

Article

Readapting Pandemic Premediation and Propaganda: Soderbergh's *Contagion* amid COVID-19

Kevin C. Moore 

Program in Writing and Rhetoric, Stanford University, 590 Escondido Mall, Stanford, CA 94305-3069, USA;
kcmoore@stanford.edu

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Abstract: Steven Soderbergh's pandemic thriller *Contagion* (2011) was trending strongly on streaming services in the US in the early days of COVID-19 restrictions, where the fiction took on an unforeseen afterlife amid a real pandemic. In this new context, many viewers and critics reported that the film seemed “uncanny,” if not prophetic. Frameworks such as Priscilla Wald's notion of the “outbreak narrative,” as well Richard Grusin's “premediation,” may help to theorize this affective experience on the part of viewers. Yet the film was also designed as a public health propaganda film to make people fear and better prepare for pandemics, and the present account works to recover this history. Although the film takes liberties with reality, in particular by proposing an unlikely vaccine-development narrative, Soderbergh and screenwriter Scott Z. Burns consulted prominent scientists and policymakers as they wrote the film, in particular Larry Brilliant and Ian Lipkin. These same scientists were consulted again in March 2020, when an effort spearheaded by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public health reunited the star-studded cast of *Contagion*, who created at home a series of public health announcement videos that might be thought of as a kind of re-adaptation of the film for the COVID-19 era. These public service announcements touch on key aspects of pandemic experience premediated by the original film, such as social distancing and vaccine development. Yet their very production as “work-from-home” illustrates how the film neglected to address the status of work during a pandemic. Recovering this history via *Contagion* allows us to rethink the film as a cultural placeholder marking a shift from post-9/11 security politics to the pandemic moment. It also becomes possible to map the cultural meaning of the technologies and practices that have facilitated the pandemic, which shape a new social order dictated by the fears and desires of an emerging work-from-home class.

Keywords: *Contagion*; propaganda; pandemic; premediation; Steven Soderbergh; Scott Z. Burns

“Contagion is more than an epidemiological fact.”

Priscilla Wald, *Contagious* (Wald 2008, p. 2)

When millions of people were forced to stay home around the world during the initial coronavirus lockdowns, it was widely observed that Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film *Contagion* was trending strongly on streaming video services. The pandemic thriller, about a novel virus far deadlier than SARS-CoV-2 and the global havoc it wreaks, ranked in the top-10 on iTunes for several weeks, competing with new releases in winter and early spring (Clark 2020). While epidemic films released before and since *Contagion*, such as *Outbreak* (1995) and *World War Z* (2013), have similarly entertained and frightened viewers, none has enjoyed the COVID-19 era afterlife of the Soderbergh thriller. This renewed appeal might seem unexpected, given the grim reassurance Soderbergh's film could have offered to viewers grappling with an emerging and uncertain viral situation. Not insignificantly, *Contagion*'s fictional virus has a disease profile more evocative of smallpox or Ebola than of COVID-19. MEV-1, as the film's

pathogen is called, rapidly kills between 20 and 30% of those it infects. The disease dispatches Gwyneth Paltrow's character in a gruesome spectacle within the film's first fifteen minutes. For some, the renewed attraction was transparently masochistic: as Wesley Morris (2020) wrote in *The New York Times*, just as the first documented cases of community spread of COVID-19 arrived in the western United States, "The appeal [of *Contagion*] now is how it's proving to be an instructive worst-case scenario of our current freak-out. We've turned to it, in part, to know how bad things could get." For others, however, it had to do with *Contagion*'s supposed "uncanny" realism (Adams and Onion 2020). Kelly (2020) speculated in *The Washington Post* that the COVID-era pull of *Contagion* is the context it provides viewers for pandemic experiences and protocols, thus offering a kind of unexpected comfort: "The compulsion to watch these fictionalized, sometimes graphic versions of things that are unfolding in the real world can be a way of making sense of what's happening when we're faced with uncertainty." Watching human actors grapple with similar situations to events playing out in real life may help viewers to recognize and process reality, especially given that the film offers a positive ending in the form of a successful vaccine.

