a post-pandemic lens, these elements of responsibility are even more striking. Our experience over the past two and a half years has left us particularly adept at recognizing actions that are threatening to our health. For example, when viewing the opening scene, we are likely to question why Emhoff was eating out of a community bowl of nuts while she was coughing and clearly sick. Perhaps we can go further, and ask why the airport even has a community bowl of nuts available from which anyone can eat? *Contagion* was designed to draw our attention to these factors by using close-ups of different objects and rapid cuts between each shot, such as close-ups of a bartender taking Emhoff's credit card and Emhoff's driver taking a pen she just used to sign an AIMM Alderson document. However, these scenes become much more noticeable after having been exposed to a pandemic lifestyle for such a long time. As such, we recognize these different actions (eating from the peanut bowl, handing the credit card to the bartender, and more) as health and safety violations, further feeding the responsibility we place on Emhoff. This, in addition to the film's obsessive inclusion of the AIMM Alderson logo in so many of the shots in the opening sequence, creates a divided sense of responsibility for the pandemic's beginning. This creates a balance between the outbreak and pandemic narratives, allowing *Contagion* to operate within a third and unique narrative space that is familiar to us. Our experience with COVID-19 has been plagued with accusations of responsibility for causing or contributing to the virus's spread, from individuals who refused to

wear masks in public spaces to broader institutions, such as schools and corporations, and the decisions they made regarding the virus.

### **Representation of Medical and Scientific Professionalism**

As is the case with most disease narratives, medical professionals are one of the central representations in *Contagion*. They are the characters that drive the response to the MEV-1 pandemic, beginning with its discovery, continuing through mitigation efforts, and ending with vaccine development. If this sounds familiar, that is because it is nearly identical to the “formulaic plot” described by Priscilla Wald (2008, p. 2). Make no mistake, though, because themes of the outbreak narrative related to the role of medical professionals are not only present in the plot of *Contagion*. Rather, elements of this narrative are also present within specific scenes in the film, and they present themselves through both dialogue and a visual vocabulary. For example, many of the film’s scenes depict varying levels of professional work. Some of the most common settings in *Contagion* include conference tables, laboratories, and offices. Even more common are scenes where the characters use hyper-technical terms like  $R_0$ , *receptors*, *fomites*, and *quarantine* or *isolation*. These settings and vocabulary present an implicit trust in medical professionals and scientists at large, particularly where their expertise likely eclipses our own.

There are two scenes that represent these elements perfectly. In one of these scenes, Dr. Ally Hextall (Jennifer Ehle) is depicted explaining the scientific properties of the film’s MEV-1 virus to her superior, Dr. Ellis Cheever (Laurence Fishburne). During this sequence we see a side angle, close-up shot of a large computer screen with numerous pop-up windows, color-coded graphs, and a model of the virus attaching itself to a human cell. Dr. Hextall easily interprets these data displays, using familiar language in an academic context. For example, she describes how the “viral attachment protein” connects to the human “receptors [that] are found in the cells of both the respiratory tract and the central nervous system.” The use of such a technical visual



vocabulary and scientific jargon creates an implicit sense of trust in these professionals. By creating a perception of absolute expertise, we are led to believe that these medical professionals are reliable and able to combat the growing pandemic. This type of depiction is a quintessential outbreak narrative representation of a medical professional working to learn more about a deadly disease.

Beyond professional competence, *Contagion* also relies heavily upon depictions of medical professionals as heroic. This is most recognizable in the final moments of Dr. Erin Mears's (Kate Winslet) life. As she sits sick in her bed at a pop-up hospital, the man next to her desperately asks for a blanket. Dr. Mears, barely able to move, takes her jacket up and places it next to the man: a last heroic act by the consummate medical professional. This scene is a textbook example of the outbreak narrative, its depiction of a scientist so pure and so dedicated to helping others that she would give her jacket to another man in need even when she was in need of it herself. It is a display of self-sacrifice in a situation where most people would choose to hold on to everything they have left, and it stands in stark contrast with the film's depiction of a selfish general public.

