



Cinema and the COVID19 When Fiction Meets Reality in Steven Soderbergh 'Contagion' 2011

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Abstract ;

The present work outlines the relationship between the movie fiction and reality the case study in this study is the movie Contagion(2011) directed by Steven Soderbergh. The work tries to focus on the way of building the movie to present fictional facts of a world pandemic situation and its main issues. Nine years later, the movie becomes a reference in terms of prediction after the spread of COVID19. The similarities between the movie and the reality of the crisis put forward the role of the cinema industry that goes beyond its simple entertaining role.

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1. Introduction

In 1927 Fritz Lang directed 'Metropolis ', a science fiction drama based on a novel of the same title written by Thea Von Harbou. The movie is a vision of the future industrialised consuming society and its effects. The movie bridged the gap between cinema and society as far as it was the first movie to predict the future, not as a world of technology and human comfort but as a disaster time caused by what people are dreaming of. Since then, cinema, led by Hollywood, attempted to go beyond its main role of diverting the spectators to play a role of informing, warning and improving the society. Steven Soderberg 's 'Contagion' is one of the best examples of the role of cinema in predicting and dealing with a pandemic situation, a crisis that can hit the world at any time. In 2020,

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the world witnessed what is colloquially known as 'when fiction meets reality'. *Contagion* becomes a reference to a disaster movie based on scientific predictions close to reality. This work focuses on the analysis of the crisis portrayed in the movie by analyzing the main elements that contribute to its double fame waves nine years after its first presentation.

2. *Contagion, the Predictive Movie*

Contagion is an American movie released in 2011, a thriller that portrays the world situation after the spread of a deadly virus rapidly affecting people worldwide. Steven Soderbergh, the filmmaker, is a well-known film director in the cinema industry thanks to his long list of famous films like 'Iris Brokovic' (2000) academy awarded part of the movie franchise that Ocean's Eleven (2001), Ocean's Twelve (2004), Ocean's Thirteen (2007), Unsane (2018) and many other famous Hollywood movies. The movie gathered a list of stars from some Academic Awards winners such as Matt Damon, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Winslet, Marion Cotillard and nominees Jude Law and Laurence Fishburne. It received many awards, among them the festival movie awards, and the film earned 165 million dollars for a 60 million budget. It witnesses a real coming back during 2020 by the outbreak of COVID 19. The movie that has been described as *a fertile ground for cultural studies, movies presents a complex system of signs, values, beliefs, and narratives, which are embedded within the social consciousness of the time.* (Korstanje, Skoll 2015)

2.1 *The Movie Heroes*

Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) was the first infected by the disease. She is Mitch Emhoff's wife. She is also the mother of a son Clark from a previous relationship.

Mitch Emhoff (Matt Damon) represents the 'common man' In the blink of an eye, he loses his wife and stepson because of the disease and must piece his life back together for himself and his daughter. Luckily, when he finds out that he is immune to the disease, he can better act on behalf of his and his daughter's interests, but he still faces extraordinary circumstances with few resources. He is presented as a simple citizen whose main goal is to survive and save his family, especially his daughter.

Dr Leonora Orantes (Marion Cotillard) is an epidemiologist and member of the World Health Organization. She has a mission to find the origin of the virus MEV-1. Leonora is in the first line of the fight on the scientific and social sides of the pandemic situation when she travels to Hong Kong. She is kidnapped by a group of those who claimed the vaccine in exchange.

Dr Ellis Cheever (Laurence Fishburne) is a physician working for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). He represents the scientists working for the government and the brave man who did his best in order to save his family.

Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law) is an eccentric freelancer who spreads conspiracy theories about the disease, which fuels panic and fear among the public. He pretended that he knew all the government's secret affairs and that the vaccine was only part of the big pharma secrets. He

enhances people to use forsythia as a cure for the disease. Finally, Alan is arrested for fraud and conspiracy.

Dr Erin Mears (Kate Winslet works for the CDC and has the mission to travel to Minneapolis to investigate the American origins of the disease. She has been infected and dies at the end.

