

The Psychos Are Coming, the Psychos Are Coming...They're Already Here: Contagion of Corporation

Edmund Weisberg*

ABSTRACT

American director Steven Soderbergh's Contagion wastes no time in laying out the context of his film on the contemporary interconnectedness of the earth's inhabitants and the concomitant susceptibility to catastrophe that such relationships imply. Despite the apparent incongruity in equating corporate and human rights, human beings—albeit ones often far removed from the typical quotidian struggles of most of our species—are at the reins of corporations. Films such as Contagion and The Corporation imply that the human-made monstrosities—the corporation and its coursing lifeblood, unbridled capitalism—act as the most formidable behemoths, and the greatest threats to the continued existence of our species, not to mention scores of others.

Keywords: pandemic anxiety, Contagion, mental health guidelines

INTRODUCTION

American director Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* wastes no time in laying out the context of his film on the contemporary interconnectedness of the earth's inhabitants and the concomitant susceptibility to catastrophe that such relationships imply. Likewise, the frenetic opening sequence of flashing corporate logos in Canadian filmmakers Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott's *The Corporation*, juxtaposed with the poster image of a silhouetted businessman with a scrawled devil's tail and halo floating above the hat, potently hints to the argument ahead. On the surface, the two films appear to have little in common. The former, a quintessential contagion film, is a fictional thriller explicitly focusing on and extrapolating the effects of a global viral pandemic. The latter is a trenchant documentary scrutinizing the prime directive of the corporation—to maximize profit for its shareholders—in the light of human behavior. The Canadian directors ask not what the implications would be if individuals acted like corporations, but, rather, how we should characterize and even diagnose corporate behavior according to standards used to evaluate individual humans. Both films surprisingly arrive at a thematic nexus, however, raising central questions relevant to intersecting film genres and, more significantly, similar commentaries on the human condition.

ANALYSIS

Contagion by Corporation

Contagion begins on Day 2 of what we quickly learn is an emerging epidemic. With the narrative bouncing from major star to major star in an ensemble celebrity cast reminiscent of 1970s disaster movies, the Soderbergh vehicle deftly moves at a throbbing, pulsating, breakneck pace paralleling the alacrity of its mysterious virus.

The characters, carefully selected to anchor the proper vantage points from which to convey an infectious disease narrative, are developed sufficiently to service the plot but not as full-blown individuals on whose plight viewers are inclined to expend much emotional energy. In fact, two of the principal characters, Beth Emhoff and Dr. Erin Mears, portrayed respectively by Gwyneth Paltrow and Kate Winslet, serve as vectors of

* Edmund Weisburg, Senior Science Writer, John's Hopkins Medicine, MS Bioethics, MS International Development

© 2016 Edmund Weisburg. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

disease propelling the story forward but whose deaths do not likely elicit tears. The momentum of the movie, as reflected by the unremitting transmission of the virus, marginalizes such characters. More cinematic time concentrates on the investigation of the advancing virus and unraveling of the mystery, theoretically before the contagion fells all of humanity.

Before her death, Dr. Mears works remotely, but in tandem, with Laurence Fishburne's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention character. Their fevered attempt to understand and mitigate the spiraling epidemic is matched by Marion Cotillard's diligent World Health Organization epidemiologist, who ultimately acts in service to one of the main messages of the film. Through Cotillard's character, viewers learn that many of the world's citizens, particularly nonwhite ones in less developed countries, perceive that world health officials view the wellbeing of those in Western developed countries as more important. This is certainly not unfounded. Recent cases of Western pharmaceutical company Pfizer's malfeasance in a Nigerian meningitis outbreak and Nestlé's ongoing efforts to foist baby formula and now bottled water on the African indigent are but the tip of the now rare non-melting iceberg.¹² The Jude Law character, a conspiracy blogger, proffers a plausible argument on Big Pharma greed and governmental subterfuge in developing and hoarding a vaccine. But he appears to have ulterior, self-serving motives. In its potential explosiveness, his storyline sets the staccato pace of the narrative but, like most of the subplots, diverts attention from the sick and dying.

In fact, Mitch Emhoff, initially bewildered by his wife's hospitalization and unexpected death, becomes the focal point of the film as caretaker for who we soon learn after he rapidly succumbs to the virus is his stepson. After his isolation due to apparent immunity to the microbe, his arc shifts from what could be a lugubrious period as his daughter arrives—following the deaths of his wife and stepson—and Mitch and his daughter segue into pure survival mode, in an increasingly bleak, dystopian, and pre-vaccine landscape.