While not all viewers of *Contagion* will share the comfort Kelly describes, *Contagion* undoubtedly offers what became, with COVID-19, a resonant catalogue of the varieties of pandemic experience. *Contagion*'s status as the most popular epidemic film of the early coronavirus moment may well be because it provides such a detailed vision of how a pandemic narrative plays out, complete with Purell panic-buying, treacherous fomites (which the camera tracks obsessively in several sequences), "social distancing" protocols (Laurence Fishburne's character, a fictional director of the CDC, actually uses the term in the film long before it entered widespread parlance), a detailed discussion of epidemiological basic reproduction numbers (R_0), contact tracing, gritty shoe-leather epidemiology, widespread paranoia, an exacerbation of social stratifications, a virus that leaps across species from bats to pigs to humans, and a conspiracy theory about a false cure. The film also possesses an impressive level of detail on pandemic science and policy. As Alissa Wilkinson (2020) writes in *Vox*, *Contagion* remains "a taut thriller for wonks, deeply researched and filled with jargon that coaxes viewers to pay attention; behind the entertainment is information that could have a real impact on your own life." In 2011, screenwriter Burns explained the film pursued considerable guidance from scientists and experts on infectious disease, including W. Ian Lipkin (2011), the Director of the Center for Infection and Immunity at Columbia University's Mailmen School of Public Health, the epidemiologist and technology entrepreneur Larry Brilliant, as well as the Pulitzer Prize-winning science journalist Laurie Garrett, author of the acclaimed volume *The Coming Plague* (1995) (Douglas 2011).

Upon its original release, this research and collaboration garnered much praise for the film, and not just from critics, but from prominent scientists and policymakers, including names that have only become more familiar in the context of COVID-19. Anthony Fauci—then and now Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who of course in 2020 became the most visible voice of the Trump administration's White House Coronavirus Task Force—attended an advance screening of the film (Harmon 2011), remarking, "It's one of the most accurate movies I have seen on infectious disease outbreaks of any type" (Roos 2011). So impressed was Fauci, in 2011, that even the aspect of the film that might strike virologists and epidemiologists as the most far-fetched, the exceptionally short 144-day timeline to develop and confirm an accurate vaccine, was, for him, "slightly unrealistic but not egregiously so" (Roos 2011). The same account recording Fauci's remarks on the film also cites Michael Osterholm, another prominent voice in the context of COVID-19 policy. Osterholm, who directs the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRP) at the University of Minnesota, called *Contagion* a worst-case scenario, yet insisted, "I'd say the potential for such an

outbreak to actually occur is real . . . There was nothing hyped about the potential for an agent like this to actually develop” (Roos 2011).¹

For many 2020 viewers revisiting *Contagion*, or seeing it for the first time, the scientific detail of the film made COVID-19 feel like a real-life sequel or adaptation of the fictional *Contagion* pandemic. Yet our attraction to what Priscilla Wald calls “outbreak narratives” (2008), including pandemic narratives like this one,² also reflects how such stories have for ages constituted deep-seated cultural formations, dictating the logic of deeply embedded cultural and social structures. Because of the long human history dealing with disease and contagion, even before the work of Louis Pasteur and the consensus of the germ theory of infectious disease transmission in the 19th century, the contours of the outbreak narrative are, for Wald, “foundational” in the collective imaginary. As Wald explains,

Contagion [not the film, but the concept] is more than an epidemiological fact. It is also a foundational concept in the study of religion and of society, with a long history of explaining how beliefs circulate in social interactions. The concept of contagion evolved throughout the twentieth century through the commingling of theories about microbes and attitudes about social change. Communicable disease compels attention—for scientists and the lay public alike—not only because of the devastation it can cause but also because the circulation of microbes materializes the transmission of ideas. The interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community. Disease emergence dramatizes the dilemma that inspires the most basic human narrative: the necessity and danger of human contact.