Dr Ally Hextall (Jennifer Ehle) is a scientist with the CDC who invested herself in the research and finally discovered a vaccine. She decided to break all rules by using her father to test her antivirus.

The movie is a multi-protagonist story; all main characters are considered heroes as far as Steven Soderbergh used parallel narration technics.

3. The Plot of a Crisis Movie

The film's plot is about global crises that hit the whole world due to the deadly outbreak of virus variant disease. The sudden and rapid spread of the virus leads to death, terror, panic, and chaos worldwide. Under a wide popular pressure, the world scientific committee tried to find a medical solution to overcome the fast pandemic growth.

The film or the story started with the unexplained death of Beth Emhoff, who died after her coming back from Hong Kong, where she travelled for her work. Soon after, her son followed his mother with the same manner and symptoms. Her husband, Mitch, has been put in a quarantine program; they were the first victim of a long list of victims of this new pandemic wave. Immediately, the World Health Organization reacted by sending a medical team to Hong Kong led by the epidemiologist Dr Lenora. Her first mission is to find what is known as patient zero or the origin of the epidemics by investigating and tracing the chain of people who got in contact with the first victim. On the other side of the Atlantic in the USA, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) tried to contain the epidemic zone by finding those in contact with Beth's family; for that, Dr Erin Mears arrived in Minneapolis, Emhoff's homeland.

The different measures taken by the CDC aim at gathering the maximum of data that could permit them to elaborate a technical and biological datasheet to allow them to find an antiviral or a vaccine to eradicate this virus. Meanwhile, the virus zones appeared in different world areas resulting in a pandemic situation.

The pandemic shockwave affected all fields due to the confinement measures that put people in quarantine programs. The world economy collapsed, politicians were helpless, and despair dominated the society. The chaotic atmosphere dominated the planet; the only hope was between the hands of scientists who fought to find a medical solution. Mass media attempted to calm the population, who are influenced by the social network, by attacking bloggers who spread the idea of conspiracy among citizens personified in the character of Alan Krumwiede, a journalist blogger who spread a rumour that he cured himself with forsythia. That rumour caused panic rush of buying, widespread looting and violence. The filmmaker divided the movie into three main stories at the same time: the scientific committee, the journalist blogger and the confined simple people.

The movie ends with a flashback scene that shows the cause of the virus. A bulldozer on a construction site knocked a tree down, destroying the bats' nets in it. One bat flew over a pigsty, dropping a piece of banana. The virus passed from the bat to the pig, and then the infection started in a restaurant when Beth ordered a pig dish.

Soderberg used two technics in building the movie scenography: the parallel narrative and bookend flashback. In the parallel narrative, the whole movie is based on three different stories that portray the movie story from three main angles:

The social pandemic situation is narrated through Beth Emhoff's story, who had a layover in Chicago on the way home from a business trip to Hong Kong. She took the time to see a former love before heading home to Minneapolis, where her husband, Mitch, and her two children were. Two days later, she experiences a seizure and dies at the hospital in an unknown condition. Her son Clark dies in the same manner. Mitch, on the other hand, is immune to any virus and returns home to his teen daughter, Jory. Mitch starts his journey in finding a way to survive and to save his daughter in the time of confinement by facing all the daily problems resulting from the pandemic situation, the decrease in food distribution due to the blackout of factories and the collapse of the world economy, the violence of the street caused by the wave of panic and terror that affected all people, the immunity of Mitch made him alien of the community and not exceptional. His situation seems to be worse because of his daughter's teen girl that rebelled against the situation, and his main aim is to protect her because she is his only family that rests and because she risks a sudden infection since she is not naturally immune. The protocol of quarantine and confinement issued a lot of struggles in his house and his relations. This first story describes with exactness the social reaction to such kind of unusual crisis.