But we are not finished with Beth Emhoff. Despite her minuscule screen time, she plays a pivotal role. Her character is among the prime suspects for being patient zero—the first to be infected—along with the three unnamed characters in London, Hong Kong, and Tokyo whose accelerating symptom manifestations we observe. In the early exposition, Paltrow's character stops in Chicago for a tryst with an old flame before returning home to Minneapolis. This potential red herring provokes the viewer to question whether Beth is liable for spreading the lethal disease and if she warrants sympathy. Soderbergh's invocation to the all-too-human penchant for casting aspersions is likely a subtle allusion to HIV/AIDS, the most significant global pandemic in the last 40 years. Homosexual males, identified as a high-risk group, bore the brunt of societal bigotry at the onslaught and through much of the epidemic, though others at high risk, including Haitians, hemophiliacs, and heroin addicts (intravenous drug users)—leading to the 4Hs designation of the denigrated (with "hookers" sometimes substituted for hemophiliacs)—were not spared.³ Although withering judgments have moderated with time and HIV has become more of a chronic than acute condition for those with access to the proper drugs, the discovery of the cause of the virus—a zoonotic infection transmitted from chimpanzee to human in colonial Cameroon over 100 years ago—is certainly decades too late in most senses for those who were maligned for having contracted the disease.⁴ Even today, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration effectively bars donations of blood from gay and bisexual men, despite vast improvements in blood screening for HIV.⁵ Once a stigma is placed, it becomes easily entrenched. So, does Beth deserve our undying condemnation?

In the concluding scenes, while he prepares to photograph his daughter's private prom in their home with her vaccinated boyfriend, Mitch scrolls through his digital camera, finding the last photos his wife took for him while on a business trip for her company, the mining firm AIMM Alderson. Roughly six months after her death, she is clearly still mourned. Also, as we see in a flashback to Day 1, she is patient zero. In the film's final revelation, we learn that her employer cut down the trees that displaced the infected bat, facilitating its flight path to the farm where it dropped the piece of fruit that served as the conduit for viral transmission. So, Beth's association with Alderson, and not her sexual indiscretion, positioned her to set off a global calamity. In an eerie, ominous ending, Soderbergh implies that the rapacious actions of AIMM Alderson, which took aim only at felling trees to maximize its profits with no apparent malevolence, is responsible for

propelling the pestilence.

Unleashing the Monster

The tag line for *Contagion* is “Nothing spreads like fear.” Indeed, mortal dread catalyzes several film genres and is even the emotion most exploited by the powerful to manipulate the behavior of others. Fear, in contagion films, is as rampantly contagious as the infection in question. While the disease depicted in the film is contained within its limits, panic transcends its boundaries, viscerally affecting many audience members long after the closing credits. But what is it that we’re afraid of?

Fear of an invisible microbe that wipes out millions, such as the Spanish Flu of 1918 cited in *Contagion*, HIV/AIDS, or the virus that drives the film, represents an understandable aversion to disease and death present in our psyches, but also to premature death in uncontrollable circumstances. Human arrogance and avarice interact, providing ample examples and fodder for film to illustrate concern that evolves into anxiety or fear. For instance, our persistent belief in our dominion over nature and simultaneous push for profit has permitted multiple corporations to run roughshod over the earth, generating the perfect storm for unleashing anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD; better known as climate change or global warming). On a small scale, the Exxon Valdez calamity in Prince William Sound, Alaska, in 1989 and the BP Deepwater oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 fit this toxic bill.

Considered by many to be the seminal horror novel, *Frankenstein*, penned by the precocious Mary Shelley, terrified readers and eventually inspired a veritable cottage industry of cinematic adaptations. The story is a horrific tale of hubris run amok, as Dr. Victor Frankenstein succeeds in synthesizing a “creature” from cadaveric body parts. Despite popular culture identifying “Frankenstein” as “the monster,” the imposing, formidable but misunderstood “fiend” is not as truly monstrous as its creator Dr. Frankenstein. Indeed, *Contagion* sparks primal fear of a monstrous microbe threatening the world. But the lethal virus itself is unleashed by dint of the avarice demonstrated by the AIMM Alderson colossus.

