

Contagion, the latest from Steven Soderbergh

By Hiram Lee
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Contagion is the latest from US film director Steven Soderbergh. Best known today for the blockbuster *Ocean's Eleven* heist movies, Soderbergh got his start as an independent filmmaker in the late 1980s, first gaining notoriety with *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989). For a time, he produced a number of interesting films, including *King of the Hill* (1989), *Kafka* (1991) and *Schizopolis* (1996). Beginning with *Out of Sight* in 1998, he moved more and more into mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. In between his major studio films, Soderbergh continues to work on smaller films which are ostensibly more serious and challenging. There have been diminishing returns on both fronts. *Contagion* is among the more serious-minded works.

The film concerns the spread of a deadly new virus and the social response to the resulting epidemic. The trouble begins when Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) returns home to Minneapolis feeling ill after a trip to Hong Kong. She is quickly overtaken by a mysterious disease, leaving her husband Mitch (Matt Damon) to pick up the pieces. Signs of the same illness soon begin to appear in cases throughout the world.

Dr. Ellis Cheever (Laurence Fishburne) of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is approached by the Department of Homeland Security and given the task of investigating the new disease and developing a treatment. An Epidemic Intelligence Service officer (Kate Winslet) is sent to Minneapolis to investigate the outbreak, but makes little headway before contracting the virus herself. Efforts to contain the spread of the highly contagious disease come to nothing and millions become infected. Panic sets in as the CDC struggles to produce a vaccine to combat the epidemic.

Contagion has its moments. To its credit, it is one of the few Hollywood studio films in which one does glimpse something of the immense social polarization in the US and the potentially explosive nature of such disasters. One sees bitter clashes at food distribution

sites and at pharmacies, conflicts produced by overwhelming social need and inadequate supplies or the unpreparedness of government agencies. FEMA tents turning away those in need because the agency has run out of supplies, producing a riot in one scene, recall the images from the Hurricane Katrina disaster, as do the makeshift hospitals set up in sports arenas.

Among the more memorable moments is one in which a desperately ill woman shows up at the door of a conspiratorial blogger (played by Jude Law), who claims to have found a cure for the disease. "I can give you some money," she says, holding the cash in front of her face. Something of the ugliness and tragedy wrought by a system in which the health care needs of the population remain subordinate to money and profit interests is communicated here.

The film is intelligently made. Soderbergh has his talents, including a feeling for film imagery and rhythm, and he has assembled an impressive cast. But there are serious weaknesses.

Like a number of other Soderbergh films, *Contagion* finds the director juggling a large cast of characters each of whose stories is ultimately so slim and told so elliptically that one feels significant pieces have simply gone missing. Important elements are only touched on when they should be worked through more thoroughly.

A subplot involving the kidnapping of a World Health Organization physician by a doctor in Hong Kong who wants his poverty-stricken home village moved to the top of the list of those to receive treatment first feels wasted. The storyline might have had some potential but feels contrived and dashed-off, too little time and attention spent on it. This is typical, unfortunately, of Soderbergh's 'artistic' efforts.

Much has been made of the social panic that erupts in the film, the mass hysteria, the rioting. Soderbergh, we are told, is addressing something essential about human nature.

The director has revealingly expressed his own views on the subject. In an interview with UGO Entertainment, Soderbergh refers to one scene in which a group of desperate people storm a FEMA truck hoping to find food, not realizing it's empty. "Yes, that's one of my favorite moments ..." says Soderbergh, "because you have Matt [Damon] about to follow the crowd, then realizing that there's nothing in there. But you see the mob mentality, you see how fear takes over. The prefrontal cortex is disconnected and we're reverting to animal stage."

In watching these scenes play out, one gets a sense that, for Soderbergh, the instances of rioting and "looting" are more or less pathetic demonstrations of human beings reduced (or reducing themselves) to animal behavior. One recently encountered similar views within the political establishment and media toward the youth who took part in the recent riots in Britain. Does Soderbergh belong to that social layer that views the possibility of a social upheaval with nothing but trepidation? For an artist, such a view would be terribly harmful. It is unlikely that significant, i.e., deep-going, substantive, filmmaking will emerge today that consciously dissociates itself from popular outrage.

Artists urgently need to develop a greater understanding of social life, of man as a social being and the objective social processes to which his life corresponds. We have seen far too much at this point of "Man" treated in an abstract sense endowed with a supposedly eternal "Human Nature" (which is too often depicted as thoroughly debased) and moral compass.

Are scenes like those that play out in *Contagion* an example of Man reduced to an animal state when his social routine is disrupted, of mass hysteria and mob mentality? Or are they the expression of pent-up, if confused, social anger over worsening social conditions and living standards?

Soderbergh's approach to some of these questions has led him to make a film which strikes a strangely dispassionate tone (it should be noted this is a director who managed to make a thoroughly uncommitted, "neutral" four-and-a-half hour film about the life of Che Guevara). With the exception of a few sequences, there's something cold and clinical, and often unsympathetic, about the way much of *Contagion* has

been filmed, as though Soderbergh can't entirely relate to certain aspects of the story he is telling or the social moods expressed. One can't help but feel much of it seems terribly irrational and inexplicable to the director. The impact of the film's better moments weakens and sours under the circumstances.

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