

# Disasters, ethnocentrism and mobilities, exploring the Film Contagion 2011

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## Abstract

This essay explores the synopsis of the film Contagion (2011) that narrates the ethical dilemma of sacrifice in a post-disaster context. At first glance, it seems to emulate the situation during Swine flu outbreaks, radicalizing the political discourse in two directions. On one hand, China, a new emerging but undemocratic superpower, is portrayed as dangerous, disordered, and the Chinese as lazy. In the movie, the United States government intervenes to maintain the security of world health. The US intervention entails restricting the rights of democratic life such as mobility, trade, connectivity, and the distribution of food. The implication is that mobility and tourism facilitate virus outbreaks. This movie presents an ethnocentric discourse because it assumes that only mobility in the First world is safe. Global connections which enable the introduction of Third World from presumed uncivilized cultures lead to the possibility of apocalyptic pandemics.

*Key Words.* mobilities, tourism, Virus, Death, Disasters, Pandemics

## Introduction

Disasters do not just have objective effects but are also rationalized in public discourse (Keane, 2006; Quarantelli, 1985). In the disaster films, we find a coherent narrative that acts as a guide in context of uncertainty or lack of information (Webb, 2007). Whenever disasters take place, two major problems arise. First, the pre-established protocols are ignored in view of the frightening situation people. Secondly, the state of emergency creates a specific discourse, which not only affects the public but also exerts considerable influence on experts and politicians in their decision-making process. Undoubtedly, disaster films disseminate an ideological message (Lacy, 2001). Therefore, understanding the

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scripted message in the synopsis of movies corresponds with a fertile ground for the study of the politics of disasters. This is the case in the film, *Contagion*, which starring by Matt Damon (playing the character Mitch) premiered in 2011. *Contagion* is framed in an apocalyptic scenario, where Mitch loses his family as a result of a virus outbreak originating in Hong Kong and then expanding worldwide. A lethal, unknown virus is transmitted to Mitch's wife after a business trip to Hong Kong. Within days, this apocalyptic virus decimated the population of the world affecting billions. Using content analysis methodology, I argue that *Contagion* is an allegory of the postmodern spirit of capitalism, where the salvation of few depends on the ruin of whole. One of the most terrifying aspects of virus is associated to the fact that they are uncontrolled by the scientific gaze. In this context, the non-white other should be controlled by the civilized West simply because they are chaotic, inefficient, or undemocratic (Levin 1993; Foucault, 2000; 2008).

### **Preliminary Discussion**

From Erving Goffman onwards, whenever social institutions of capitalism are scrutinized, much attention has been devoted to the role played by discipline in changing or molding individual behavior. Total institutions consist of spaces of discipline where the liberties and rights of inmates are temporarily cancelled. Goffman was interested in understanding how these institutions work. In their spaces, which ranges from prison to mental hospitals, the imposition of rules the subject loses all its sovereignty. The person is stripped of group belonging. Confinement in isolation is of paramount importance to ensure the success of the process (Goffman, 1961). The West, over the last few centuries, has used the gaze as a sign of truth over other senses. The act of discovering, epistemologically speaking, needs visual certification. As an all-encompassing way of control, vision appeals to what can be immobilized and scrutinized. For example, as Foucault argued the observed persons, or the patients, are subjected to medical reason. The metaphysics alludes to the patriarchal order where instrumentalism leads to the needs of truth (Levin 1993; Foucault, 2008). The ocular hegemony, anyway, is not limited to the perception of self, but also appeals to the politics of the will to power. Foucault went on to argue that the panoptic model concentrates scattered situations into a one-sided mechanism of control (Foucault, 1992). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault acknowledged that the eye that sees all transforms daily life into epistemes. In that way, medicine, history, and other experts segregate those values which have nothing to do with vision. The medical eye, rooted in the hegemony of science, not only treats the patients in specific spaces but also separates them from the normalcy until the pathology is removed. Before the sickness, a set of expiatory rituals sanitize the infected persons so that the disciplinary values of societies may persist. By a previous validation of medical reason, the ill person passes from one state to other by the imposition of Western

values (Foucault, 1996; 2000). Society, Foucault adds, adopts stability through principles of efficacy and contingency. Any disaster, or big economic problem, is defined in those terms, because it affects the society and its idea of omnipotence. The sense of instability produced by disaster may lead the society to chaos. The disciplinary mechanisms serve to regulate the state of disintegration so that society does not collapse. Foucault uses the example of the homology between virus and vaccine. Any risk is a controlled threat, in the same way that vaccine inoculates the patient. Therefore, controllability is derived from created risk where the future of threat is domesticated. If social discipline signals the application of law to regulate misbehavior, the sense of security articulates policies of contention and management (Foucault, 2006). This raises an interesting question: what is the connection between risk and scientific knowledge?