As *Contagion* makes clear, the object of our apprehension is not always visible. The movie monster is a facile metaphor for and manifestation of our deepest fears. But where do we turn when unable to discern what poses us the greatest harm? The original and first remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and John Carpenter’s *The Thing*, perfect metaphors for “illegal aliens,” speak to xenophobia, prejudice, and fear of the other—particularly those that can pass, such as homosexuals, religious minorities, and patients, in many cases—and the consequent confusion over identity and terror when it is realized that the other is just like oneself. The object of abject dread hides in plain sight and lives among us.

Corporate Contagion

The Corporation, by Canadian filmmakers Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott, and writer Joel Bakan, begins by intimating at the pervasive power of big business. Corporations undeniably wield significant influence in our daily lives. The documentary details the birth of the modern corporation, also laying the groundwork for validating the examination of the corporation as a psychiatric patient. It proceeds to describe the activities of corporations intrinsic to their nature and assesses them according to guidelines appearing in the psychiatric/psychological industry International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, 10th Revision (ICD-10) standard Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders IV. In this respect, *The Corporation* belongs among the canon of health care films, particularly psychological health. Specifically, *The Corporation* may be aptly considered a contagion film, and somewhat prescient at that.

By seven years, *The Corporation* preceded the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court that codified corporate personhood.⁶ While seemingly a landmark case, it enshrined an insidious, protracted intrusion of corporations into the realm of personal or civil rights that began, as the filmmakers argue, shortly after the U.S. Civil War. Lawyers used the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to argue for the personhood of corporations. As a legal “person,” corporations are “special

kinds of persons, with no moral conscience,” opined Noam Chomsky, groundbreaking linguist and political philosopher from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who was interviewed in the film. The derisive response to such a notion following the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision in 2010 was epitomized in a protesting wag’s placard that read: “I’ll believe corporations are people when Texas executes one.”⁷ *The Corporation* takes a logical step by evaluating corporate behavior according to human standards and checking off diagnostic criteria in the DSM.

Using intermittent strains of menacing music, occasional humor, and interviews with reformed Chief Executive Officer Ray Anderson—who describes the deleterious effects of his own company and seeing the errors of his ways—and liberal luminaries such as Chomsky, Naomi Klein, the late Howard Zinn, Vandana Shiva, and Michael Moore, the film presents a balanced emotional palette while detailing the inherently amoral structure of the corporation and its frequently nefarious actions. Thus, the film frames the modern corporation as an entity that routinely shows callous disregard for the feelings and safety of others, harms animals and the environment, exhibits deceitfulness but no capacity to experience or admit guilt (or limited liability, one might say), and fails to “conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors.” The DSM and its many contributors, as any human enterprise, are hardly infallible. After all, previous editions of the oft-cited work once labeled homosexuality as an illness. But the nimble use of the DSM-IV in this context makes a cogent case for diagnosing corporations as psychopathic.

Truly pernicious examples abound and the movie highlights various transgressions against the biosphere—multiple arboreal clear cuts, carbon dioxide emissions, and production of nuclear waste—courtesy of several corporations, acts that might upset most sensibilities if widely known. For instance, during World War II, to ensure a steady stream of profits from Nazi Germany, Atlanta-based Coca-Cola concocted Fanta Orange and purveyed it to the Third Reich. Currently, Nestlé bottles and sells water extracted from drought-stricken California, marketing it back for astronomical profits to residents living with government-mandated water restrictions.⁸ The inexorable corporate search for profits knows no limits, moral or otherwise, save the various regulatory schema that some governments try to impose, and companies incessantly try to outmaneuver, often finding gaping loopholes. Such safeguards are also under merciless attack even from governments beholden to corporations and colluding with them to advocate for the secretly negotiated Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). This purported “trade” agreement—which includes 30 chapters only six of which pertain to trade—and similar pacts, such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), would shield corporate accountability from sovereign countries, allowing corporate rights to transcend those of nations and, especially, individual citizens.⁹

The Corporation evokes unease in suggesting that corporate malfeasance, committed by pharmaceutical or any variety of companies, can cause widespread human suffering. *Contagion* turns the concept of scapegoating on its head in demonizing a faceless, amorphous entity that, the U.S. Supreme Court notwithstanding, hardly seems human or deserving of compassion while managing to elude accountability. *The Corporation* suggests one potential psychotherapy: governmental action to revoke corporate charters. The prognosis proposed by the film comes from documentary filmmaker Michael Moore. He notes the irony of his movies being distributed by studios or corporate networks whose work and very ethos he attacks—thus supporting the contention that such entities display an amoral, valueless attraction to profit. They know that regardless of the views he espouses, he will earn them money. Moore concludes, and the filmmakers agree, that cognizance of how depraved corporations behave may spur real human beings to act, contravene, or resist as appropriate. As *The Corporation* offers at least a glimmer of hope, *Contagion* also provides a slightly encouraging nod for humanity. While it ends menacingly on Day 1, the picture follows multiple altruistic efforts and ultimate success in curing a global affliction.

