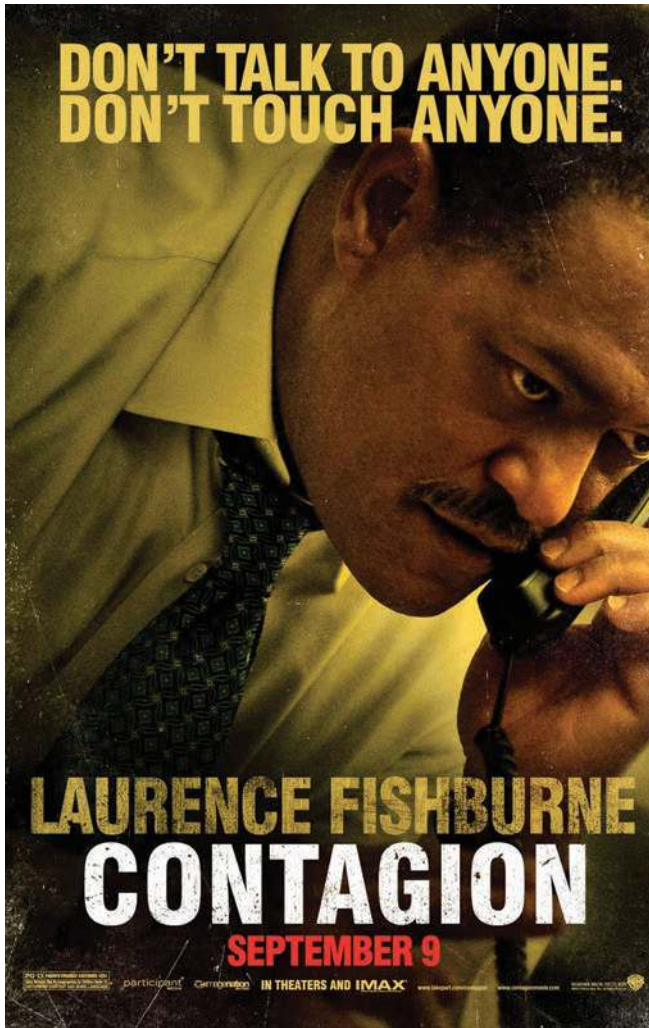


Medicine on the big and small screen: Things fall apart, movies for a pandemic

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Contagion

Starring: Matt Damon, Kate Winslet, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow

Directed by Steven Soderbergh; released September 2011; DVD release January 2012; Rated PG-13; 106 minutes.

What better respite during a pandemic than to curl up on the couch, flip on the TV, and watch a movie. But it seems ironic, or even macabre, that during a time when we're feeling most vulnerable, we would occupy ourselves with a fictional narrative about a now very real type of virus spreading across the globe.

A quick Google search reveals a gaggle of "the 10 Best Pandemic Movies." Films that repeatedly appear on these lists include *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *Outbreak* (1995), *12 Monkeys* (1995), *28 Days Later* (2007), and *Carriers* (2009), but sitting atop such compilations one usually finds *Contagion* (2011).

Director Steven Soderbergh's film, which accurately predicts much of our current health crisis, is experiencing a rare viewing resurgence. According to Warner Brothers' statistics, the film now ranks second (just behind Harry Potter) as the studio's most requested online title. Industry sources report that it is the most rented/purchased title on Fandango, and it remains among the top 10 movies ordered on both iTunes and Amazon Prime.

Perhaps seeing movie scientists finding a remedy for an intractable infection feels comforting during these uncertain times, but the film's portrayal of communal life disintegrating during a pandemic provides little solace.

Contagion's plot follows the deadly eruption of a virulent and extremely communicable coronavirus that begins in Hong Kong: first in bats, then in pigs transported to a wet market, and finally into foods served in an upscale casino. After contracting the virus in Asia, Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) brings it back to America, and the illness quickly spreads throughout the world.

