

Hollywood Pandemic Cinema as Premediation of Global Crises: A Thematic Analysis of *Contagion* (2011)

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Abstract: Cinema Hollywood has been a major contributor to the shaping of imagination in the masses with regards to the large-scale crises through the process of converting scientific uncertainty and social anxiety into easy narrative forms. Movies on pandemics, especially, provide dramatized versions of how the world is at risk, institutionally responding as well as how the population responds, and in many cases, rehearse potential future scenarios instead of creating a prophetic future. This paper focuses on the film *Contagion* (2011) by Steven Soderbergh in terms of remediation to understand how the film industry envisions and frames the world crisis in pandemic cinema. The film is examined using the approach of qualitative thematic analysis as the cultural text, which creates narratives of risk, governance, scientific power, misinformation, and people response. The analysis indicates that *Contagion* is no longer a prophetic narrative about real-world pandemics but a mediated depiction that the audience is ready to be emotionally and cognitively involved in uncertainty and systemic disruption. The application of fear, control and technological intervention in a coherent narrative makes fear management schemes normal and strengthens the belief in scientific and institutional control and at the same time reveals the weak spots in the social systems. The study also serves the field of media and film by revealing the functioning of pandemic cinema as an anticipatory media, which informs the collective knowledge of crises around the world that do not pertain to a particular historical context.

Key Words: Pandemic Cinema, Premediation, Global Crises, *Contagion*, Thematic Analysis, Hollywood Film

Introduction

Real and imagined media on the advent of epidemics is a great resource of mass culture encompassing film, TV and print media, online resources and related vivid media, and general wellbeing communication. However, these media not only disseminate knowledge, but also indicate how infections are treated in society (Hawker, 2020). Movies are a common cultural experience that had traditionally illustrated outbreaks and epidemics of infectious diseases, and expressed associated desires, and often disturbing reality regarding contagion.

The unpredictable nature of humans complicates predicting the spread of disease. Those acquainted with pandemics, for example, HIV and flu might be shocked by how *Contagion* represented public policy in a similar way (Latham, 2009). *Contagion* was a 2011 fiction film about a pandemic of a virus named MEV-1. The story begins from Chicago Airport where Paltrow was seen coughing, after returning from Hongkong. A sequence of carefully & intelligently positioned scenes illustrates that everything in this world is medium for virus transmission. In both the 2011 film and the coronavirus pandemic: both epidemics likely started from an infected bat. In both the film and the real-life health crisis of 2020, the virus killed millions of victims who were suffering from virus symptoms. Like Covid-19, MEV-

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I in the film is a respiratory infection, that can be spread out through a sneeze or cough in released particles of saliva (Demoulin, [2023](#)).

Pandemic films are gaining prominence due to the current issues affecting us, such as the changes in the environmental climate that trigger pollution, and the string of outbreaks, such as Ebola, SARS, H1N1, and Covid-19 film on these subjects is significant but under research. Knowingly submitting oneself to terrifying scenarios is a curious condition on one's hands. The scientifically justified theory of why people participate in terrifying fiction scenarios is that these interactions can serve as models of real interactions where the people can collect knowledge and construct alternative environments. Pandemic film offers audiences low-cost access to essential knowledge that is hard or risky to obtain in the actual world (Whiting, [2020](#)).

For Example, how people behave during outbreaks? Are those incidents leading to Constructive or greedy conduct? How do people handle the transformed social environment of a global epidemic? How will the future look like when systems that function as the key elements of daily life no longer work? In the case of a pandemic, this knowledge may be very useful. The hypothesis that disease outbreak and catastrophe fiction can include norms of devastating events has been theoretically proposed but had not been empirically examined (Doğrul & Korkut, [2020b](#)). Another very interesting aspect of many Fiction films would not be their actual relevance to actual world, but the sense which can be derived of them and adapted to circumstances in the real world. The massive disorder that happens in Pandemic movies is in several ways comparable to the worldwide disorder which can arise during real-world emergencies (Mondello, [2020](#)). Therefore, the knowledge that we receive from the Pandemic outbreak movies can support us in similar scenarios in the actual world.

