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MELODRAMA UNBOUND

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Melodrama and Apocalypse

Politics and the Melodramatic Mode in Contagion

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Contemporary criticism in film studies has made an important case for expanding our understanding of melodrama, for considering it not as a genre but as something much greater, more culturally diverse, more versatile, and therefore more elusive. Over the decades, a wide range of texts have been described as melodramas, from grand epics to private family stories, from action serials and thrillers to women's films and "weepies," from westerns to crime, action, and disaster films. Each era forgets or revises the previous incarnations of the label, or resists the label altogether. After the end of the studio system and the demise of well-known (if unevenly applied) production and marketing categories, we find melodramas identified as dramas, thrillers, or sagas, connected to studio pedigrees and particular directors or actors, or branded as "Oscar pictures." Even when a director, producer, or actor describes a film as a melodrama in interviews, as Todd Haynes (as cited in Davis 2015) did in his descriptions of *Carol* (2015), no one in Hollywood overtly *markets* a film as a melodrama anymore.

Although the generic label of melodrama may be limited or avoided, the workings and logic of melodrama have expanded their reach to such an extent that contemporary mainstream Hollywood cinema is arguably fundamentally melodramatic. This, in effect, proves that melodrama is more than a genre but also displaces it yet again—melodrama is now everywhere. In defining the contours of the melodramatic mode, we confront a new problem in this ubiquity. Films that don't advertise themselves as melodramas are structured by their uses of the melodramatic mode because melodrama is in the bloodstream of contemporary cinema. Its radical dispersal makes melodrama both essential to cinematic storytelling and invisible *as* melodrama.

But what if the work of melodrama is denaturalized, either because the text offers an overdetermined or amplified melodramatic structure, or because the text disguises its dependence on melodrama? To discover the structural properties of the melodramatic mode in contemporary cinema, I propose that we need to see it where its impact might be clearest, which is in texts that are not using the melodramatic mode solely as their baseline. Stated axiomatically, the melodramatic mode

is now the default narrative modality in mainstream cinema, where it functions as a way to tell a story, and in fact to tell it well. Recognizing the function of melodrama allows us to trace the narrative tendencies of contemporary cinema in general, and to revise long-standing misconceptions of melodrama as an aberrant narrative style, as excessive, or as unconventional. This may sound contradictory here because I plan to focus on certain off-beat uses of the mode, in texts that either exaggerate or resist its workings. But my examples must be seen in the context of the mainstreaming of melodramatic narration, not against an imagined other form of narration that would be an antithesis or counterpoint to melodrama. I hope to show that Hollywood cinema has absorbed the melodramatic mode so thoroughly because of the structural coherence, order, and sense of balance melodrama creates in a narrative. This is true both for conventionally linear narratives and for more experimental ones. The more genre mixing and mashing we see in mainstream cinema, the more these new hybrid forms depend on the underlying ordering structure of melodrama to function as narrative.

My examples are drawn from a particularly melodramatic genre, the disaster film. Since its resurgence in the 1990s, the disaster film has become a staple of contemporary Hollywood, deftly merging melodrama as action and as pathos with its cutting-edge spectacles, computer-generated imagery (CGI), primordial dangers, and adrenaline-fueled escapes and rescues (Keane 2001). As I argue elsewhere, disaster films are quintessential melodramas, using the melodramatic mode to highlight urgent political and social issues and to present spectacles of civic and personal conflict, suffering, struggle, resolution, reconciliation, and community (Kakoudaki 2002). In many ways, disaster films are descendants of the spectacular nineteenth-century stage action melodramas, with their literal and metaphorical cliff-hanger scenes and the extravagant stagecraft that brought horse-drawn carriages, boats, trains, buildings engulfed by fire, and even the eruption of Mount Vesuvius on stage (Booth 1965, 1967; James Pain in Mayer 1994; Daly 2011); as well as the early twentieth-century screen action/thriller serials, with their fast-paced adventures, escalating dangers, fearless heroines, and death-defying stunts (Singer 2001).