The second story is that of the scientific community's reaction towards the virus, in which the director wanted to explore and portray the scientific committee and their daily fight against the virus by choosing some main characters who took the responsibility to investigate the causes and then find the antiviral that can save the world. Representatives from the Department of Homeland Security convene in Atlanta with Dr Ellis Cheever of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Cheever suspects that the disease is a bioweapon released in time for Thanksgiving when people spend time together with the most; the weaponised disease can do the most damage at this time. Cheever sends Dr Erin Mears, who works for the Epidemic Intelligence Service, to Minneapolis to speak to Mitch Emhoff because Beth has been identified as patient zero. After travelling to Minneapolis, Mears also becomes infected and dies. Dr Ally Hextall has been studying the virus. She finds that it is a mixture of genetic material from viruses that typically infect pigs and bats. Another doctor, Dr Ian Sussman, defies instructions to destroy all of the sample cells so that he is able to use samples to grow the virus and help devise a vaccine. At this time, it is also determined that the virus spreads by contact with inanimate objects. Dr Cheever is under investigation because he told his family and friends to get out of Chicago before it was quarantined. Hextall, meanwhile, is confident that she has developed a vaccine and is anxious to test it out. She does not want to wait for the informed consent of patients who already have the virus and so she vaccinates herself and then visits her father, who has the virus. She does not contract MEV-1, and so the vaccine has been

announced a success. Vaccines are issued via lottery as the death toll worldwide rises to twenty-six million.

World Health Organization epidemiologist Dr Leonora Orantes is kidnapped while doing research in Hong Kong, a manoeuvre orchestrated by a Chinese official named Sun Feng, who wants to use her as a money exchange in order to get the vaccine for his small village. Vaccines are provided, and Orantes is released, but on her way out of town, Orantes learns that the vaccines provided to the village were placebo.

Soderbergh focused on the scientists who are at the first rank to fight pandemic situations not only by investigating or analyzing the situation but also by facing the social reaction. The character of Dr Leonora Orantes's story shows the hostility of people, which is a natural reaction against unknown danger. It is the prediction of different sociologists and psychologists about people in such situations, mainly when the question of their survival is concerned. The infection and death of Dr Mears is the symbol of the sacrifices given by the scientists and health community during the pandemic situation. The scenes related to this part of the movie show, at the same time, the scientific and humanistic sides of the medical and scientific community. The character of Dr Cheever is in this movie a symbol of the scientist, the politician, and the father at the same time. His first reaction as a scientist was when he applied the scientific investigation protocol at the head of the CDC, the first medical and scientific institution that called for such a situation in America. However, Cheever played another role as a politician when he made his first deductions that the virus is a biological weapon spread in the United States of America, which is mostly represented by different politicians to cover their inability to control the situation. The father, Dr Cheever, took the risk of asking his family to leave Chicago before the quarantine federal decision announcement, which is forbidden. It is also clear when he calls Mears and discovers that she is infected and he is helpless for her.

Both Dr Hextall and Dr Sussman are symbols of the scientific dilemma in a pandemic situation; following the world health organization's steps for finding, testing and producing vaccines that take years and millions of people would die meanwhile, or breaking the rules for an end that could save the world. This is well known among the scientific community as the medicine of war where the laws, protocols and rules are not respected for the sake of saving lives, as it is well explained in the works of R. Elwood Jones in his writings about the *Development of Medicine during the Wars* or in *Medicine and the Goodness of War* by Roger Cooter.