(p. 2)

The capacity of the outbreak narrative, and contagion more broadly to “materializ[e] the transmission of ideas” is not just a metaphor. If ideas propagate contagiously, or go viral as we might say, that is because contagious disease has long been an essential aspect of human experience. The structures we use to communicate, and for that matter to protect ourselves from perceived threats have adapted to bear the logic of contagion. This is undoubtedly why we especially hear reverberations of how we fear contagious disease during times of conflict and paranoia, when subversive ideas and invisible agents of perceived enemies are traced and rooted out as we might attempt to isolate a virus. In the context of globalized modernity, these dynamics proliferate. As Wald explained in a further April 2020 webinar, this time remarking directly on *Contagion*, this “disaster film,” which she notes was released just before the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, indeed highlights how the “outbreak narrative . . . focuses our nebulous anxieties about globalization” (Wald 2020).

This reference to the lasting cultural fallout of 9/11, however speculative, evokes another rubric for understanding the affective experience of viewing Soderbergh’s film in 2020, as its real-world sequel COVID-19 swept the word. In addition to being an example of the perennial outbreak narrative, *Contagion* also represents the 21st century media logic of what Grusin (2010) calls “premediation” or “medial pre-emption” that developed in the post-9/11 moment, of which *Contagion* is most certainly a part. Although the film tracks a deadly pathogen rather than a terrorist threat, the film’s release date of 9 September 2011—almost exactly ten years after the attacks on New York and Washington—could hardly have been coincidental. The film moreover explicitly depicts its pandemic response in the context of post-9/11 threat management. Almost as soon as the virus is identified, the film’s fictional CDC Director Dr. Ellis Cheever (Fishburne) is sloughed off to a meeting with brass at the Department of

¹ The article citing Fauci, by Richard Roos, was published on CIDRP’s news blog, a major public health institute at the University of Minnesota, ironically a campus where a key plot thread of the film takes place (Minneapolis is the original American epicenter of the MEV-1 virus in the film). Michael Osterholm has been an outspoken proponent of lockdowns in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

² Although pandemic narratives are clearly an instance of the outbreak narrative, of course not all outbreaks are global, and the present account takes care to distinguish between these terms. Pandemic narratives are, moreover, implicitly global, and thus entangled profoundly with other questions and fears related to globalization.

Homeland Security, where he is asked to weigh in on the security dimensions of the threat, including the possibility of bioterrorism. *Contagion* could hardly be a clearer specimen of a representation displaying premediation, which, as Grusin defines it, “works to prevent citizens of the global mediasphere from experiencing again the kind of systemic or traumatic shock produced by the events of 9/11 by perpetuating an almost constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack” (p. 2). While here the premediated potential systemic shock is not terror but a naturally mutated virus, the infiltration of a massively disruptive pathogen activates similar American and global security apparatuses, and reflects the “nebulous anxieties” of global interconnectedness characterized by Wald (Wald 2020). As one military or Homeland Security official puts it in the film, hypothesizing about the circumstances underlying the initial spreading event of the fictional virus at a Macao casino, “Someone’s ready to blow themselves up at a pizzeria or the local market then the thought of getting themselves sick with smallpox or plague and walking through a crowded casino must have crossed their mind.” One could hardly imagine a more “nebulous” description of a perceived global threat, which here might just as well transpire in a pizzeria, a market, or a Macao casino. In this scene, the specter of plotting sleeper cells and surprise suicide bombings, which loomed as perennial threats to the “homeland” during the post-9/11 decade concluded exactly by *Contagion*’s release, mutates in the imagination of this fictional security agent into the threat of a deliberately spread contagious disease with the capacity to impact the globe (although bioterror turns out not to be the cause of the pandemic in the film. “Someone doesn’t have to weaponize the bird flu,” Cheever (Fishburne) deadpans in the film, responding to the specter of bioterror, in one of the film’s cleverest lines. “The birds are already doing that.” According to a *Scientific American* review on bioterror and its portrayal in *Contagion*, Anthony Fauci found this argument of the film to be especially pertinent, responding in an interview, “Nature’s the greatest bioterrorist” (Harmon 2011)).