Anthony Giddens discusses the nature of risk as an instrument of assistance to help experts in diluting uncertainty. That is why the modern social system recovers its ability to keep society working. Whenever someone feels bad, s/he goes to the doctor to get a diagnosis and treatment. To take medication, the patient must trust the expert's knowledge and skills. Without that trust, lay people would never ask for the doctor's assistance (Giddens, 1991). In this vein, Martin Hollis (2011) traced the history of science to emphasize the production of knowledge as conducive to the interests of laboratories. The reasoning of medical discourse is supported by the government to discover the theories that facilitate the adoption of the production of pharmaceuticals. The industry of knowledge and market are inextricably intertwined.

*“The history of medicine, for instance, is illuminated by recognizing that the acceptance of medical theories is related to the power of the church, the rise of a medical profession, the fact that doctors are mostly male and midwives female or the influence of giant pharmaceutical companies”.* (Hollis, 2011: 87)

Undoubtedly, the world is facing substantial changes, though the medium and long term effects are not duly calculated by specialists. The technology of information plays a pivotal role by reporting scattered news in a globalized universe (Laszlo & Kingsley, 2013; Korstanje & Skoll, 2013), which altered the ways and basis of production in economies (Toffler, 1991). The old disciplinary modes of violence, described by Foucault, seem to be changing to new forms of distributing knowledge, information, and power (Toffler, 1991; Lyon, 2004; Bauman & Lyon, 2013). As money has been replaced by credit card transactions, power today is defined in terms of knowledge production (Toffler, 1991). In these times, the governance of risks is one of the main themes discussed by sociologists and anthropologists at their meetings.

## **Disasters, Mobility and Viruses**

The modern world cannot be as fair as we wish. Natural disasters that leave thousands of people without their households, mass death in ethnic cleansings, starvation, and war are some of the problems humankind faces in these times. Many activists struggle to make of this world a safer and better place, but new risks arise. Discussing the problem of humanitarian assistance from an ethical perspective, David Miller explains that nation states, which govern in-group attachment are automatically excluding other, undesirable groups. As a pseudo-philosophical project, cosmopolitanism had serious problems to show why some societies should have solidarity with others. The outbreak of swine flu not only demonstrated how individualism worked but also the failures of all nations to successfully vaccinate their citizens. To put this in other terms, capitalism seems to be a paradoxical system where the wellbeing of individuals is granted only by the suffering of the whole (Miller, 2007).

Unlike classical disasters such as quakes, tsunamis, or fires; virus outbreaks or food contamination causes extreme fears in society (Ofri, 2009; Goodwin et al, 2009; Tarlow 2011). One of the characteristics of pandemics is the fact that the causative factor is not accessible to human vision. Particularly, one might speculate viruses escape to the natural mechanism of alarm through human nature. Animals trigger their alarm system by the endocrinology of fear (Pile & Gordon, 2006; Rubin et al, 2009; Hilton & Hunt, 2011). They are naturally programmed to fight or run away at time a predator which is near. In contrast, humans have a much more complex and differentiated system that lead them to imagine potential dangers, which sometimes are not real. The angst or anxiety of these times corresponds with an exaggerated system of alarm posed by the media. Based on simulacra, media imposes imagined and abstract fears that have nothing to do with reality (Baudrillard, 2006), to create a climate of panic (Sandman, 2009). Some scholars have agreed that without this atmosphere, some governmental policies would be rejected by citizenry (Klein, 2007; Korstanje, 2011; Tzanelli, 2014; Elden, 2005; Etzioni, 2012; Hardt & Negri, 2002; 2004).

Although in the context of disasters, the media concentrate on the future of poorer classes, while richer groups are not blamed for their responsibility in the event. This means that disasters do not exist except in their effects in a non-egalitarian society. Instead of solving poverty, which remains a chronic problem, capitalism has developed a spectacle of disaster (Drotner, 1992; Korstanje, 2010; 2011; Skoll & Korstanje, 2012). As C. Bouton (2011) put it, the society of risk is characterized by planning for the future. Risk management policies attempt to colonize the future to control the risk, but beyond this, they generate new risks.