In addition to their affinities with earlier melodramatic forms and their extreme situations, heroism, visual spectacle, and special effects, disaster films bring traditional melodramatic principles into modern texts. Although they feature events drawn from contemporary headlines, thus claiming their timeliness and political relevance, disaster films also retain echoes of the vocabulary of nineteenth-century "blood and thunder" melodrama. Many of the moral questions staged in nineteenth-century melodrama, revolving around altruism, greed, egotism, charity, or sacrifice, can be evoked in disaster films in ways highly plausible to contemporary experience. The threat of absolute destruction in a disaster film sets up a life and death situation that demands big emotions and significant actions, and launches not just the drive for survival but the moral imperative for proving one's character and mettle. Disaster films often present nature as actor, sometimes with what Peter Brooks calls expressionist purpose, when nature externalizes the moods and feelings of the characters, but most often as a nonhuman agent or almost-agent that embodies

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and amalgamates social forces and tensions. Natural catastrophes in these films sometimes stand in for transcendental levels of danger, the closest we can get in the twenty-first century to nineteenth-century stage melodrama's depiction of evil, as enacted by cruel and single-minded villainous characters, whose only motivation sometimes seems to be their ability to hurt others. Human villains of that scale cannot be sustained in contemporary film outside of supervillains, Nazis, or sociopaths, and even with such characters we often get a modicum of psychological motivation or causal explanation about their actions and moral stance. Instead, nonhuman agents such as weather patterns, earthquakes, icebergs, tsunamis, and comets supply a categorical threat in disaster films without undermining a rationalist vocabulary for action, causality, and plausibility.

By translating the terms of older melodrama into modern narrative patterns, disaster films can help us define the presence and operation of the melodramatic mode in contemporary cinema. If melodrama, as David Grimstead (1987) has argued, spells out the moral and ethical tensions of a particular historical moment, then the disaster film functions as a weathervane (pun intended) of current concerns about action and politics. The tension between what happens, the historical and material realities we face, and what ought to happen, our desires for justice or retribution, constitutes the genre's political potential, visible in the disaster film's staging of contrasts between global threats and local actions, between the desire for global connectivity and the fear of a borderless and uncontrollable world.

THE MELODRAMATIC MODE: ON SUFFERING AND CHOICE

To understand how the apocalyptic and disaster film genre use the melodramatic mode, we have to explore an essential contiguity between melodrama and apocalypse. It is visible in the way the melodramatic mode constitutes events, especially the urgent, important, or life-threatening events that often power the emotional engines of melodrama. For instance, we have to recognize that the traumas disaster films showcase are real for many people every day. Even a cursory look at a newspaper today provides so many, too many, stories of injustice, pain and suffering, the scale and frequency of which is unfathomably more expansive and dispersed than even the exaggerated plots of Hollywood disaster films. Each story is a personal and cultural apocalypse, the end of someone's world. People sail through dangerous waters to save their families from war zones; people are persecuted, killed, or poisoned by their own governments; people are discriminated against, bullied, and raped; people lose their loved ones because someone walked into a building with a gun; people risk everything in order to cross a border; people die from preventable diseases; people see their homes disappear under rising sea levels; people starve or sleep in the street; people run away to escape their own abusive families. And this list does not include the personal traumas we experience: the death of a parent, the loss of memory, the sudden instability of a job, poverty, illness, betrayal, bankruptcy, depression. We may not describe these experiences

as *apocalyptic* because we reserve that term for something singular or global, or something that cannot be endured. Our own survival stops us from using the concept of the apocalypse to describe such events, but they transform the world radically, they change everything.

I provide this snapshot of everyday traumatic events and personal apocalypses to showcase how melodrama reworks apocalyptic events into a specific mode of narration. One might describe everyday events as traumatic or tragic, and actual events may fuel, inspire, or inform a melodramatic narrative in fiction or film, but we would not describe these real-life events as melodramas. Even when a film features actual situations, the melodramatic effect does not hinge on the fact of the participants' suffering or the fact of pain or abuse but on the context created in order for that suffering to play a narrative role. Sometimes the melodramatic treatment helps make sense of the event, sometimes it accentuates a lack of meaning, and sometimes it creates the grounds for moral retribution or recognition (Brooks 1995; Gledhill 2002). Melodrama works by recruiting the event into a story, using the pain or suffering involved to create a particular aesthetic, dramatic, or narrative effect.

