Chapter 14
"Nothing Spreads Like Fear":
Narrative Immersion in Soderbergh's *Contagion*

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter looks at the way fear is depicted in Soderbergh's 2011 thriller Contagion and how the onlooker is dragged along into feeling the fear. Without using a studio to shoot the scenes, without insisting much on characters, employing hyperlink narrative (scenes change quickly, playing with geographical distant places and interweaving storylines between multiple characters) and using few words, the movie's main character is not the invisible virus but the fear it spreads into the characters, growing and turning into mass hysteria. The aim of this chapter is to analyse how narrative immersion works in Contagion through visual, auditory, and emotional elements, which are used by the director as vehicles for instilling fear in the audience.

INTRODUCTION

There are movies that eerily anticipate events from the future. *The Truman Show* (1998) ushers in the era of reality TV, whose emblematic representatives are the Kardashians; *Minority Report* (2002) envisages how personal data can be collected and used by authorities and commercial companies; *The Net* (1995) predicts the rise of online identity theft, while *The Matrix* (1999) lets us catch a glimpse of what it may mean to have both a "real life" and a virtual one. Yet, none of them seems to have come closer to real life than *Contagion* (2011), especially in the context of 2020's most impactful and most terrifying event—the rapid and global spread of the new SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Contagion is one of those movies which have managed to catch more attention years after its release, though it was praised from the start for its realistic scenario. 2020 has rekindled the interest in the movie

and important TV channels and platforms began to re-broadcast and stream it: AMC, HBO, Netflix, Amazon Prime Videos, etc. The realistic portrayal of a then fictional global pandemic, together with its play on a basic human emotion—fear—have turned this movie into a cult classic, albeit belatedly.

The mechanism which keeps the onlooker involved to the degree of physically feeling the characters' fear is called narrative immersion. Narrative immersion is a concept borrowed from the field of virtual reality, specifically from the study of computer games. Yet, immersion can be used to describe any type of mental simulation (Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002) induced by various props (Walton, 1990), such as verbal, visual and acoustic elements, or a combination thereof, as is the case in cinematographic representations. The ultimate goal of any story, regardless of its medium of transmission, is to fully immerse the audience in its universe. This goal is more difficult to achieve in the case of written fiction—it takes a very good storyteller to engage the audience with a tale that requires them to re-create its universe in their minds—and is supposed to become increasingly easier once the written medium is exchanged for the visual, auditory or virtual one. Yet, this is not always the case and, even in game design, immersion is one of the most difficult responses to instantiate (Björk & Holopainen, 2004). Success is not a guarantee either for games or movies, and a film which strives for 'scary' but manages only 'boring' causes the viewer "to fall out of the immersive 'There' and arrive in the disenchanted, non-immersed 'Here' " (Hanich, 2010, p. 70).

Complete or partial failure of immersion in the story may have various causes, from an uninteresting storyline, to blunt exaggerations of the scenario. But major faults in the construction of the text are sometimes not the only reasons why the audience cannot be fully immersed in the story. Sometimes, a situation, plausible as it may be, is too much of a stretch of the imagination for the largest part of an audience, at a particular time. Either because the prospect is too frightening, too depressing or too removed from his/her personal reality, the average viewer cannot engage emotionally with the story. Or at least not until truth becomes stranger than fiction and reality begins to imitate art. This is arguably the case for what happened with the release of *Contagion.* The tools which facilitate the immersion of the viewer were in place from the very beginning, which ensured that the critical reception was mostly positive, with a score of 85% on Rotten Tomatoes. But, unlike critics who valued the strengths of the script written by Scott Z. Burns, the general audience did not feel so appreciative, giving *Contagion* a score of 63%. This is not because the film is somehow poorly constructed, but perhaps because, in 2011, the scenario it proposed was not sufficiently close to reality as to garner fear in all the audience. At the time of its release, the movie seemed remote from what might happen in real life and had the flavor of a larger-than-life blockbuster disaster movie of the mid-90s, of which *Outbreak* (1995) is an illustrative example. Yet, the director, Steven Soderbergh, took great pains to do his job properly and confessed to having researched into the matter of air-borne deadly viruses and being told by scientists that "it's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when. We had started the movie and then about 3 or 4 months into the research is when H1N1 happened. That became a really interesting tracer bullet through the system for us to follow some of the issues" (Soderbergh, 2011). Nevertheless, he could hardly envisage at the time how well his movie would portray future global crises.

As immersion is not only a matter of text but also a matter of context, in 2020, viewers have rediscovered *Contagion* and watched it with different eyes. Its position on various lists testifies to this—from number 270, as listed by Warner Bros. at the end of December 2019, this movie has managed to jump to the second place on the same list in the first months of 2020, being bested only by the *Harry Potter* series (Sperling, 2020). It is clear that the 2020 pandemic was another chance for a film which was, in the authors' opinion, well-written, well-acted and well-directed, but which did not enjoy the high level

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