One recent indication of this is the huge rise in vogue of the film Contagion within initial days of the coronavirus epidemic. Although the film is ten years old, soon it became one of the popular films, it offers a true portrayal of what occurs during every global disease outbreak. Most individuals watch Pandemic movies with the intention of being entertained instead of learning anything, Pandemic movies offer sufficient learning opportunities. Fiction enables the viewer to discover the imaginary view of the future at a really low amount. Via fiction, people can learn to avoid serious elements, manage new social environments, and improve their imagination-reading and expression abilities (Zhang et al., [5](#)).

The 2011 film "Contagion" a story about a pandemic with similarities to the recent COVID-19 re-ignited its flames. A new and novel virus spreads like wildfire in the film "Contagion", initiating in Hong Kong and ultimately annihilating the population of the world until a vaccine can be created and distributed. The virus in the film, called MEV-1 in nature, is zoonotic. Like Covid-19, MEV-1 in the film is a respiratory infection, that can be spread out through a sneeze or cough in released particles of saliva. Those particles pass directly between people, if those droplets touch an uninfected person's eyes, nose, or mouth they can become infected with the virus as well. Look at the similarities in both; the 2011 film and the current coronavirus pandemic (Brzeski, [2020](#)). Both epidemics likely started from an infected bat. Moreover, in both the film and the real-life health crisis of 2020, the virus killed millions of victims who were suffering from virus symptoms. Social distancing and misinformation emerge in the movie, as they do now in this age of coronavirus.

The movie depicts multiple competing plot points, with no specific lead, over all the course of weeks from the initial outbreak and efforts to control it, to chaos and collapse of global hierarchy, and, eventually, to the development of an antidote (Yiping, [2020](#)). The doomsday scenario turned out to be true when the COVID-19 outbreak ceased life around the world, triggered by a viral corona virus which was extremely contagious, with estimated of 2.72 million deaths worldwide unless severe prevention measures of physical and social distancing, stay home, and closing all non-essential activity were not taken. A staggering disease outbreak plot, disturbingly like Contagion, started to play out in China in 2019, and the entire world in 2020, due to a lack of adequate testing, scarcity in healthcare facilities, and no way to isolate the sick from the non-infected. Incompetency, disruptions, and mistakes resulted in a death of millions worldwide (Nulman, [2021](#)).

Cinema has long been a cultural locale whereby, societies imagine, negotiate and make sense of massive crises. Hollywood pandemic cinema is uniquely placed among the modern genres of filmmaking in that it dramatizes the world menace, institutional reaction and the mass human action during the times of uncertainty (Martausová, [2024](#)). Although such films are commonly considered speculative or science fiction, their plots and storylines often have a basis in the existing scientific knowledge, political systems, and social fears, which allows them to predict and influence how people perceive future crises.

Contagion (2011) by Steven Soderbergh received a new wave of attention when the world was facing new health crises, and many of the popular and scholarly discourses started to interpret this film as an example of prediction of real-life pandemics (Satıcı, [2023](#)). Nevertheless, it is important to pay attention to the fact that by emphasizing its evident similarity to certain historical events, one may become blind to a wider cultural and theoretical value of the movie. Instead of being considered as a prophecy, *Contagion* is better productive when considered in the light of premediation, as an act of rehearsing potential futures to prepare the audience in an emotional, psychological, and political way as they anticipate being confronted with the future of uncertainty.

Although recent scholarships on the subject have expanded, much of the current literature is descriptive or event-based and focuses on comparison to real outbreaks without theorizing the role of film in the development of anticipatory discourses of crisis. Surely, there is an apparent absence of speculative qualitative research that explores the way Hollywood pandemic movies have preempted global disasters by dramatizing risk, governance, scientific authority, misinformation, and popular action into a single narrative. This paper fills this gap by applying *Contagion* (2011) as a case study in the Hollywood pandemic film industry to examine how the film prefigures the crises that take place across the world in its thematic and narrative forms. Using thematic analysis, the study intends to break out of the event-based reading and add to the media and film studies by illustrating how the cinematic representations act as cultural rehearsal of global instability, and as constructive influences on how the audience perceives the crisis, control and collective response.