At a basic level, the moment an event is described or recounted, something happens—linguistic elements transform the bare facts into narrative patterns. Considered as a narrative or a dramatic form, the melodramatic mode is one of these possible patterns. It could be argued that “bare facts” or “events” do not exist before or outside narrative because the act of narration itself constitutes the facts. This is precisely why it is important to trace how the melodramatic mode constitutes facts and events in particular ways. For example, I did not write “people die” in my list, which would state an absolute existential fact; or “people get sick and die,” which is narrative in some measure but with no melodramatic hook. In the phrasing “people die from preventable diseases,” the melodramatic tension emerges when the word “preventable” adds injustice to the mini-story. The preventability of the diseases opens the phrase to melodramatic interpretation: these people did not have to die. If only, say, the resources of Western medicine could become available and affordable in the developing world, people would not die of asthma, AIDS, malaria, or malnutrition. An implicit choreography of action emerges, of withholding treatment or arriving “too late” or “in the nick of time” to save someone. And there it is: the small addition of “preventable” provides the foundational condition for a complete melodramatic structure, with villains, suffering, injustice, action, and pathos (Williams 2001).

This tendency to construct the possibility for choice is a primary feature of the melodramatic mode, especially in the American context. In contrast to tragedy, where events are structured so as to be inevitable and where human choice is thus revealed to be an illusion, melodrama requires the possibility of some form of openness, some wiggle room for options or alternative outcomes, in order to produce tension and suspense. The operations of chance, coincidence, accident, or fate, and the upheavals or surprises we may find in melodramatic texts emerge in this space of possibility and function as its most spectacular manifestations, active reminders that (in melodrama) anything might happen. Melodrama also uses the

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structural positioning or timing of an event to alter its narrative and emotional impact. In a melodramatic story, whether a character dies *just as* another character is arriving, apologizing, or bringing a medical kit is of high emotional importance. The existential incomprehensibility of the fact that people die is translated into a different issue of timing or choice, or into the sense that someone did not have to die at that precise moment, or from that particular disease. Melodrama's play with time dramatizes profound questions about human experience. Is it better for someone to die at a different moment? Is it less painful to have a loved one die after everything humanly possible has been done to save him or her? Is that a consolation? Death is unfair, unfathomable. We use a specific emotional vocabulary to give death a human (and narrative) dimension, as when we say "But at least she had a long life" or "But at least he didn't suffer at the end" or "But at least I was there." Perhaps there is an inherent melodramatic recuperation in the sentiment "But at least we tried everything," and it is this implicit underlying feeling that the idea of "preventable" activates in order to interpret death wistfully as avoidable and therefore unjust. As the final event of life, death is not related to timing or justice, it is just a given. Or, in existential terms, all death is unjust. But the death from a preventable disease at a particular moment in a melodramatic story is additionally unjust in specific terms, not in abstract existential terms.

In this rudimentary description, the melodramatic mode thus offers a way to navigate the tension between our awareness of the conditions of human life and our very human desire for overcoming or counteracting these conditions in our literary and dramatic forms. Things may just happen, events may just occur or follow each other in life, but in literary, narrative, and dramatic forms they connect, they are ordered so as to provide meanings or patterns, and they may be interpreted beyond the basic facts of their occurrence. What melodrama does with this interpretive function is quite complex, using plotting, timing, the ordering of events, and the treatment of choice to produce heightened forms of meaning. In my example, the phrasing "people die from preventable diseases" activates the melodramatic mode because it translates existential fact into something that has narrative *and* moral extension, transforming death from something unpredictable and inevitable in reality to something that involves questions of timing, justice, or action.