With this as a backdrop, D. Desroches (2011) observes that democracy and its concept of publicity blurs the boundaries between risk management and alarmism. The mediated effects have been accelerated to reach a point of inflation of risks. Any event, no matter

what its cause, is presented to stimulate the mass consumption into a coherent framework. The media plays a vital role in context of disasters, because it signals the necessary alarm to achieve efficient rescue or evacuation plans but in some conditions it may trigger panic. Ulrich Beck acknowledged that the complexity of modernity posed serious challenge for humankind in the next century. Though technology and medical discourse devoted considerable attention and effort to ensure this life as safer, some unanticipated risk may emerge (Beck, 2006). A similar argument has been brought up by Anthony Giddens who argued that risk and modernity were inextricably intertwined. In contrast to Beck, Giddens formulated a new theory which sheds light on the problem of risk.

*“Modernity’s reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relation with nature, to chronic revision in the light of a new information or knowledge. Such a information or knowledge is not incidental to modern institutions, but constitutive of them ... because many possibilities of reflection about reflexivity exist in modern social conditions”* (Giddens, 1991: 20)

The net of experts not only discover and mitigate new risk, they intervene in daily life to reinforce the medical gaze. Risks are framed and explored by experts to revitalize the trust between citizens and their institutions. The concept of reflexivity, which is based on modern thought, corresponds with the ecology of mind. In a recent book dedicated to ecology, Giddens (2011) acknowledges that the technology at disposal of humankind would make the earth a better world, but this not only has not happened but technology exerts pressure which deteriorates the conditions of life. While some risks are monitored and controlled, other, more globalized ones work as a runaway train (Giddens, 2011). The authority of experts is legitimized by the covering of other peripheral or informal theories. Separateness, a concept originally coined by modernity, is of vital importance to give credibility to experts’ arguments. The belief that we are individual agents or that subjectivity is opposed to objectivity is not only false, but it also imposes a psychological dependency toward the scientific paradigm. Any threat or problem needs the intervention of a therapist or an expert who knows more than the patient about his or her body or mind. Beyond this discourse, the West has woven a tactic of expropriation, control, and submission (Schmitt, 1995). Are risks real or imagined categories?

According to Cass Sunstein, the states of disasters not only are generated by our emotional misconception of risks, but also by the probability of neglect, which consists in a personal disposition to remember similar events with a lower probability of repetition. When this happens, the social imaginary overestimates some risks while ignoring others (Sunstein, 2005; 2006). In earlier works, M. Korstanje had drawn the attention to the role played by human contact restrictions in virus outbreaks. In conditions of emergency, nation states restrict human contact along with geographical mobility. Travelers and trade are stopped in

favor of national security. Based on an analysis of swine flu case, he adds the theory of conspiracy blamed American laboratories as mainly responsible for the manipulation of the virus (Korstanje, 2011b). The role of media in encouraging or discouraging fear in public audience, has been widely discussed by Bob McKercher (2003) and S. Litvin (2004). While the former offers a radical critique on the role of journalism in covering SARS, the latter focused on its moral character. One of the functions of journalism and media is the protection of society. By instilling fear, even at the cost of tourism industry, journalism is saving many lives.

In recent decades, a new incipient field emerged: the communication of risk. This new genre in disaster studies is aimed at giving audiences clearer guidelines to prevent potential catastrophes. Focusing in the precautionary principle, risk communication examines information by mathematical algorithms and extremely complex calculations (Haider, Ahamed & Leslie, 2008: 274).

Detractors of risk communication claimed that the use of algorithms neither resolve the problem nor prevent the next disaster. It creates a state of panic that leads populations towards chaos, looting, and instability. This happens because our emotional viewpoint tends to exaggerate some threats by hypothesizing about the future instead of arriving at scientific conclusions (Sunstein, 2005; Korstanje & Skoll, 2013). Other more radical voices attacks Western science as the conduit for expanding fear in industrial societies.