Research Question

- ▶ How does the Hollywood film *Contagion* (2011) premeditate global crises through its narrative, themes, and representations of risk, governance, and public behavior?

Literature Review

Pandemic cinema promotes an often discussion about the connection between imaginary infections and modernity as an engine for the protection of the middle class. The tale of the pandemic has a quite long history and has always mirrored, or followed, real pandemics. Established values and prejudices have influenced these structures, which have led to the creation of many of these identity formations via the creation or existing forms of Alterity (Shah et al., [2020](#)). The outbreak's story reveals doubts and concerns about three types of highly ineffective boundaries: first, among legislative parties and individual bodies; secondly, among States; & finally, among "average" people and potentially lethal disaffected communities. Dramatically, the tale of the outbreak often shows various ways in which such fears were built and commercialized. Although fears of virus outbreaks may be legitimate responses to real threats, latent and/or facetious fears due to changes in how the society now operates also reflect them. It is not as easy as "infection has influenced our perception of modernization," or our understanding of infection has been influenced by "modernization (Ruback & Ryan, [2022](#))"

These narratives of outbreaks and the fears they portray feed into broader agendas created by government agencies, reporters, and Hollywood to fuel a much-expanding relationship between anxiety, power, and wealth. Worry needs a multiplier to propagate, whether by word of mouth, newspapers, radio, movie, or tv. Although fear may be the outcome of a specific case, it is the consequence of cultural production, affected by cultural scripts that teach people how or what to fear (Frykholm, [2021](#)).

During Pandemic occasions when the entire world has automatically gone to lockdown and the inquiry, "Would film endure the pandemic?" arose. Immediately there was a befitting reaction from OTT Platform: Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and so on, the deliverers of Cinema. Like different classes the slasher films sprung up to engage individuals. The influxes of woman's rights delivered women's activist film hypotheses which request the movies, a type of craftsmanship, to change the existences of minimized voices with its possibility. The chose slasher films offer a treat to isolated society with all their uniqueness, and they could get minimal appraisals as well, regardless of their defects (Christopher, [2024](#)). Encouraged by their prosperity, the future slasher movies would unquestionably help women's activist developments by displaying tough ladies as the fourth rush of woman's rights demands.

The Day After Tomorrow had a critical effect on the environmental change hazard discernments, reasonable models, conduct expectations, strategy needs, and in any event, casting a ballot goal of moviegoers. The film drove moviegoers to have more elevated levels of concern and stress over an unnatural weather change, to gauge different effects on the United States as almost certain, and to move their reasonable comprehension of the environment framework toward an edge model. Further, the film urged watchers to take part in close-to-home, political, and social activities to deliver environmental change and to raise a worldwide temperature alteration as a public need. At last, the film even seems to have impacted elector inclinations (Mittal & Sinha, [2021](#)). These outcomes show that the portrayal of natural dangers in mainstream society can impact public mentality and conduct.

Overviews led by the National Science Foundation (NSF) have altogether archived a serious decrease in the comprehension of and interest in science among individuals of any age in the United States. Around 50% of individuals don't realize that Earth requires one year to finish a circle around the sun, that electrons are more modest than molecules, and that early people didn't live simultaneously as the dinosaurs (Dehory, [2020](#)). These instances of broken information on actual sciences most likely reach out to life, social and abstract sciences and are reflected in different countries (Doğrul & Korkut, [2020a](#)). This new methodology, Physics in Films, utilizes famous motion pictures to show the standards of actual science, examining singular scenes against the foundation of the central actual laws of mechanics, power, optics, etc.

Feynman (1949) defined causality as one of the ways in which a human 'system' be it one person or a group of people comes to an understanding with the environment it is in by cutting down the latter's complications to relevant features for the system's functioning within and interaction with said environment (Sy & Lopresti, [2022](#)). Similarly, stories and narratives are a significant way to understand causal bonds with happenings and actions, especially in those instances where no general laws govern the transformations and state-changes in each world be it a story, game or ancient realm or an active system (Mozdkhah et al., [2021](#)).

