

Film Review:

'Contagion' Revisited: Eight Months into the Pandemic

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The morning newspaper (which, diffident about the virus-free delivery of physical papers, I still peruse online) informs me that somewhere in the world there is a COVID-19 death EVERY NINE SECONDS (the mind will produce its own banner headlines, even as these abound elsewhere); in my own city of Bombay the numbers are under control, and the feared “festival spike” has not occurred. Gallows humour, which has brought us much-needed albeit grim relief through the long enforced seclusion, currently nudges us with a cartoon that has Indians asking relatives in the UK to bring home, not chocolates and cheeses and clothes, but the newly approved Pfizer vaccine. This is the mental and emotional *mise-en-scène* as I settle down to watch Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011) for the second time, having been, at first viewing (in what we have been calling “the early days” of an era that may be far from done with us), both stunned by the film’s uncanny prescience and terrified by its probably accurate prophecies.

It was in those selfsame early days, soon after images of endless migrant workers trudging endlessly home – some cut down by a goods train one night as they slept on the relatively comfortable level ground of “safe” train tracks, because had trains been running, why would they be walking? – had begun to fill our screens and hearts (not counting the hearts of those whose job it had been to provide survival alternatives that could have prevented the massive exodus from urban centres), and rumours of provision stores running out of items had begun to fuel the minds of those who could indulge their stockpiling instincts, that economist

Jayati Ghosh had predicted food riots, eerily echoing the food riots and looting of supermarkets depicted in the USA of *Contagion*. Given the extreme desperation of so many millions here, this seemed a likely outcome. The question of why we have not had food riots in this country (yet) but are witnessing, instead, community langars serving free food to thousands of protesting farmers surely deserves to be asked, unsentimentally, but that goes beyond the scope of this article.

The theatrical release of *Contagion* preceded the present crisis by nine years. Soderbergh is an American filmmaker of no mean renown; his *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989) is diffident a modern classic. But *Contagion* found its true – and biggest – audiences only in 2020, as viewers sitting safe in their homes with their OTT platform subscriptions marvelled at this incredible crystal ball of a medical thriller that begins, before any image appears, with a cough on the soundtrack (you might well feel you've just made a phone call and are hearing the too-familiar opening bars of the government's earnest automated safety message). The rest of the film is devoted to unravelling the causes and consequences of that ominous cough, as people begin to fall ill with the same symptoms all over the planet and our attention is drawn to objects, and hands touching those objects: cocktail glasses in a bar, elevator buttons in a residential building, handrails in buses. These are foregrounded through shots held for just that bit longer, rather than through obvious close-ups. One wonders what the 2011 audience would have made of it all; today we shudder each time someone drinks from a glass and passes it on, or grips a metal rail that other passengers will hold, because hindsight has taught us how to read the signals.

Impressive research into the history and science of respiratory diseases lies at the heart of the film, which harks back, as we did, to the Spanish flu of 1918 that killed 50 million people. *Contagion* then goes on to anticipate, quite breathtakingly, practically everything that we have seen occurring. It doesn't anticipate breathing difficulties, or the lack of ventilators, but the film is a decade-old fictional drama after all, not a *Book of Destiny*: the diseased and dying do exhibit initial symptoms similar to those we have become schooled in – coughing, fatigue, headaches, fever – but the ones who die seem to have convulsions, and foam at the mouth. One is thankful for these differences in detail, because anything much closer to reality could have engendered its own conspiracy theories, even as US

administrators in the film speculate that the fast-spreading virus could be an act of terrorism (sound familiar?). Soderbergh and screenwriter Scott Z Burns also foreshadow large public spaces being turned into treatment centres; the toll on health care workers; the central role of the CDC. The film's "MEV-1" is a "novel" virus; there's the false promise of a homeopathic cure (in the non-fiction we inhabit it was hydroxychloroquine); and the all-out search for a vaccine. As states close their borders and schools are shut down, the film's sociocultural soothsaying goes even further: people standing in lines berate others who sneeze or cough into the air (almost everyone is wearing masks three weeks into the pandemic, although the word "pandemic" is not actually used in the film); and the bereaved are increasingly denied the solace of known rituals.

Much of the film's effectiveness comes from its excellent writing, location filming, and the complexity and tenderness that its actors – including Gwyneth Paltrow, Matt Damon, Kate Winslet, Jude Law, Marion Cotillard, Elliott Gould – bring to their characters and scenes. A caveat: the index patient, a high-flying businesswoman, is adulterous across time and geography, and hence not alone in paying the price. Whether or not Soderbergh intended to dish up a side moral lesson to accompany the cautionary main course about humans messing with nature at their own peril, one wishes its undeniable narrative impact had been achieved by other means.

Contagion is also a countdown, or perhaps count-mounting-up, thriller. It begins on Day 2 (that cough at the start); less than 13 minutes into the 106-minute feature, we have heard the sinister words, "It's going to spread"; in the first 20 minutes we have been educated about surface transmission and learned that the average person touches their face three to five times per minute; before the first half hour has gone by, lab scientists have figured out the precise zoonotic (one that has jumped from a non-human animal to a human) nature of the virus, estimated that one of every 12 persons on Earth will be infected (it was initially assumed Covid-19 would infect 8 of every 10), and the words "no treatment protocol and no vaccine at this time" have been pronounced; and so the action proceeds, at the fairly breakneck speed typical of thrillers, with people you're rooting for dying or being kidnapped by villagers whose ransom demand is the vaccine. For, before

we hit Day 200 (the day numbers appear throughout), the vaccine – although the long and necessary phases of trial, manufacture and distribution challenges are spoken of – is ready (Caveat 2), and being administered based on a lottery system. But that is not the happy ending: the viewer is made privy, at the actual end, to the missing piece of the puzzle. A series of non-verbal images shows us just where and how the virus began its devastating rampage, and who its first victims and carriers were. Then at the end of the credits we read, all in capitals, “IT’S NOT IF BUT WHEN. GET READY AT”, and see a website link. Well, we certainly weren’t ready, and you wonder if we are doing anything to get ready, even now, for the next big one.

At least two other remarkable and more recent films are germane here – Ashiq Abu’s *Virus* (2019), a Malayalam feature film that engagingly tells the successful story of Kerala’s contact tracing in the aftermath of the Nipah outbreak, and *76 Days* (2020), a documentary from China filmed up close and personal right inside Wuhan’s Covid-19 hospitals. Unsurprisingly, one of the film’s three directors is ‘Anonymous’. The film begins with a weeping nurse being restrained by her colleagues from going near her beloved father’s body, and goes on to show us the extreme pressures under which the hospital staff work, and their unfailing empathy and compassion through it all: *Contagion* did not zero in on Wuhan as a point of origin, incidentally; instead, it chose nearby Macau, with its casinos and tourists. Less incidentally, while *Contagion* gave us face masks and PPT, *76 Days* –stranger, of course, than fiction – shows us true images that are far more sci-fi.