French philosopher Paul Virilio (2010) denounced the acceleration of reality into hyper reality which caused a substantial rupture in human relations. In hyper reality news and events facts happen on the horizons of hyper reality where territories are delocalized. One of the key factors that keeps society together is faith. History is considered a continuum of ordered past events, with causes and effects, synchronized to create understanding and knowledge at universities; now hyper reality evolves without any logical sequence. As a result of this, people not only do not understand what they are watching, but also catastrophic news is combined and condensed to determine behavior. In doing so, the causality of events dilutes to the extent of creating the globalization of fear. The university of disaster is for Virilio the hegemony of the market that today has monopolized everything scientific produced by the imposition of copyright and patent. Therefore, disasters are not correctly evaluated except by reinforcing the production and subsequent mass consumption.

*“We might note a recent project whereby detection of major risks is reversed, since the computer in question is involved in producing said major risks. At the end of 2006, IBM effectively decided to build the most powerful super calculator in the world.. to do so, it will use processors capable of up one million billion operations per second, accelerating by as much the reality of the disastrous progress in*

*weapons of mass destruction... which prompts personal question: after having resorted to meteorologists and other climatologists to calculate the economic risk of catastrophe, will the insurance and reinsurance companies one day have to call on the army and their new strategists to detect major ecological risk of nuclear proliferation” (Virilio, 2010; p. 18).*

But he is not alone in this discussion. Baudrillard explores the film, *Minority Report*, to express his discontent with hyper reality. He argues that the precautionary principle works through “precogs” who identify criminals in the future. The problem with this is that pseudo-events not only escape from the probabilities, but also they may be designed from the outside and imposed to control the present (Aichele, 2006; Baudrillard, 2006; Korstanje, 2013). Far from being closed, the discussion should not lose sight of the role played by the medical gaze and science in disasters. The next section explores the roots of the movie *Contagion*, which depicts a facet of a pandemic as well as the political miseries of modern consuming societies. Based on the proposition that disasters do not alter the political structuration of society but reinforce it, the thesis is that *Contagion* disseminates an Anglo-centric discourse, where only the US and England are civilized countries in comparison to the rest of the world. Secondly, the disciplinary mechanism of society in case of uncertainty appeals to isolation as a catalyst instrument of control. Third, social Darwinism which determines the superiority of few over others is replicated through the movie.

## **Methodological Discussion**

Anthropology has shown that the analysis of content is a valid methodology to examine movies and discourses embedded with cinema industry (McNamara, 2005). Enrico Quarantelli (1980) documents some classic disaster movies in the United States. He understands that these films attract millions of people who have had no direct contact or experience with disasters. In view of that, larger audiences may be educated in the following steps in similar emergency conditions. Two typical elements are present in these types of movies: the social behavior of survivors and their interaction with rules, and the physical nature of disaster that effaces entire cities. The former signals the variability of human action; the latter refers to the causality of events. Why disasters happen is one of the primary aspects of concern placed by directors into disaster movies. Quarantelli argues that movies do not follow the protocol of scientific research, and therefore they portray false answers about the reasons of disasters. This creates a dichotomy between the steps people follow in disasters and their social imaginary. Quite aside from this, he distinguishes films that focus on three diverse stages of disasters: pre-, trans-, and post-impact. Some stories are set in pre-impact scenario (causes of disasters) while others emphasize the magnitude of



obliteration or post-impact recovery process. The physical losses and social reactions are two key factors in the examined synopsis. In this sense, Quarantelli acknowledges that more research is needed to expand the current understanding of the issue. Our investigation attempts to complement this viewpoint. It implies the question of why *Contagion* rather than other movies.

Although there are many other films which not necessarily replicate these outcomes, *Contagion* offers a conceptual background to understand the Anglo centrism in America. This not only reaches a global audience worldwide, but was resounding box office success, which means that the cultural values transmitted by the film were accepted by audience. The following uses content and discourse analysis. Three key variables were scrutinized:

- a) *Political context*, which signals the tension between forces and counter-forces (America vs. China, us vs. them)
- b) *The micro-interaction*, which is based on the experience and lives of protagonists.
- c) *The meta-discourse* which helps deciphering the ideological message.

As a fertile ground for cultural studies, movies present a complex system of signs, values, beliefs, and narratives, which are embedded within the social consciousness of the time. Appealing to a qualitative viewpoint, this offers a valid way to discuss semiotics in the context of social interaction. No less true is that as a qualitative instrument, movie analysis should not be based on the quantity of cases, but on the depth the chosen case gives.