My focus on the arrangement and timing of events foregrounds the melodramatic mode as a structural baseline, not an overlay, tone, addition, or corruption of an otherwise presumably realist narrative structure. This distinction is essential if we are to recognize the fundamental operations of the melodramatic mode, and to resist descriptions that treat melodrama in terms of excess, as if it adds (too much stuff) onto a structure that could exist or be understandable without it. Premise, situation, timing, characterization, event, narrative unfolding, impact, expressiveness, emotional articulation—all these features of a text are constituted by its baseline modality. Each mode (the epic, tragic, lyric, pastoral, realist, or melodramatic mode) arranges textual elements and tendencies differently, and this operation is discernible in how a text sets up, comments on, enhances, or resolves its situations, what stance it might take toward events or worldview, what forms

of expressiveness it engages. An epic modality would have a different treatment of causes and consequences than a pastoral one, and each mode presents different emotional tendencies, resolutions, and types of expressiveness. To contrast melodrama and realism, for example, the realist modality might add the types of expressiveness that tend to be understated or melancholy, or that refuse to see or show range in terms of emotion or action; the melodramatic mode might add more overt, demanding, acted out, or externalized emotion, and insert options or a range of actions or outcomes.

To recognize the melodramatic mode, then, we have to see it not as overlay but as substrate, as the foundation upon which all the other narrative and dramatic elements are built. To study how the melodramatic mode is activated in a text we can follow just one of its tendencies, its penchant for constructing space for alternative outcomes, which also draws the traumatic or tragic events of everyday life into a melodramatic premise. When the bare facts of suffering are transposed into a narrative context where actions and tensions are negotiable, and in ways they are not in real life, the story creates the impression of choice, the impression of alternative outcomes. If the actual event does not afford such transposition, then a secondary plotline might add that dimension. The magic trick of melodrama in this vein is that one story line asks the difficult questions, and the other story line asks and answers slightly different, limited, or answerable questions. These second answers do not match the first questions, but they are close enough to be satisfying or to provide the semblance of resolution. Films such as *Philadelphia* (1993, Jonathan Demme) and *Amistad* (1997, Steven Spielberg), for example, work in this mode, both using a two-layer narrative structure. On one implicit and largely invisible narrative layer, the films posit difficult and almost unsolvable social and political questions: Why can't we cure AIDS? Why can't we stop homophobia? Why can't we stop discrimination against gay people? Why can't we end slavery? Why are people dehumanized, tormented, and treated as property? Then in the second and more visible narrative layer, both films move to a court setting where these issues are rephrased into questions that *can* be adjudicated and solved: Did this law firm discriminate against this gay lawyer? Should these particular people be treated as property? In both cases, the judicial outcome is satisfying and presents social justice as a possible, desirable, and in fact available political outcome within the context of the film, despite the fact that these specific court decisions do not resolve the larger social questions.

The court settings of *Philadelphia* and *Amistad* offer a distinct, spatialized version of what many melodramas do in their layered narration. In both films, the desire for change is satisfied in the films' resolutions and in the courts' decisions, even though these are limited, individual, and local solutions to a much bigger social or political problem. The political potential of melodrama emerges from this slippage between two levels of question. Asking the first, broader, and more difficult questions can be a political statement, in which the story challenges foundational aspects of our reality, things we take as a given. Answering the second, more specific, and more local questions can be satisfying, politically resonant, provocative, or merely palliative. Yet the unanswerable questions about injustice,

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discrimination, racism, and slavery remain, even after the two films resolve what they could resolve. If we recognize the operations of this layered narrative style, we see how politically powerful melodramas can be. The confrontations they facilitate with difficult issues, such as patriarchy, racism, gender relations, capitalism, family trauma, abuse, or institutional injustice, to name just a few, resonate far beyond their sometimes limited resolutions.

CONTAGION: MELODRAMA AND THE QUESTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

We see the operations of this layered narrative approach and its impact for melodramatic narration in a film such as *Contagion* (2011, Steven Soderbergh), which presents a global virus outbreak and the government and medical response it entails. *Contagion* participates in the self-conscious tone that emerged in action and disaster films after the events of 9/11, when scenes of danger and destruction increasingly were staged in terms of political relevance and responsibility rather than for vicarious pleasure or spectacular, gratuitous violence. In general, the disaster film translates melodrama's desire for moral legibility into a choreographic alternation between responsibility and response (Kakoudaki 2002). Some films use the categorical situation to demand accountability on behalf of governments and organizations, or to assign political, social, and moral responsibility for the catastrophe. Others focus on the heroism of government and military agencies, emergency personnel, and professional first responders. Most disaster films also traffic in the spectacular visual presentation of threat, in thrilling sequences of exaggerated scale that depict annihilated cities and continents. The vicariousness of this spectacular tendency is usually mitigated through a focus on family or civic values, themes of sacrifice and altruism, and scenes of poignant or solemn consideration.