The film's fictional MEV-1 virus is modeled on the coronavirus that triggered SARS, the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome pandemic that spread to 29 countries. Through international collaboration, scientists quickly contained SARS by July of 2003, but not before it infected 8,069 people with 774 deaths (eight in the United States).

Intrigued by epidemiologist Larry Brilliant's comments about pandemics (Brilliant is Chairman of the Board of Ending Pandemics and was a consultant on the film.) scriptwriter Scott Z. Burns conducted intensive research on the subject before he wrote his script. In an April 2020 interview, Burns said, "I never thought in a million years that the scientists and public health people would be questioned and doubted and defunded....I would never have

imagined that the movie needed a ‘bad guy’ beyond the virus itself”¹ (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/01/writer-contagion-imagined-all-this-except-inept-government-response/>).

Based on Burns’ script, Soderbergh’s fast-paced drama benefits from a stellar cast, including, Paltrow, Jude Law, Matt Damon, Elliott Gould, Kate Winslet, Laurence Fishburne, and Marion Cotillard. But what sets *Contagion* apart from the majority of Hollywood disaster films is its factual portrayal of how quickly a virus can obliterate everyday life. When *Contagion* was released, few people could envision how a biomedical disaster might turn ordinary citizens into Lord of the Flies cast members. Yet when anxious shoppers encountered empty shelves, and toilet paper become a precious commodity in the winter of 2020, the progressive stripping away of society’s fragile veneer of civilized behavior became all too imaginable.

Soderbergh’s main advisor during filming was a recognized authority in the field, Professor Ian Lipkin (played by Elliott Gould), currently the director of the Center for Infection and Immunity at Columbia University, and a frequent contributor to news programs during this pandemic. The result is one of cinema’s most realistic pictures of science and its dedicated practitioners—some of whom risk their lives to protect the public—and a frightening depiction of how rapidly devastating global pandemics can evolve.

Soderbergh’s scientists proceed, step-by-step, to create a vaccine. Yet, when hearing the characters coughing and the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) uttering the now-all-too-familiar phrase “social distancing,” viewers could be excused for hitting pause, putting on a mask, and rushing out to wash their hands. Just as we are about to do that, however, the reassuring figure of CNN’s chief medical advisor, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, appears in the film. Although medical critics attacked *Contagion* for too quickly finding a vaccine and for unrealistically speeding it into mass production, the movie shows how difficult distribution of a new vaccine becomes when the entire world wants to be first in line—a cautionary tale for today.

Emhoff’s gruesome death is not the usual stuff of blockbusters, but it serves as a grisly forewarning of even worse events that will transpire. Perhaps most disturbingly, Soderbergh’s camera focuses on all the potential spots for a lethal virus to lurk, transforming the mundane stuff of everyday life into toxic danger zones.

Law’s greedy and reckless blogger spreads conspiracy theories similar to those propagated today, offering false hope, creating panic, and impeding the experts’ progress.

Burns’ script also raises the suggestion, that the virus might be a bioweapon, and Homeland Security officials work alongside the researchers—all factors we see with COVID-19 on a daily basis.

When the movie ends, we find that the trauma is not yet finished. At a time when we still have no vaccination, no treatment, no broad-based testing, no national contact tracing, and not even enough information about COVID-19, *Contagion* seems more like a documentary than a fictional narrative, a life-imitates-art moment with an ending yet to be written. Let us hope that *Contagion*’s stark depiction of society collapsing in the wake of a pandemic does not come to resemble W.B. Yeats’ terrifying prophecy in “The Second Coming” when he wrote:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed.

References

1. Norris ML. She wrote “Contagion.” Here’s what she had to say about the response to the coronavirus. The Washington Post. April 1, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/08/this-is-not-an-equal-opportunity-virus/>

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Note: Dr. Kavey, and her daughter, Professor Allison Kavey, have written *Viral Pandemics: From Small Pox to COVID-19* (Routledge), scheduled for release September 29, 2020.