The significance of sci-fi (SF) presently is on the expansion. To begin with, there are solid signs that its notoriety in the main modern countries (USA, USSR, UK, Japan) has risen strongly during the most recent 100 years, paying little mind to nearby and short-range vacillations (Moura, [2022](#)). SF has especially influenced some critical layers of present-day culture, for example, the school graduates, youthful scholars, and general peruses energetic about new arrangements of qualities (Higson & Treadwell, [2023](#)). This is a huge social impact which goes past any only quantitative enumeration. and so forth in addition, even though SF is imparted to legend, dream, fantasy and peaceful resistance to naturalistic or empiricist scholarly types, it contrasts fundamentally in approach and social capacity from such bordering non-naturalistic or meta-observational types. Both correlative perspectives, the socio-intelligence and the methodological, are by and large energetically bantered among authors and pundits in a few nations; both vouch for the pertinence of this sort and the need of academic conversation.

Research Methods

The research design used in this study is qualitative, as it involves analyzing the role of Hollywood pandemic cinema in premediating crises all over the world based on Contagion (2011) as a single-case study. Qualitative inquiry is especially suitable in this research because it allows one to deeply interpret meanings, representations, and narrative constructions that are engraved in media texts (Lv et al., [2023](#)). The movie is approached as a cultural text in which social anxieties,

institutional responses, and future imagination of crisis are both created and expressed. A case study methodology is highly contextualized, and it will be appropriate in the exploration of a complicated theoretical issue like premeditation in a film context.

The textual analysis of the movie is used to collect the data and the appropriate secondary literature on the subject of the pandemic cinema, media theory, and crisis communication is used to support the data collection (Khakhalkina & Vyachistaya, [2024](#)). The analysis relies on the thematic analysis as the main approach to analysis as the systematic acquaintance with the movie, finding common trends, coding of the important scenes and dialogues, and building up on the interpretative themes. Themes are inductively based on the plot and visual components of the film, but they are theoretically guided by the concept of premeditation in order to maintain coherence in analysis.

Thematic analysis can help the researcher to understand how the representations of risk, governance, science authority, misinformation and behavior of the people are arranged in the movie to practice the potential crisis situations across the globe. Instead of analyzing frequency or causal impacts, the analysis focuses on meaning-making and narrative logic. Such an interpretive method makes the study illustrate how Contagion serves as a cultural practice of rehearsing global crises and provides clues to the influence the Hollywood cinema has on developing anticipatory conception of uncertainty and collective action.

Data Analysis

The movie was based on a fatal disease and efforts of the humans to deal with. As mentioned, in previous chapter, thematic analysis will be incorporated in this study; after applying this method, four major themes identified from the content of the movies. These frames are the main results and answers to the research question.

Premediation of Global Collapse

Contagion, a movie released in 2011, shows its relevance till today. The movie directed by Steven Soderbergh and written by Scott Z. Burns is a story of how a novel virus that broke in the world ended up killing millions of people, globally. There is confusion shown among researchers and people because people are unable to get clear answers followed by panic and chaos in public. The movie addresses various problems and challenges that governments, scientists, and the public during a difficult situation in this case, a healthcare threat.

Although the movie was released in 2011, it somehow became relevant after 7 to 8 years of its release. The movies gained attention due to the start of coronavirus in 2019 owing to the similarities between MEV-1 (fictional movie virus) and Covid19 (real virus behind the ongoing pandemic). How is the virus depicted in the movie and how close it is to reality?

The infectious disease caused by MEV-1 in Contagion was realistically depicted as it was based on the symptoms from SARS-CoV-2. Moreover, the symptoms that were shown in the movie show similarities with COVID-19. The symptoms like dry cough, fever, headaches, shortness of breath, body aches, and respiratory issues are very similar to the symptoms of COVID-19. However, the symptoms of MEV-1 in the movie were severe with a very high mortality rate.

The movie started with a cough and amplified into many deaths as the movie progressed. The virus started spreading from the very beginning of the movie through human contact. It showed people moving freely without any care because there is no harm in doing that. However, it all changed when a pandemic was suspected by World Health Organization (WHO) and other health care authorities. The situation has uncanny similarities with December 2019 when the increased number of coronavirus cases were identified in China. On the contrary, the mortality rate of the contagion virus was a lot higher than it is of COVID-19, fortunately.