Contagion presents the threat of a global pandemic in tones that aim to be chilling in their realism, instead of thrilling or exciting. The film traces the spread of a disease from the first infected patient to populations on a global scale and presents the interaction among local, federal, and international agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and the Epidemic Intelligence Service, the World Health Organization, and the Department of Homeland Security. The film works solidly within the response-centric focus of films since the 1990s. In interviews, the director, screenwriter, and many of the actors mention their connection to real processes and people. Soderbergh describes the desire to make an "ultra-realistic" film. Screenwriter Scott Z. Burns consulted with scientists such as W. Ian Lipkin, who worked on SARS and the West Nile virus, and Lawrence Brilliant, who helped eradicate smallpox (MoviesOnline). The response scenarios depicted on screen mirror contingency plans and actual responses from recent events such as the 2009 flu pandemic. Yet despite its measured tones and focus on real-world details, the film stages a number of major and minor melodramas throughout, and closes with an intense apocalyptic sequence that provides an origin story for the outbreak. Why does the film need these melodramatic and apocalyptic excursions?

Although *Contagion* follows the multistory ensemble-cast style of many disaster films, it starts and ends with the family as ground zero. We meet the soon-to-be first victim of the disease, Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow), in an airport bar in Chicago, on what the film tells us is “Day 2” of the epidemic. She is on her way back to her family in Minneapolis after a business trip to Hong Kong, snacking on peanuts from the bar’s shared bowl and talking to her lover on the phone. They have just met for a brief sexual encounter that infects him with the virus she carries. In the fast-paced montage sequence that follows, the film shows a number of people getting sick: in Hong Kong, London, and Tokyo. Both Beth and a Japanese businessman we see in these scenes are reviewing papers from a company called AIMM Alderson, the logo clearly visible on the screen. Close-ups of people’s hands produce a sense of insecurity about all the people we share the world with, the people who have touched door handles or sneezed on the bus next to us. But in addition to showing the practical effects of our connected world, where a person can traverse half the globe and infect myriad spaces and people in hours, the opening scene sets up the subplot of Beth’s adulterous affair, adding a moral dimension to the story that is not necessary for the contagion narrative. Why do we need to know she just had sex with someone on her way back to her family? Isn’t the phobic visual treatment of touch and proximity enough? If the virus can spread when one touches a credit card, why is sex needed at all to picture its transmission? Even in this early moment, we see that the film complicates its process-driven premise by providing a second layer of melodramatic explanation. Beth’s adultery produces a sense of discomfort that functions as an excess meaning, and one that will reveal its narrative function later in the film.

In a standard narrative technique for mainstream Hollywood melodrama, the family story creates an intimate and local foil for communicating the impact of the disaster, and functions as a counterpoint to the professional heroes and official processes that dominate the film. Extending the “networked world” theme and reflecting the diversity of contemporary families, this is a blended family, for Beth and her husband Mitch (Matt Damon) have brought their kids from previous relationships into their life together. The family becomes a battleground. Mitch finds out about Beth’s affair after she dies, an added betrayal that intensifies the impact of the tragedy for him. The infection restructures familial relationships across strict bloodlines: Beth and her son Clark die, Mitch and his daughter Jory survive. Mitch wonders if Jory has inherited his unexplained immunity to the new virus. He has to fight crowds for food and supplies, insists on keeping her completely isolated from her boyfriend until a vaccine can be found, and battles the deteriorating social conditions in their town.