The third story is personified in the character of Alan Krumwiede, a free social media reporter in San Francisco who believes that the virus is a governmental conspiracy in order to increase the selling rate of medical products and then ensure the Big Pharma domination. As it is clearly explained in the following quotation:

Big Pharma' is shorthand for an abstract entity comprised of corporations, regulators, NGOs, politicians and often physicians, all with a finger in the trillion-dollar prescription pharmaceutical pie. Eliding all of these separate entities into a monolithic agent of evil allows the conspiracy theorist to mistakenly ignore the complex and conflicting interests that they represent

(Blaskiewicz,2015)

Alan posts videos pretending that he has cured himself by using homoeopathic medicine. In the clothes of an astronaut, the superhero incites people to use forsythia as a natural and biological solution against the disease. This led to a real rush after pharmacies to get the forsythia extracts. Krumwiede's story ended with a scandal. People discovered that his miraculous cure was a fake product aimed at increasing the sales rate. He is arrested finally and charged with fraud and conspiracy. The third story is a warning to people about how to deal with the different information spread through mass media, whether the 'classical' channels or that of the social networks. The effects of the 'buzz' videos and fake news are part of the social aspects and popular culture, which encourage some untruthful people to seize any opportunity for their self-enrichment.

Although the denouement of the story, or the three stories, comes with the discovery of the vaccine and its mass production, the last scene presented, in the form of a bookend flashback, reveals at the same time the past and future: it explains the origin of the pandemic situation and a caution about the permanent risk of such crisis in the future by showing the simplicity of the chain reaction caused by two peaceful animals disturbed by the man hands.

4. Contagion: the Reality in a Fiction

In 2020, the world witnessed the emergence of a pandemic situation caused by a coronavirus mutation genre called COVID19. The rapid and surprising spread of this new disease put the planet into real chaos; the health system weakness, death, world economic collapse, and inefficiency of the political decision threatened the modern civilization. The situation reminded people of the prediction of a movie produced in 2011 that narrated the same story.

Contagion witnesses its second wave of fame throughout social media, a movie that reached a high rate of uploading or watching during the period of confinement.

During the initial lockdown in early 2020, in order to reduce the rate of COVID-19 transmission, Kritz (2020) reported that the film entitled Contagion (2011) has been on the rise. It became No. 10 most rented or bought on iTunes. It also became more famous in the Google search engine in early 2020. (Arifa, Waluyo, 2020)

The main reason behind this sudden second success is the strange similarity with the 2020 pandemic situation. The storyboard of the film and its scientific accuracy is so close to reality that it opens the door of imagination for people about the COVID 19 conspiracy theory. In fact, the filmmakers, including the screenwriter and the director gathered the maximum data about the scientific prediction of a pandemic situation in the future and how the world can react to solve the situation. The risk of virus mutation and its rapid and deadly spread is the subject of scientific community studies years before the disaster. Even the authorities were alerted about the future situation. Steven Soderbergh realized the movie as a warning for all people to prepare themselves. However, it takes time, nine years to see this fiction becomes reality, but how can a movie fiction be transformed into reality with a high degree of exactness?

The choice of the virus NEV1 in the fiction becomes similar to the real virus they are from the same

family of viruses: the corona. This virus was the best candidate for a rapid and deadly mutation according to the scientific community since the 2000s. The development and the impacts of the pandemic situation on the world are also part of the sociologic and economic predictive studies in many universities in the world. The protocols and the confinement measures are part of the reaction prepared by the authorities in such a situation. In general, the filmmakers made a great job in the collection of all those information about what if there is a pandemic.

However, the artistic side of this movie lies in the know-how of the filmmaker to present the facts in a way that any spectator who watches the movie before the real crisis can mimic the acts and behaviour of the characters in order to survive. In this situation, we can recognize the magic side of cinema and its role to face the crisis.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper presented is a summary of how cinema treats some very serious topics of disastrous crisis. The pandemic situation is among those topics that need scientific awareness of the film directors to give an authentic vision that can convince the viewer. *Contagion* (2011) is a movie that not only presents a convincing disastrous scenario of the world pandemic situation but also has been presented for the first time nine years before the COVID 19 situation of 2020. Steven Soderbergh succeeded in giving a story that becomes a reference in the cinema industry nowadays. Thanks to the use of parallel narration, bookend flashbacks and the multi protagonists, it gives the movie a report documentary aspect, a kind of roadmap to people if the crisis would happen. The work aims at giving a brief idea to prove that cinema can play a real work of informing warning more than entertaining.

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