Moreover, as the movie progressed, it was shown that the virus was mutating making it difficult for scientists and virologists to study it and make a vaccine to control the disease. It also showed that the root of the virus was the

crossover between pig and bat. This situation is also quite like COVID-19 because the roots of coronavirus were identified to lie in the bat's genome.

As the movie gained fame amid the COVID-19 pandemic, various concerns surfaced over the internet. Many people were dubious of the resemblance of the movie with the current situation. People were suspicious of the "prediction" movie has made with the COVID-19 outbreak. However, the movie was merely a depiction of epidemics, plagues, and pandemics that have passed in the past i.e. Swine flu, MERS, SARS, H1N1 virus, etc. This makes the movie Contagion a cliché of pandemics rather than a future prediction.

The way Contagion depicts the spread of MEV-1 was in line with the spread of viruses causing pandemics and its effects in the real world. A bigger part of the movie showed the challenges of scientists and authorities dealing with the outcomes of the virus. How does it like the ongoing pandemic?

Fear, Panic, and Social Behavior

The plot of the movie moved in parallels showing different parts of the world affected by the virus equally. That can be applied to real world as the coronavirus spread like wildfire in all countries simultaneously. The movie also gives a very educated account of the scenes of vaccine development process and challenges scientists face that is hidden from naked eyes.

The panic of the public in such situations is inevitable. The frustration gets to people when they are unable to understand the cause of the death of their loved ones. On top of that, not being able to perform the funeral rituals adds to the anger. I am sure people during real-life pandemic face the same. However, the same goes for scientists. Because the virus was novel meaning it is new to scientists and the human body, which is why the immune system is unable to fight against it. The scientists have to follow protocol before announcing anything regarding the situation. The movie captured the emotions of loss, grief, anger, frustration because of helplessness, and fear due to uncertainty of the situation quite accurately.

The first step following the announcement of a pandemic is to impose lockdown to limit movement and reinforce isolation. Many people still do not follow the guidelines or do not believe in the reality of the situation. This happened in COVID-19 as well. Many conspiracy theories emerged during the period misguiding the public. The freelance journalist was shown doing the same – finding ways to gain profit amid a global emergency. Many such examples are present in the coronavirus scenario as well. Some people are ready to cash in on people's fear and desperate need to avert the crises.

However, the chaos that was shown in the movie was far less than what we faced. People chose crime over being civic under the pandemic. Breaking into stores to get goods, food, medicine, etc. Fortunately, the situation was not the same during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many parts of the world maintained lockdown. For the people who were not following lockdown, at least they did not resort to breaking the rules for personal gain. The movie showed two sides of humanity one was ready to take the opportunity for personal benefits (such as the freelance journalist living on conspiracy theories and people terrorizing others). The other side showed self-sacrifice for the sake of the greater good (for example, the scientist who injected the vaccine to herself for testing it). Overall, a major part of the movie was in line with the real-life situations that we faced during the pandemic of 2019.

Misinformation and Crisis Capitalism

At the end of the movie, they showed how the virus spread among the human population. Considered the anti-Asian hate and violence in the west after the breakout of COVID-19, it should be a lesson that infectious diseases can occur without human involvement. The hate narrative against a specific community or ethnicity and blaming them for a pandemic is not the right way. However, what we should do is to avoid meddling in the natural habitats of animals to save the peace of our habitat.



The storyline of Contagion - directed by Steven Soderbergh revolves around the outbreak of a deadly virus that spreads with the respiratory droplets. Medical personnel and public health officials make tireless efforts in order to find out how this virus MEV-1 originated and what is its cure? The first character infected succumbs to the virus, however, her husband happens to possess natural immunity against it. Meanwhile, people remained quarantined.

The plot further discusses that people already scared to death become victim of a conspiracy by a blogger. He creates unrest in society leading to riots and looting. However, after multiple efforts, they find a vaccine. At the end, it is found out that the virus actually spread after a pig swallowed an infected piece of banana thrown by an infected bat. This pig later reached a restaurant as food. The chef who cooked it, showed carelessness and shook hands with a lady without washing them, which brought such deadly results.