Indeed, Grusin’s notion of premediation provides a further, helpful framework for understanding *Contagion*’s uncanny cultural meaning from the perspective of COVID-19, as a historical placeholder lying somewhere between cultural fears about post-9/11 terror and concern about emerging pandemics. Here is his extended definition, which distinguishes explicitly between premediation and prediction:

Premediation characterizes the mediality of the first decade of the twenty-first century as focused on the cultural desire to make sure that the future has already been pre-mediated before it turns into the present (or the past)—in large part to try to prevent the media, and hence the American public, from being caught unawares as it was on the morning of 11 September 2001 ... premediation is not to be confused with prediction. Premediation is not about getting the future right, but about proliferating multiple remediations of the future both to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock that the United States and much of the networked world experienced on 9/11.

(p. 4)

Using this rubric, one might wager the hypothesis that viewers of *Contagion* circa February and March 2020, who returned to the pandemic narrative of *Contagion* as an interpretive and affective guide for understanding or at least processing COVID-19, participated in an act of nostalgia for the experience of premediation once offered by the fictional, hypothetical *Contagion* pandemic. Back in 2011, the cultural logic of *Contagion* worked to both harvest and mitigate surplus post-9/11 fear (“to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock”). The film’s 2020 appeal thus may not stem from its status as prophetic pandemic prototype, but as an unexpectedly soothing reminder of what it felt like to consume pandemic drama and terror in the safe space of the alarmist, premediating cinema of the post-9/11 security state, versus the alarmist, inescapable, polarized news, media, and technological landscape of 2020 (especially as inflected by the social chaos and political divisions of the Trump era).

What the film does not nor can be expected to explain are exactly the advancements in technology and media that have made COVID-19 so different from the pandemic world it portrays. Some characters still use flip phones in *Contagion*, notably the cure peddler, conspiracy theorist, and folk hero Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law), who is an adamant defender of the citizen science to be found on the “blogosphere.” In 2020, one perhaps hears less about the blogs and the blogosphere, but citizen science as well as panic and rumor pervade online. These dubious forms, as well as legitimate information, news, and even scientific research about the real pandemic spread with breathtaking speed, via sources as varied as partisan news websites, Reddit and Twitter, and the biomedical preprint servers Medrxiv and Biorxiv, which are radically transforming bioscientific publication practices by providing an open forum for scientific debate in advance of peer review (Flier 2020). In 2020, pervasive smartphones and a truly wireless internet have created an apparatus where one might receive news alerts, participate in pandemic surveillance projects, and consume entertainment content—such as the film *Contagion*, or for that matter populist content such as Cardi B’s viral coronavirus Instagram post and its various remixes (Cardi B 2020)—all on the same device. The arrival of reliable videoconferencing apps, such as Zoom, have facilitated a massive shift to remote work for white-collar employees, which would not have been possible in the world of *Contagion*. All of these developments shape pandemic rhetoric and policy, and they are rearranging structures of security, surveillance, and power. Through the lens of COVID-19, *Contagion* becomes not prophetic but an important historical marker. It was created just as the post-9/11 decade of premediation and “nebulous” paranoia about globalization, but also of relative technological optimism, began to give way to alarming trends that would increasingly define the 21st century’s second decade: rising tides of nationalism, hypermediation, a blurring of legitimate information and propaganda, and, for many, especially in the COVID-era, a feeling of creeping techno-capitalist dystopia.