Indeed, the film progresses through a networked narrative style that features quick and aggressive editing, oscillating between political plans, official efforts to curb the infection, scientific experiments to identify the virus and develop a vaccine, and scenes from Mitch’s family life. In addition to the melodramatic treatment of loss in this family setting, we have numerous additional mini melodramas that are not always recognizable as such, partly because they are delivered to us piecemeal, interrupted, and dispersed. For example, the unscrupulous Alan Krumwiede

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(Jude Law) makes millions selling fake herbal remedies that promise to cure the infection, using social media to sell both fear and hope. Counter to the sacrifices of most other characters, Alan is only out for himself. His story line includes meetings with a hedge fund manager also trying to profit from the outbreak, and a more personal three-act melodrama involving his former boss, an online magazine editor. She dismisses him as a conspiracy theory quack at the beginning of the film, later seeks him out in despair to buy some of his herbal cure, and then dies from the infection along with her unborn baby. We have silent scenes in which Dr. Ally Hextall (Jennifer Ehle) tests vaccine versions on monkeys, and then finds the poor animals dead in their cages. Her understated relief mirrors ours when one monkey survives. She impatiently injects herself with the vaccine prototype without waiting for proper trials and testing, so that she can meet her ill father without any protective gear, eager to touch and kiss him. Dr. Ellis Cheever (Laurence Fishburne) violates orders by warning his girlfriend to leave Chicago just before the city is officially quarantined, and later gives his priority vaccine dose, available to him as a CDC official, to the son of the building's janitor. A researcher refuses to shut down his experiments and destroy virus samples, and then manages to grow the virus in bat lung cells, thus ensuring the first step toward developing a vaccine. A World Health Organization official is kidnapped by one of her colleagues and kept in a remote village in Hong Kong as a guarantee that the village will receive priority doses of the vaccine. And so on.

These actions create stereotypical victims, villains, and heroes, but also create complex human figures out of the detached professionals that begin the film, remaking them into people whose actions combine duty and belligerence, professionalism and self-interestedness. In fact the film includes even smaller melodramas, so minimalist as to be contained in one line, one image or gesture. As Dr. Cheever administers the vaccine to his girlfriend, now wife, she says, "If we weren't married, I'd have to wait almost a year," implying that they got married expressly for this reason. The implied mini drama anticipates a sensational soap opera plotline or scandalous newspaper headline, "Married for the Vaccine!" When Dr. Hextall meets her sick father in the hospital, she says "You're here because you stayed in your practice treating sick people after everyone else went home," identifying his noble self-sacrifice in one sentence. When the kidnapped WHO official finds out that the village was given placebos instead of the real vaccine in order to release her, she runs out of the airport to warn them. When Dr. Erin Mears (Kate Winslet), a CDC officer who has been coordinating response efforts in Minneapolis, realizes she is sick, she creates lists of the people she met so that they can be treated. On her death bed, she overhears the man on the next cot begging for a blanket, and with effort takes off her own overcoat to give to him, a final gesture of sacrifice interrupted by her death.

By focusing on recognizably melodramatic sacrificial actions and complex depictions of human motivation, these mini melodramas transform the standard response scenarios that otherwise structure the film and infuse it with pathos and sentimentality. It is especially interesting to trace the functions of melodrama here, because the film expressly undermines this dimension of pathos in its narrative

style and unfolding. In contrast to more overtly melodramatic disaster films, such as *San Andreas* (2015, Brad Peyton), that prioritize the melodramatic through-line, build toward emotional scenes, and use them to forward the narrative and resolve conflicts, *Contagion* distributes and interrupts its melodramatic elements. The film's editing is confident, secure in the knowledge that we can follow the myriad story lines and supply the missing emotions that would flesh out these dispersed melodramas. The film uses the archive of known plotlines creatively; it knows we know how to expand the narrative hint into a fuller story arc. But the editing style also ensures that none of the melodramatic plotlines will stay on screen long enough to take over the story.