### ***Contagion*, 2014 – the effects of Pandemic.**

#### **Picture 1- Mitch in evacuation.**



*Contagion* is situated in an apocalyptic landscape where a virus kills the whole population of planet. Starring Matt Damon, Kate Winslet, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Laurence Fishburne; it tells the story of a high mortality rate virus which wipes out the industrialized nations of Europe and the US. Beth, the wife of Mitch, is the patient-zero. For business she travels to Hong Kong where she contracts an uncanny virus. Not only her health but also her family as well is in danger. Mitch faces the death of all his family, even his law-son and wife. Officials and risk-management specialists are strongly concerned by the situation and have really no solution for the chaos that flourishes on streets. Unlike other viruses as H1N1, this flu mutated by a combination of bats and pigs' genes. This represents a big challenge for humankind. At the hospital, Mitch discovers he is immune to the new virus but is disappointed when he is told that his wife was unfaithful in Chicago. This secret is of paramount importance to know the evolution of the virus through the city. The quarantine is imposed on the main urban zones of the US and Mitch and his daughter struggle to survive. The number of infected people grows to the extent that social life goes out of control. The army is used to control the streets and recover order. Everyone uses surgical masks and mouth pieces. The lack of information, vaccines, and strategies against contagion trigger panic in the population. The society is led to panic because the threat cannot be named, isolated, or disciplined. Three lives are woven throughout the movie to capture the attention of viewers. The journalist, Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law), who confirms he found an efficient vaccine for the virus. Alan blames the laboratories that sought to enhance their profits by the mass death produced by this virus. This paranoid view not only may destabilize society, but shows how pressure groups involved in the production of medicines in the US. These groups, lobbying the government, impose their own agenda. Their efficacy rests on the elaboration of theories that explains a secret side to the official story.

On another side of this story lies Dr. Cheever (Lawrence Fishburne) and his Department of National Security (ONS) who experiments day by day to find a vaccine that would mitigate the effects of this virus. As a representative of ONS, Dr Sears is invited to work with Cheever in Minneapolis but she dies few days after her arrival. The vulnerability of experts shows that they not only may not maintain the integrity of population but even their own. Another expert, Dr. Orantes, is kidnapped in China by a radical group that presses the industrial countries to find a cure. These terrorists require the ONS distribute freely an efficient vaccine for poor patients who have money to pay for a treatment. The material and financial asymmetries of capitalism are questioned by the inefficiency of the state to control the conditions of health. In this discouraging situation, Mitch and his daughter leave the hospital facing all types of obstacles. Both represent the role of ordinary people who have no certainty about what steps to follow in these types of crises.

**Picture 2 – Chicago’s inhabitants in concentration camps.**



To some extent, this film contains an ideological message that encourages Anglo centrism and the supremacy of Anglo-American civilizations over other cultures. In this respect, America has historically developed a strange sentiment that combines curiosity and fear about the other. According to this cosmology, the world is not only a hostile place, but also is fraught with violence, disorder, chaos, and uncertainty. By placing the virus origin in China, *Contagion* reinforces how the lack of efficiency among Asian scientists in deterring the virus affects global well-being. The US suffers the consequences of others' improper style of life. The Occident is a victim not only from the uncivilized world, but from its lack of prevention. The US retreat likens to a state of disaster. This belief, which was coined in the Cold War period, supports the doctrine of intervention which was widely proposed by "Radcons" (radical conservative in the White House). The same stereotype applied to the Soviet Union in the Cold War era, is now applied to China as a global superpower. The ideological nature of movies helps audience to accept discourses which otherwise would be neglected. *Contagion* disseminates the idea that if the US retreats from its interventions in the world, things like these may happen. The proactive struggle against the virus, like communism, terrorism, and other unseen threats, should be achieved only by the direct intervention of America. This is the point where politics and cultural entertainment are intertwined. The sense of urgency is recreated by the allegory of fiction, which poses the dichotomy between friends and foes, us versus them, West versus East. Anglo centrism is based on a much deeper red scare where communists are portrayed as the axis of all evils. China, the East, not only represents a constant threat for "our style of life," but also needs to be directly deterred. Urgency plays a pervasive role. On one hand, it undermines the social trust internally to control the workforce; on another, it inscribes in Americans a sentiment of superiority over external peoples. A closer look suggests that China escapes all

controls imposed by ONS regarding the manipulation of food and nutritional health. That way, *Contagion* reinforces the ethnocentrism of some Anglo values, discussed in the conceptual section of this essay. It also acts as a kind of instruction manual by showing the diverse facets of a pandemic: the steps officials, experts, and ordinary people have to take. It provides answers to the question of what are the stages one may face when a disaster of this caliber takes place.