Yet *Contagion* is also directly implicated in the future it premediates. To fully understand *Contagion*’s historical meaning and 2020 impact, one also must acknowledge its influence agenda. Beyond its entertainment value as a thriller, its COVID-19 value as a possible intellectual comfort, and its status as a premediation of a fearful public health scenario, *Contagion* was also conceived as a propaganda film. This aspect of *Contagion*, which sought to impact pandemic awareness and policy, went largely unacknowledged amid its afterlife, although it marks yet another way the film looks forward to, and may even have helped to constitute how Americans, in particular, began to understand the coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, the fictional world of *Contagion*, as it was originally conceived, is not simply entangled with real-world pandemic science and policy as a matter of artistic verity. A deliberate, educational agenda underwrites the film, which sought to raise awareness about the emerging threat of novel viruses and pandemics, and what a public response should look like. As Burns tells the story, when he and Soderbergh came up with the idea for *Contagion*, they had been immersed in an ongoing plan to make a film about none other than Leni Riefenstahl, the problematic, technically acclaimed director of Nazi propaganda films such as *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938). In the wake of the success of their previous collaboration on *The Informant!* (2009), the team had been planning for six months to make a Riefenstahl biopic (Jagernauth 2011). It was Soderbergh who urged Burns to reconsider: a film on Riefenstahl, he warned, would not be terribly marketable. Rather than the Riefenstahl film, we have *Contagion*, but the capacities of cinema to influence reality lingered in the genesis of the new project. Burns said, “We were trying to make a movie for a variety of reasons that would really reach people . . . [*Contagion* is] a movie where I think people go and have a really good time and hopefully walk out of it and think about some things a little differently” (Douglas 2011). The film was produced and distributed by Participant Media, the same production company that created the influential documentaries *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Food, Inc* (2008), as well as the Academy Award winning *Spotlight* (2015) about the Boston Globe investigation that brought to light the systemic culture of abuse within the Catholic Church in the early 2000s. Regardless of whether or not *Contagion* actually impacted pandemic policy in the US and globally—an impact that would of course be challenging to quantify—the film’s deployment of seemingly realistic epidemiological protocols

and vocabulary gives credence to the dramatic measures and public narrative the COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated. Consulting scientists as well as policy-makers at the CDC and WHO, including existing plans for pandemic response in the time and aftermath of H1N1, *Contagion* consolidates a script for a real pandemic, not least of which is the notion that pandemics can end only with the arrival of a vaccine.

Burns had been wanting to work on a pandemic film ever since hearing a 2006 TED talk by Larry Brilliant, the epidemiologist, technology entrepreneur, and inaugural Executive Director of Google's philanthropy arm, Google.org (Douglas 2011). Brilliant, who was cited on *TIME Magazine's* list of 100 most influential people in 2008, may also be the advisor who left the biggest mark on the film. Brilliant, a self-described "spiritual seeker," helped to eradicate smallpox from its final stronghold in India and was a founder of the Seva Foundation, which has helped to bring sight-restoring cataract surgery to developing nations (Brilliant 2006). He has long been a major Silicon Valley guru and personality, and was an early embracer of computer teleconferencing (Brilliant 2016, pp. 387–88). In collaboration with counterculture and tech icon Steward Brand, he co-founded the early social network The WELL (Turner 2006, p. 142). A friend of Steve Jobs, Sheryl Sandberg, and Ram Dass, in 2006 he was one of three winners of the 2006 TED Prize, for which he gave a special presentation for the organization in which he had the opportunity to ask for the fulfillment of a "wish" (Brilliant 2006). On that occasion, which left so strong impression on Burns, Brilliant, who the previous year had founded an organization called PanDefense 1.0, asked activists and investors to help him pursue the ambitious goal of creating a vast epidemic surveillance network, in which internet data would become a key component (Brilliant 2016, p. 390). Brilliant would go on to become an advisor to the film, and he led Burns to Columbia University professor Ian Lipkin, another major consultant (so critical, in fact, that one of the film's minor characters, an epidemiologist named Ian Sussman, who is played by Elliott Gould, was supposedly based on Lipkin) (Wallis 2011). Burns spent the next several years researching pandemics against the background of the H1N1 flu pandemic.