However, when Dr. Mears dies and we see her lifeless face in the same translucent body bags of the dead masses in the film, we lose our collective hope for humanity's survival. This is the great tragedy linked to the pandemic narrative: that a medical professional so dedicated, intelligent, and good does not survive. Her death scene is symbolic in a way. We do not see her suffering. There are no visible seizures nor clear signs of her infection immediately prior to her death. Instead, we see one last simple act of heroism followed by the image of her dead body. This can be viewed as the ultimate loss of the outbreak narrative professional, a loss that not only represents the death of a specific character, but also the death of an entire type of character within the outbreak narrative form. Even her very illness presents a vulnerability that is

predominantly a theme in the pandemic narrative. The film elicits in us a complete loss of hope when she succumbs to coughing fits and calls Dr. Cheever from a gloomy room, nearly enveloped entirely in darkness, to tell him, “I’m sorry I couldn’t finish” the job.

Does this mean that *Contagion* effectively subscribes itself to the pandemic narrative, and in doing so rejects the outbreak narrative? Some, such as Mitchell and Hamilton (2018), might argue that it does, pointing to this scene as an example of the profound devastation typical of pandemic narratives (p. 590). They could, for example, point to Dr. Mears’s death as a symbol of what they characterize as the “dated” nature of scientific “heroism” in narrative (p. 590). It is, to put it bluntly, as dead as Dr. Mears is. However, I disagree with this view. Without a doubt, Dr. Mears’s death is in line with the elements of the pandemic narrative. That said, the film does not maintain this narrative form consistently throughout the rest of its plot. It is only through the continued efforts of other medical professionals, such as Dr. Ally Hextall, that the MEV-1 virus is contained. Dr. Hextall’s selfless injection of a largely unsuccessfully tested vaccine into her own body is what leads the way to its eventual approval for distribution. Thus returns the heroic medical professional, whose sacrifice and hard work help develop the vaccine that ends the pandemic arc. There are, therefore, continued elements present of the outbreak narrative.

Of course, I acknowledge that many of these professionals are still portrayed in a flawed, nuanced way. For example, Dr. Cheever uses confidential information about the impending lockdown of Chicago in order to alert his girlfriend to leave the city, a clear breach in ethics. In this sense, *Contagion* depicts a flawed response to disease spread in a way that lines up perfectly with the pandemic narrative as Mitchell and Hamilton (2018) have outlined it. I still contend that the pandemic narrative is not an accurate label for the film. Consider that the general public is nearly wholly reliant on scientists and medical professionals to combat the MEV-1 pandemic. *Contagion* displays a broader public who break into stores, fight for food and medicine, burn

buildings, leave trash in the streets, and descend into absolute chaos and panic. While this kind of devastation may align with the pandemic narrative, the fact that it leaves the response to the pandemic solely in the hands of scientists and professionals leaves substantial elements of the outbreak narrative remaining in the film.

Therefore, *Contagion* offers a more nuanced depiction of professionalism and pandemic response than either the pandemic or outbreak narratives, providing more evidence that the film uses a third kind of narrative form. Again, this form is familiar to us because it has many echoes of our experience with COVID-19. Medical professionals such as Dr. Anthony Fauci dominated the news cycle and often led the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortly after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, public confidence in medical scientists increased. In April of 2020, 43% of Americans indicated that they had a great deal of confidence in medical scientists in a Pew Research poll, while another 46% indicated a fair amount of confidence (Kennedy, Tyson, & Funk, 2022). This level of confidence, however, later declined as the pandemic waned on, demonstrating that medical professionals are not wholly revered and trusted as they might be in an outbreak narrative setting (Kennedy, Tyson, & Funk, 2022). *Contagion* represents this middle ground in the narrative form.