**Picture 3 – Kidnapping Dr. Orantes.**



Tourism and modern mobility are fertile conduits in order for the virus to be disseminated. Conditionally, mass transport helps industry growth and the mobility of passengers. In context of disasters its functionality is radically altered. Not only daily contact, but also mobilities are suspended in contexts of emergencies. The introduction of *Contagion* is appalling, chaotic, and shocking but gradually the movie describes the stages and steps of an apocalyptic setting. Two major indicators announced the advent of disasters: the suspension of flights, mobility and trade and a much broader and restrictive process of physical isolation. The growth in the number of infected persons led authorities to cancel all international flights, closing the international and domestic airports. At the same time some infected citizens are isolated into camps while others are rapidly hospitalized. Without food, and struggling for survival, people are stranded in the streets. Complete chaos reigned in largest American cities, from Chicago to New York. Looting and vandalism are accompanied with attacks on drugstores. To some extent, this movie is based on the true events of SARS and swine flu. The symptomatology of the disease seems to be clear. It attacks the brain and lungs of people causing death in days. The biographies of naïve and opportunistic persons are combined with the stories of people who die alone, peripheral nations where pharmaceutical companies use their populations as experimental subjects. This movie shows the social Darwinism which underlines in the capitalist society. What yesterday was the pride of West—the technologies for mobility like the airports—today becomes the facilitator for the virus to be disseminated throughout the globe. The rapid time of propagation conjoined to the higher rate of mortality makes this new virus

into an apocalyptic threat for humankind. For the question of whether mobility and tourism rest on the human contact, *Contagion* poses contradictory dilemma. The civilized order covers the struggle of all against all, but in doing so, it adopts the concept of supremacy as a valid criterion of distinction. As Richard Hofstadter (1992) puts it, one of the primary aspects that determined competition and the spirit for entrepreneurs in the US was the adoption of social Darwinism per the view of authors such as Asa Gray, Graham Sumner, and Herbert Spencer. This biological theory postulated two significant axioms which reinforced the sentiment of exceptionalism inherited in the founding parents of the nation. The first was the survival of fittest, and the second was the social determinism. Following this, one might speculate that in disaster films the Protestant logic of salvation is replicated. The salvation of few equals the condemnation of the rest. This is what defines capitalism as a project. According to liberal thought, millionaires are not the result of greed, but from the evolution of natural selection. They have been selected by their strengths, tested in their success in business, and abilities to achieve adaptation to environment. Others have been relegated to occupy poor conditions of existence or disappear. Social Darwinism was a doctrine originally adopted by some religious groups, and both Sumner and Gray warned of the negative effects of leaving the poor without assistance. At a closer look, Calvinist and other Protestant sects emphasized the hostility of the environment as a proof of faith. This belief suggests that man evolves in a conflictive and dangerous world. The archetype of the city on a hill enunciated by the New England Pilgrims, holds that the select are people who influenced the value of labor. Being a success, for Americans, was signed to show that one has been selected by God for salvation. On the surface, this is not very different from what social Darwinism claims (Hofstadter, 1992).

As Bauman observed, the capitalist ethos has changed the mind of citizens who are part of the production machinery. As commodities, workers are exploited to congeal the mass consumption encouraged by capitalism. The Big Brother is an example how people enter in commerce, as commodities, to be selected and bought by others. Participants in this reality show know that only one will win, and the rest will die. Big Brother, for Bauman, emulates life in capitalist societies which enhance the style of life of few by producing pauperization for the whole. The modern state set the pace for the advent of neoliberal market to monopolize the sense of security for people. This does not mean that states are unable to maintain security, but that the market is channeling consumption by the imposition of fear. If human disasters such as Katrina show the pervasive nature of capitalism which abandoned thousand of poor citizens to death, no less true is that the show of disaster removes responsibility for the event. The sense of catastrophe, like death, serves to cover the inhuman nature of capitalism (Bauman, 2007; 2008). This society only has an answer to crisis when its economic system is at risk. The real reason for disasters are ignored by the allegory of death, which persisted in the media and famous TV series where technicians and forensic experts look to solve the crime, but the disaster comes sooner or later (Bauman, 2011).