Further evidence of *Contagion's* agenda lies in the film's credits. Near the end of the credit roll, on a slide thanking the US Department of Defense as well as the National Guard of California, Georgia, and Illinois, a plug for a companion website reads, "IT'S NOT IF, BUT WHEN. GET READY AT www.takepart.com/contagion" (Jacobs et al. 2011). Notably, this link was updated to redirect to a different site, for COVID-19—more on this update below. However, if one had followed the link in in early March 2020 before it was changed, one would have been directed to a page hosted by the now retired "digital news and lifestyle magazine" of Participant Media called Take Part, which encouraged activism on issues such as environmental justice and food production practices (Contagion 2015). On the *Contagion* subpage, which is still accessible via the *Internet Archive's* "Wayback Machine," an invitation for the public to "Host a Screening" lies beneath a link to the film's trailer, with a link to the distributor (Contagion 2015). Other links redirected to pandemic projects at International Medical Corps, as well as two web-based epidemic surveillance websites: FluNearYou and HealthMap, both of which have ties to Brilliant (Contagion 2015).³ Although not terribly sophisticated as a resource page for public health information, its existence as a supplement to *Contagion* underscores the film's educational enterprise and interest in influencing pandemic policy.

The March 2020 update to this website goes much further, becoming a belated, further adaptation of the entanglement of *Contagion*, and its fictional, hypothetical world, with real policy and science. Amid the film's renewed popularity in late March, the original companion website abruptly disappeared, and the link at the end of the film's credits began redirecting instead to a webpage hosted by the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, titled "Control the Contagion" (Columbia University 2020).

³ FluNearYou is backed by the organization Ending Pandemics, where Larry Brilliant serves on the advisory board. HealthMap received funding from Google.org, where Brilliant was the first CEO, and where one of his two inaugural initiatives was related to ending pandemics. Brilliant's influence not only on *Contagion* but on pandemic policy more broadly is outside the scope of the present study, but is worth noting as a topic of considerable compit lexity.

The website describes its agenda like this: “Misleading, inaccurate messages and advice about the COVID-19 pandemic are being shared across both traditional and social media platforms. We wanted to do our part to curb this” (Columbia University 2020). Apparently, the Mailman School reached out to the ensemble cast of stars to create a series of public service announcements (PSAs) based on the film, which they released on YouTube as well as via an updated companion website for the film (Columbia University 2020). These PSAs constitute a delayed adaptation of the original, fictional film into an instance of real-world, public health propaganda (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013).⁴ The cast isn’t exactly “reunited,” insofar as they all filmed their own segments at home. However, the scripts were penned by original screenwriter Burns and developed in consultation with the same scientists who helped to shape the film, including Lipkin and Brilliant. In the PSAs, the actors play themselves, yet all of them allude to their screen identities. Each one tackles a different aspect of COVID-19 pandemic reality, as if the aura of the experience of the fictional characters from the world of *Contagion* somehow lends them their authority. Matt Damon advises the public to “Listen to Experts”; Kate Winslet instructs on how to “Wash Your Hands”; Laurence Fishburne unpacks “Social Distancing”; Jennifer Ehle appears on a slide that says, “Stay Home,” although she primarily talks about vaccines; and Marion Cotillard, beaming in from France a few days ahead of the forthcoming American viral wave, warns Americans, gravely, that they need to “Make a Choice” to slow the spread of the virus. For the most part the actors filmed themselves, and the videos cultivate the raw, Zoom-vérité quality of coronavirus-era visual media. Two major actors from the film are missing, although it’s not hard to see why: they include Paltrow, whose character, Beth Emhoff, is effectively patient zero, and who is depicted rather negatively by the film for spreading the virus via an extramarital affair; and Jude Law, who plays the conspiracy theorist Krumwiede. Insofar as the PSAs earn their credibility in part from that of the characters they represent, one can see how these “negative” characters would be disqualified from the Columbia PSAs.