Contagion is a realistic movie which depicts the outbreak of a global virus. The movie, along with its storyline, also discusses how airborne viruses enter human bodies and worsens its conditions. Contagion by Steven Soderbergh discusses that it is not the humans who give viruses to another human being. Infact, the virus keeps on finding new host bodies because an individual once affected cannot survive for long.

Contagion also portrayed well how sometimes people use such serious and deadly situations to create a buzz which can further lead to unpleasant incidents. In the movie also, a blogger tries to create conspiracy regarding the virus and vaccine which enrages people. Frustrated people start creating tension by demonstrating riots.

Governance, Science, and Authority

The film further illustrates that in today's modern age, how viruses and diseases can spread across nations in a very short span of time. A disease originating in one part of the world can reach another part in no time. It is so because now people travel more frequently than in the past. The movie Contagion also tends to meet all requirements of a technothriller movie.

It describes each step of the scientific process that is taken by the scientists and doctors in order to provide vaccine and cure to a pandemic. It explains how these advancements are made by experts on frequent basis. The movie also depicts how scientific processes in such scenarios start by a meeting among experts of field which not only include doctors but also representatives of Epidemic Intelligence Service and World Health Organization etc. They not only comprehend the severity of matter but also try to find out the root cause behind origination of virus, its spread as well as development of vaccination.

On the other hand, it also explains that in such scenarios, a dedicated team of doctors, researchers and scientists spend their days and nights in the laboratories. Contagion deserves praise for explaining and depicting the entire scientific process that is really followed in case of such pandemics in real life. It also very well explains the technological advancements. Furthermore, it also highlights the step-by-step successes and frustrations of the team investing their efforts into the process.

The 2011 movie also filmed several self-explanatory strategic shots that depict how viruses spread in such situations. It also elaborated that in case of such pandemics, each and everything around us can act as a carrier of viruses. Be it doorknobs, used glasses, credit cards, napkins, handshakes, aero planes - anything and everything can cause the spread of the virus.

The movie also explains that after the outbreak of virus, how people must quarantine themselves. It speaks about their fears and helplessness. It also accounts for the frustration a person faces in similar situation. The fear of public was shown to the extent that they were not willing to go out of their homes or interact with other people. Certainly, this fear is realistic. In similar situation, anyone would be compelled to take such measures to run away from death.

On the other hand, the movie further depicts that people become jobless and economically weak in such situations. Due to this reason, frustration increases to such an extent that people even start looting to survive. On one hand, is the fear of death but on the other hand, is a competitive effort for survival. Moreover, a major problem of the digital era is conspiracy.



Conclusion

This paper aimed at discussing the way the Hollywood movie Contagion (2011) anticipates crises on the global scale, using narrative pattern and thematic presentation. Using thematic analysis in the context of premediation, the study proves that the film is not an anticipation of the actual world pandemics but a cultural practice of the situation of crisis. Contagion creates anticipatory logic by means of illustrating viral transmission, institutional control, medical intervention, the public panic, and misinformation, which makes viewers accustomed to the emotional and institutional components of worldwide disturbance.

The discussion indicates that the film systematizes the uncertainty into familiar patterns of authority and reaction, which places the role of science and state institutions as the main mechanisms of restoring order and, at the same time, demonstrates the vulnerability of society and ethical conflicts in the face of crisis. By doing that, Contagion is part of a wider tradition of cinema that reflects the ways of how societies construct, perceive, and react to mass threats. The premediation concept is useful in explaining why these types of films are not confined to their time in history and are able to be popular even after the time they were created since they prepare audiences to face future uncertainty rather than being a one-time event.

This paper will emphasize the critical role of pandemic cinema as one of the key locations of power within the media and the meaningfulness of cultural representations by going beyond event-related comparisons. The current study can be expanded to comparative studies on post-pandemic movies in the future or investigate how people in various cultures receive the narratives of crises. Finally, this paper confirms the position of Hollywood pandemic cinema as a vital instrument of collective cognition of the global crisis, not predictive but imaginatively and emotionally comprehensible.

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