For the neoliberal discourse, life is symbolized as a race. Every competitor is blind about its own possibilities simply because it is a race where only one will be the winner. As an economic system, capitalism efficiently survived by imposing the belief that only a few are marked to be salvaged. However, accepting this entails the whole will be ruined. The Protestant logic played a crucial role in cementing this ideology in America. While some people struggle for achievements, many others are symbolically buried in the battlefield. What makes people feel attracted to disasters or fictional apocalyptic settings?

George H. Mead, a founder of what is now called symbolic interactionism, asked why many people are prone to read or listen to bad news presented the mass media. What is our fascination for the suffering of other people? Mead observed that the self is a social phenomenon which is formed in interaction with others. This social dialectic refers to anticipation and interpretation as two pillars of communication process. The self gets happiness from others' suffering, because it displaces people's own pain. Starting from the premise the self is morally obliged to assist the other to reinforce its sentiment of superiority, Mead adds, this is the ethical nature of social relationship (Mead, 2009).

What we have above discussed applies for *Contagion*, where health workers brought by the US government try to find a vaccine. Although it might be found in time, there are not enough doses for everyone, which suggests that some inevitably are marked as secondary citizens. Rooted in capitalist logic, social Darwinism draws boundaries between the essential and redundant. People are marked according to their functionality for the system. When Americans are sent to concentration camps, Dr. Cheever is when he tried to contact his wife to advise her to get away from Chicago.

The journalist Krumwiede explains that the pharmaceutical industry, which is supported by the US government, created a new virus to sell their drugs for exorbitant prices. In a bizarre sense this revelation gives a hope, because if the authorities created the plague, they may reverse it. After all, the world does not need to be destroyed, it needs to be sold. These types of behaviors are typical in context of disasters, but are echoed when the information is not credible or people stop believing in their government. The media and press try to establish causality among scattered events, offer an all-encompassing diagnosis of the situation. This triggers the demonization of some minorities. When the vaccine is created, the question of who deserves it, who decides becomes paramount.

In the movie, citizens are selected by a lot according to birth-date to receive the vaccine. But beyond America, Dr. Orantes is kidnapped by a cell of terrorists who are trying to get the vaccine. These desperate peoples are fooled by a placebo while Big Pharma makes exorbitant profits worldwide. Survival is not based on ethic, but random chance or purchasing power. Films like *Contagion*, besides being Anglo centric, reminds how doctors and other experts become victims. There is no place where people may be protected.

Horror movies, as an ideological dispositif, are conducive to recreate a state of fear, where elites remind people of the dangers of not accepting American values (Korstanje, 2011b). This is a new type of imperialism, which exploits the fear as a commodity (Skoll & Korstanje, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

In 2010, a genetic mutation of swine flu appeared in the US and later expanded to Mexico. Although the mortality rate of this virus was lower than classical flu, one of the aspects that scared the public was its ability to infect the young and healthy. The media, as in *Contagion*, promptly announced a new pandemic virus which jeopardized the world, the like so-called Spanish flu at the end of the First World War. The old political tensions between Mexico and US were exacerbated, and so was the division between First and Third worlds. Many industrial nations cancelled trade and travel to Mexico. Even though *Contagion* is fiction, it combines all the drama of international virus outbreaks. In fact, the probabilities of a virus of high mortality and easy transmission are very slim. What the media stimulate panic as a disciplinary mechanism, it is the mixture between probable and possible. Probabilities of an apocalyptic virus wiping out humankind are low if not microscopic, but possibilities exist. At the time the causality between probability and possibility is blurred, psychological panic surfaces. Movies, in this vein, are platforms to disseminate ideological message to audience which are politically formed. Stereotypes, expectancies, rules and moral guidelines are told by the discourse of movies.

As mentioned above in *Contagion*, China and Asia are presented as filthy places where the regulations of food handling are not enforced, while the US and Europe are presented as the cradle of civilization and order. This discourse leads blurs the connection between probability and possibility and reeks of ethnocentrism. Viruses slide the ocular control of medical gaze and its reason. In doing so, they defy the hegemony of science over daily life. To restore the legitimacy of states in context of uncertainty, the enforced confinement and physical isolation of quarantine become instruments of censorship used to keep the societal order. The cinema industry is a fertile field of study that reveals the connection between disasters and popular culture.

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