*Contagion* does heavily rely on a vaccine as the end of the pandemic, which is a staple of the outbreak narrative. In fact, there are some scholars, such as McGuire (2021), who argue that the film's depiction of blind acceptance of the MEV-1 vaccine underprepared the medical field for popular resistance against taking the COVID-19 vaccine. That said, I would argue that the film only misplaced the politics of the pandemic. Rather than portraying parts of the population that deny the severity of the pandemic and a president that spreads disinformation (as was the case with COVID-19 in the United States), *Contagion* instead illustrates a public that recognizes the severity of the pandemic but is woefully misinformed by Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law), a

conspiracy theorist and blogger who promotes forsythia as a “cure” for the MEV-1 virus in order to earn a profit by boosting its stock market valuation. The film, then, does miss on vaccine hesitancy through its outbreak narrative depiction of a vaccine as the end of the pandemic arc. However, it still represents the rampant spread of conspiracy theories. Furthermore, it suggests that vaccine uptake may not be as universal as it may seem on the surface, as Krumwiede gains a massive following throughout the course of the plot, to the point where his supporters raise millions of dollars to help him make bail after having been arrested for securities fraud. This, too, demonstrates *Contagion*'s adherence to a third and different type of narrative, one that imperfectly but still better reflects the reality that we are experiencing in the COVID-19 pandemic years after its release.

### **Resolution of the Film**

In one of the last scenes, Jory Emhoff finally gets to have a prom with her boyfriend. In a way, this scene is emblematic of the bridge between the outbreak and pandemic narratives. While Moore (2020) and Mitchell and Hamilton (2018) propose that the pandemic narrative ends in devastation, *Contagion* bears more resemblance here to the outbreak narrative and containment as the end of the pandemic arc. This prom is only possible because her boyfriend received a vaccine protecting himself against the virus. As a plot point, this is tied into the outbreak narrative and vaccination as the end of Wald's (2008) “formulaic plot.” However, the scene also offers a unique dynamic. While there is an implicit new world order present given the destruction and tragedy throughout the film, *Contagion* still ends with the reintroduction of the old world order by using the prom as a concluding plot point. The result is a successful balance between the fundamental characteristics of the outbreak narrative and the nihilism of the pandemic narrative.

These scenes now bear a new significance in post-pandemic culture. The dynamic of an old world phenomenon, the prom, in a new world setting, within isolation in the midst of a pandemic, reflects much of our experience as many countries try to return to “normalcy.” The scene’s implicit balance between the new and old world orders creates a sense of the unnatural that is meant to make viewers uncomfortable, a foreign feeling prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the post-pandemic lens, this scene reads differently as a reflection of the unnatural balance between our old way of living and our pandemic-adjusted living that can be characterized as the “new normal.” Rather than reading this scene simply with a vocabulary of discomfort, we also read it with a vocabulary of adaptability. Emhoff cannot create a real prom, so he makes one with pandemic adjustments. This has echoes of the adjustments society is actively making in reality: wearing masks on airplanes, working from home, and using contactless payment methods, among others.

### **Conclusion**

*Contagion* can be used as an example of a “third way” of viewing plague fiction, one that shares characteristics of the outbreak and pandemic narratives while also acting as a bridge to the representation of pandemics in the COVID-19 era. As a work of fiction, it is important to note that the film cannot be construed as predictive of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not the argument that I have placed in this paper. Rather, *Contagion* is a film that reflects the changing social forces that surround pandemics and disease outbreaks. Narratives prior to the film relied either heavily upon the outbreak narrative, such as the film *Outbreak*, or the pandemic narrative, such as the novel *Station 11*. *Contagion*, however, combines these two narratives into a more nuanced, third narrative form. This complicated display of professionalism and responsibility has echoes of the COVID-19 pandemic that are either partly or wholly missing in other works of disease fiction. Going forward, future research will need to be conducted to examine how real

pandemics, such as COVID-19, interact with narrative forms, which could potentially change how narratives are created in the future and how real pandemic responses are crafted. These will both have major implications regarding the health of the public and its social fabric in the years and decades to come.

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