Contagion. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Perf. Matt Damon, Kate Winslet. Warner Bros. / Participant Media, 2011. Film.

Contagion is an "end of humanity" film set in the present day, which features an ensemble cast (Gwyneth Paltrow, Matt Damon, Jude Law and Laurence Fishburne, to name only a few), whose fates are grimly linked as they collectively face a new and particularly virulent worldwide virus. The film follows a chain of events to establish who the "index patient" is, in other words, the first person to present the symptoms of the illness and the initial point of contact through which the condition rapidly spreads. The film does this investigation primarily through a series of slick montage sequences accompanied by electronic music.

The narrative presents three distinct stages of the virus and their effects. The first displays the creation of the disease born out of an instance where "the wrong bat met the wrong pig." The action subsequently shows the virus spreading to various countries, including the United States, from Asia, through a series of innocuous-seeming brushes with infected people; a touched glass, a returned mobile phone and a cough in an airport lounge suddenly become worldwide death sentences. Through all of these scenes, there is an attempt to assign accountability and seek a definitive answer as to how and why these terrible events have happened. Often disaster films of this nature open with an inciting event that determined the characters' future course of action; this is not so much the case here. Soderbergh initially suggests that things may not be wrapped up so neatly: freak accidents, urban sprawl, and bad choices just happen to people everywhere.

The second stage examines the societal breakdown that occurs when a pandemic of this magnitude occurs. Looting and random violent attacks on fellow citizens break out everywhere. The final stage of the narrative examines the creation of a lifesaving vaccine and the logistical difficulties involved in distributing it to everyone as quickly as possible. Even this solution comes with its own set of terrible problems.

Soderbergh is an adept filmmaker who tells and shows compelling stories. His visuals in this film in particular, depict a world where one can see the vulnerability of what we conventionally consider safe and secure. Cities, airports, houses and official government offices are filmed in a chilly

blue-ish hue, and framed in ways that hint at how little it would take to have them in ruins. The music throughout the film (by Cliff Martinez) is cold and impersonal, and at its most effective during a sequence where people wrapped in plastic are laid to rest in mass graves on the outskirts of huge American cities.

The film remains tantalizing in many ways, as we are left unsure as to whether Soderbergh will actually show the inciting incident responsible for these millions of deaths. What we are presented with is a convincing series of ghastly events tenuously linked by random seeming circumstances up until the very end. At the end we find out the cause in a relatively straightforward resolution: unless we are prepared to tread more thoughtfully, we are doomed, and we probably deserve it.

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