

Contagion Review – An infectiously intelligent worst-case scenario

Description



This is the second post in my September Series, where I am experimenting with different forms of journalism and writing. Last week, I wrote an article entitled [Not Just An Idiot Box](#), which took a look at educational television, using examples from my own childhood to argue the point. This week, I decided to try a movie review. Beware of some spoilers and enjoy!

Is there anything scarier than an enemy you cannot see?

Horror movies have been taking advantage of this for decades, as it allows your mind to run wild with scary and horrifying possibilities. However, instead of some crazy murderer following you around your house or a spirit seeking vengeance upon you, something all together scarier and deadlier is all around you. All you have to do is pick up a microscope and look at the onslaught of bacteria and viruses that we are exposed to every day.

Sometimes, all it can take is one touch, one cough or one innocent gesture to expose someone to a potentially lethal virus. And that is what the Warner Brothers movie *Contagion* is all about, tracing the path of a virus from initial exposure and its eventual outbreak, all the way to pandemic and finally treatment.

Director Steven Soderbergh expertly decides to start the movie, not from day one like the 1995 thriller *Outbreak*, but from day two, the day after Gwyneth Paltrow's Beth Emhoff is exposed to the virus. She returns home to her loving husband Mitch, played by Matt Damon, but quickly succumbs to the illness, followed quickly by their young son.

But, the bulk of the plot doesn't follow the widowed Mitch being a hero of the story and saving the day. Instead, Soderbergh divides his story amongst many different characters, all affected by the virus somehow and doing their best to manage, fight back and most importantly, to survive.

– We don't have to weaponize the bird flu. The birds are already doing that –

As the virus begins to infect an increasing number of people, either from direct contact or secondary contact (infected person touches rail followed by a healthy person, who then picks up the virus), the movie widens its scope and focuses on characters from all over the world, from Atlanta to Hong Kong.

The acting is stellar across the board, but the cast is far too large to name everyone. However, the standouts include: Laurence Fishburne as a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) division chief who is portrayed with just the right amount of humanity, Jude Law as a blogger who is one of the first to report the illness but has ulterior motives, Kate Winslet plays CDC employee Dr. Mears who is literally scrambling to contain the outbreak, and Marion Cotillard plays an epidemiologist from the World Health Organization sent to China to track the origin of the epidemic.

Every storyline adds weight, and allows the viewer to experience another facet of the destruction and pain a viral outbreak can accomplish.

Matt Damon's story is by far the most emotional of them all. His storyline showcases the human side of the disease, and what can happen when normal people become so scared for their own lives that they begin to do whatever they can to survive.

And that is where the film becomes elevated beyond a mere biological thriller, as it manages to resonate beyond the confines of one genre. The film is also an insight into our most basic human conditions, and what happens when even the simple act of touching something can be deadly.

As the tagline of the film rightly states, "nothing spreads like fear."

A different view of a never-ending battle

Soderbergh spends a lot of time focusing the camera for just a fraction longer than usual on everyday objects, such as a glass, a doorknob or a handrail on a bus. It is like seeing a shadow moving across the screen in a horror movie, showcasing just how susceptible the people in the movie (as well as ourselves) really are. And that's the take-home message.

Contagion is a movie with brains that keeps you thinking after you leave the theatre, which is the kind of movie I always enjoy. As well, it managed to highlight some pretty decent science that made me want to look through some of my old microbiology notes. I won't say that the movie is a substitute for learning about viruses in an academic setting or using better hygiene, but its heart is in the right place and the intelligence and thought that was put into this movie really shows just how possible such an event is.

Now that's the real scare.

For those of you looking for an in-depth look at the science behind the movie, I will not be going into it in this post, as movie reviews traditionally don't utilize a lot of science. However, for those still interested, be sure to read [this](#) great article where noted journalist and author, [Maryn McKenna](#), spoke to the science advisor of the film, Dr. W. Ian Lipkin (who has also written a piece on the real threat presented by viruses for the New York Times, which can be read [here](#)).

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Author

mrmanly2hotmail-com

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