CONCLUSION

The Corporation definitively and defiantly analyzes and diagnoses the modern corporation through the prism of guidelines designed to gauge the mental health of individual patients. By putting the corporation on the couch and subjecting it to a clinical gaze, the filmmakers deliver a refreshing take on highly influential

actors on the world stage. In the grand tradition of horror, monster, and disaster films, they present a genuine cause for alarm—a threatening invader is in our midst. Despite copious evidence to justify pessimism or despair in the face of an epic battle against a paradoxically brash, omnipresent, insidious entity that imperceptibly encroaches on our lives, they suggest rather than curing the psychotic patient, healing its likely victims.

Awareness is the first step toward combating an affliction or an addiction to intrinsically harmful practices, but is it too late to surmount the contagion of corporation and all that it has wrought? Is it better to lose oneself in a scary movie than to contemplate the horrors human beings have inflicted upon one another and the planet? Might one leave such films more unsettled than entertained, but moved to act? *Contagion* concludes on a note of flagrant foreboding. *The Corporation*, perhaps unexpectedly, ends with a ray of optimism. Contradictory and conflicted as we are in the human condition, we likely need to contend with despair and hope as we wrestle with our real (manmade or not) and imaginary demons. Despite the apparent incongruity in equating corporate and human rights, human beings—albeit ones often far removed from the typical quotidian struggles of most of our species—are at the reins of corporations.

Human beings are capable of creating great beauty and appreciating the wonders of the natural world just as we are culpable for engendering abominations, ineffable horrors, and wanton destruction. Our species' haughtiness, which spurs reckless self-aggrandizement and unremitting avarice for ever more riches, helps to render us unable or loath to admit that we pose the greatest risk to our planet's diversity of life. Films such as *Contagion* and *The Corporation* imply that the human-made monstrosities—the corporation and its coursing lifeblood, unbridled capitalism—act as the most formidable behemoths, and the greatest threats to the continued existence of our species, not to mention scores of others. Do we have the capacity to rein in the violence and virulence of corporations, to tame the beasts that we have created and continue to feed, before their amoral, indifferent machinations for profit perpetuation drive us, and them, to extinction?

¹ D. Smith, "Pfizer pays out to Nigerian families of meningitis drug trial victims." *The Guardian*, August 12, 2011.

² M. Muller, "Nestlé baby milk scandal has grown up but not gone away," *The Guardian*, February 13, 2013.

³ S. Gupta, "Change in law necessary to address HIV discrimination," *The Hill.com*, November 6, 2012.

⁴ T. Maugh II, "Book review: 'Tinderbox' by Craig Kimberg and Daniel Halperin. *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 2012.

⁵ FDA News Release, "FDA updates blood donor deferral policy to reflect the most current scientific evidence and continue to ensure the safety of the U.S. blood supply." December 21, 2015. Retrieved from:<http://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm478031.htm>.

⁶ A. Germanos, "Citizens United at Three: Grassroots Fight Against 'Corporate Personhood' Swells. *Common Dreams*. January 22, 2013. Retrieved from:<http://www.commondreams.org/news/2013/01/22/citizens-united-three-grassroots-fight-against-corporate-personhood-swells>.

⁷ D. Kurtzman, *Funny Political Protest Signs*. About.com. Retrieved from:<http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/funnypictures/ig/Funny-Protest-Signs/I-Il-Believe-Corporations-Are-People.htm>.

⁸ C. Davis, "Protesters Tell Nestlé to Stop Bottling California Water." *Alternet*. May 22, 2015. Retrieved from:<http://www.alternet.org/environment/protesters-tell-nestle-stop-bottling-california-water>.

⁹ Public Citizen. "Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP): More Job Offshoring, Lower Wages, Unsafe Food Imports." Retrieved from:<http://www.citizen.org/tpp>.