Jacob Wall

Professor Williamson

English 1302 Sec 049

February 26, 2012

Adversities to a plague

*Contagion* expresses a plethora of reactions that people have to a plague, while at the same time demonstrating the fact that the hysteria caused by mankind is more adverse than the plague itself. This can be shown in the grocery store, panic on the streets, or food distribution scenes within *Contagion*. Barney and Scheck reference that “during the past three decades in which scientific, cultural, and political representations of biological catastrophe, especially in the U.S. and Europe, have renewed and refurbished the notion of “plague,” while often doing so in oblique or implicit fashion” (Barney and Sheck 2). With the increase in coverage, as eluded by Barney and Scheck, people have created mass hysteria whenever a plague is to be mentioned.

There are many significant scenes within *Contagion*, for example in the grocery store scene Mitch Emhoff and his daughter, Jory, enter a grocery store and are confronted immediately by an infected woman. Mitch in this scene reacts to the woman coughing in the direction of himself and his daughter by immediately leaving the grocery store and disinfecting their hands. The scene continues with them stopping once outside the grocery store and seeing looters break into a bank. The scene offers an oblique extreme long shot with the focus being on Mitch and his daughter but allows the viewer to see the hysteria that’s ensued by the plague as well as the response from the government in the background. In a documentary you would get a more objective shot versus an emotional shot, which Hollywood focuses on. Society, in a sane moment of time, would be outraged by such actions that are played out within *Contagion*. Using Hurricane Katrina as an example, we saw completely normal people, when put in a dire situation, become ruthless individuals and made the devastated area as an MSNBC reporter resemble, “downtown Baghdad” (MSNBC).

How would the world react if one of the world’s busiest transportation and economic names were suddenly shut down? In Contagion Lyle Haggerty and Dr. Ellis Cheever discuss the soon closing of Chicago O’Hare, Chicago Midway, the Chicago Board of Trade, and the setup of the National Guard to prevent people entering and existing contaminated cities. This would be very rare footage to have access to for a documentary and is only reasonable in Hollywood. Just as Haggerty and Dr. Cheever noted the high possibility of a run on the banks, gas stations, grocery stores will cause mass panic and the “virus will be the least of our worries.” The reaction to the plague is much the same as people reacted towards the Great Depression. There was the run on the banks, gas stations, and grocery stores. This shows that society provokes mass hysteria regardless of a manmade disaster, like the Great Depression, or in this case, a fictitious plague can cause. To sum up, based upon the response of government and individuals with power the response can be extremely volatile.

The rationing of food is mentioned briefly in a scene within *Contagion* but it shows that people will do anything possible to make sure that their basic needs are fulfilled. In this segment the military hands out the remaining MREs and once out a fit of madness arises. Brawls are started and even those without any food are relentlessly attacked. Scenes like this, although in certain different contexts, were not uncommon to have filmed during disasters such as previously mentioned Hurricane Katrina. Barney and Scheck explain that the word plague can cause “volatility” as well as “exponential proliferation, producing a potential plague of rhetorics” (Barney and Scheck 13). By “plague of rhetorics” Barney and Sheck mean the word plague, or any word with the same meaning, cause an instant proliferation of emotions.

*Contagion,* while fictional, represents how people react towards plagues in reality – with strong emotion causing mass hysteria and changing the whole world around them. This is even seen outside of *Contagion,* as brought up in the examples of Hurricane Katrina as well as The Great Depression. The outcomes are much the same; mass hysteria is almost a guarantee with the fact that the word plague is synonymous with many emotions. As you can see, the ways humans react to a plague, or disaster, propel the hysteria regardless if manmade or not.

Works Cited

Barney, Richard A., and Helene Scheck. "Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies."*Project MUSE -*. Web. 28 Feb. 2012. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal\_for\_e arly\_modern\_cultural\_studies/>.

*Contagion*. Steven Soderbergh. Warner Bros. 2011. DVD.

"Looters Take Advantage of New Orleans Mess." *Looters Take Advantage of New Orleans Mess*. Associated Press and MSNBC, 30 Aug. 2005. Web. 28 Feb. 2012. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9131493/ns/us\_news-katrina\_the\_long\_road\_back/t/looters-take-advantage-new-orleans-mess/#.T0wR3nJSQmQ>.