The specific content of the PSAs mainly reiterates the advice with which health authorities in the US and around the world saturated the public in the early days of the pandemic. Nor is it extraordinary for Hollywood actors to make public statements about social or political issues that capitalize upon prior roles, although the involvement of a major research university in such a production represents a weird blurring of Hollywood glam with academic authority. Given that the homemade videos were produced at home and explicitly designed to be shared on social media, however, they begin to call attention to what has changed since the film came out in 2011, specifically to what the film does not predict about the 2020 pandemic: the advances in internet technology and infrastructure—in particular streaming video and video conferencing—that have facilitated the experience for an emerging non-essential, work-from-home class. These PSAs, in which the actors play themselves working from home, represent what again appear as the most critical aspects of our pandemic life not predicted by the 2011 science-fiction world of *Contagion*: the arrival of widespread, easy-to-use, streaming video production and communication, and its facilitation of white-collar remote work as well as entertainment. Notably, aside from government and public health officials, doctors, and pharmacy workers, no one appears to be at work in the world of *Contagion* once the pandemic gets rolling. Aside from one scene where the National Guard distributes food to a panicked crowd, the film simply does not address what the policies look like regarding issues such as government-sponsored food distribution, income replacement, or housing provisions. This is perhaps the most unrealistic component of the film, or at least the part most out of sync with the priorities of public discussion as they have played out in politically polarized 2020: although the characters do witness looting and experience some

⁴ The definition of propaganda I deploy here and throughout this essay is not necessarily negative, but rather follows the definition offered by Auerbach and Castronovo in the introduction to their groundbreaking co-edited volume *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*. As Auerbach et al. explain, “[p]ropaganda is not intrinsically evil or immoral” (p. 5), and can in fact be positive, as is often the case with public health propaganda. Propaganda is moreover always “fluid, varying according to context and function” (p. 5).

hardship, they survive in what appears to be suburban comfort for the most part, and it's never clear how they continue to support themselves, or for that matter how they keep themselves occupied at home. The characters of *Contagion* certainly do not have widespread access to Zoom, nor to the now ubiquitous streaming entertainment services on which so many viewers accessed *Contagion*. Instagram had not yet acquired the video functionality that made Cardi B's viral sensation possible. These technologies would have still been emerging in the world of the film, assuming it was set roughly contemporaneous to its 2011 release.

The depiction of media and technology in this pandemic film, and especially how it contrasts with the 2020 experience of COVID-19 pandemic reality, matters. As a belated adaptation of *Contagion*, the Columbia COVID-19 PSAs focus our attention not only with the health guidance they describe, which is widely available everywhere, but also—through their materiality as homemade videos in the age of coronavirus—on what the original film failed to foresee about the COVID-19 pandemic: the emergent power and cultural inertia of 2020's videoconferencing enabled work-from-home culture. If we take them as a kind of sequel to this premediating disaster film, remade for a hypermediated 2020 reality, it might even be said that they attempt to convert the film's premediation into real pandemic propaganda. One might even retroactively speculate that the fictional world of *Contagion*—a world without work-from-home as a standard practice, or even a realistic possibility given the limitations of software and bandwidth—is plausible only because the virus in the film is so deadly, killing up to a third of those exposed including children and non-elderly adults, forcing (rather than loosely ordering, as was the case in the US and most of the world) essential and nonessential workers alike to remain at home. Indeed, the populace in the film stays home not because the government has ordered it or deemed their employment nonessential, but because their lives truly depend upon it. The COVID pandemic, by contrast, involves a virus with a relatively low death rate for the young and healthy—who would include most of the cast of characters in *Contagion*—and, in most countries, an exceptionally steep gradient of risk for the sick and elderly (Ioannidis 2020). The Columbia PSAs, which call attention to this technology through their *vérité* style (although surely these famous actors had access to high-quality production, even amid the pandemic), thus become something like a belated revision offering the following acknowledgement: that only with the arrival of home videoconferencing technology could a long-lasting, massively disruptive pandemic response become possible for a respiratory virus with the fatality profile of COVID-19. This, too, may ultimately represent a belated adaptation of a further uncanny reassurance the original *Contagion* offered to those who watched or rewatched it in 2020: its whispered, contradictory reminders that our pandemic, however grave a concern for the vulnerable, in fact is not as deadly or contagious as MEV-1, while our infrastructure for transmitting media for work and pleasure—including the infrastructure that makes it possible to stream *Contagion*—has become exquisitely nimble.

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