In this, *Contagion* alters the terms and effects of the disaster film as a quintessential network narrative. The typical aims of network narratives revolve around revealing the inherent connectivity of the world. Stories inch closer together and intersect dramatically, as in *Amores Perros* (2000, Alejandro G. Iñárritu) or *Crash* (2004, Paul Haggis); or reveal an inherent parallelism or causal connectivity about a global issue, as in *Traffic* (2000, Steven Soderbergh) or *Babel* (2000, Alejandro G. Iñárritu) (see Bordwell 2006; Azcona 2010; Ciafone 2014). In *Contagion*, on the other hand, there is a self-consciousness about the concept of the network narrative. Yes, a pandemic connects us all around the world, but conversely our connectivity is what makes us sick, what facilitates the virus's fast transmission and global range. Here the effect of the interrupted narrative style is not to bring the disparate stories together but to undercut the process by which emotion can be developed, so that the film's foundational dependence on the melodramatic mode will remain hidden. As each story line interrupts the others, the film separates the emotional scenes with impersonal expository scenes, quick montages of official action, shots of empty landscapes and destroyed urban environments, and official events that add a detached, cooler, or even clinical tone. The effect is a form of compartmentalization, in which the film belies its dependence on melodrama. Yet, as I propose, the narrative would not work or have emotional resonance without the pervasive deployment of melodramatic narrative strategies. And because it resists melodrama, *Contagion* shows us what the melodramatic mode does, how it functions to organize the narration even in texts that resist it.

The mix of registers is most acutely felt when we consider the ending of the film, or in fact its multiple endings. The first ending is both official and personal: while people around the world are being vaccinated, Dr. Hextall puts on protective gear, enters a secure part of the lab, and deposits a sample of the virus in frozen storage. The threat is now identified, labeled as MEV-1, boxed up, and put away next to other contained threats such as SARS and H1N1. In a visual parallel, we see large boxes with the same label, MEV-1, on military trucks that deliver the vaccine to inoculation stations. Dr. Hextall closes the lab door and lingers at the porthole window with a slight smile, satisfied. The second ending returns us to Mitch who has created a prom setting in the living room so Jory can finally dance with her boyfriend, now vaccinated. All the required props are there: a new dress, corsage, banners, tiny lights, music. Looking for his camera, Mitch discovers Beth's last pictures from Hong Kong, from her night at the casino only days before she died,

and he cries alone that the film has no emotion created by the implied flashbacks. The song "All I Want for Christmas Is You" by Mariah Carey plays over Mitch and also for the promises we receive. Making promises. The teary father glances back at a continuity of trauma. Love can allegorize the of international cooperation. an old-fashioned, the lost love, of Beth. the prom scene appears conventional. Time promises and the film

The third and final ending returns to the origin of the virus. A logo prominent on the displaced, and on the and then settles in the piece, which is the stock of the pigs, a truck. From the let on a platter, as or spices in the pig his apron, and the. The words "Day beginning, at the seen in the badly closing the causal company that destroyed the groundbreaking bulldozing of the

Here again we see a narrative of response to contagion, modeled on from pigs to human transmissions have used this process other complex scientific loose political ends was needed. This

and he cries alone in the closet looking through them. Each picture replays images that the film has now shown us at least three times, first as a timeline of the infection created by the WHO officials, then as footage from security cameras, then as implied flashbacks of uncertain origin that replay Beth's last night in Hong Kong. The song "All I Want Is You," by U2, resonates over the traumas of the film, for Mitch and also for Jory, dancing in the living room with her boyfriend: "But all the promises we make / From the cradle to the grave / When all I want is you." Making promises is replaced by breaking promises in a later verse of the song. The teary father gazes at the dancing couple, the daughter aims a shy and grateful glance back at him. Despite the virus and the mayhem, the future combines a continuity of traditions, the prom, with the kinds of open endings only young love can allegorize. Why would the resilience of the human body and the success of international cooperation and medical science have to be celebrated in terms of an old-fashioned, gendered, heterosexual, American ritual? The silent pathos of the lost love, of Beth's remembered image, betrayal, life, and death, is what makes the prom scene appear fitting and recuperative instead of overwrought or merely conventional. Time starts again. Young love erases, forgets, rewinds the broken promises and the losses of love.

The third and final ending of the film indeed rewinds the story, taking us back to the origin of the outbreak. A bulldozer with the AIMM Alderson company logo prominent on its side is tearing down tall trees. Bats fly out of the trees, displaced, and one feeds on a cluster of bananas, flies over the twilight forest, and then settles inside a large covered building, a pigsty. The bat drops a banana piece, which is then eaten by a young piglet. In the daytime, men arrive and take stock of the pigs, selecting our piglet and others, putting them in cages and onto a truck. From the piglet in the cage we cut abruptly to a close-up of the dead piglet on a platter, as a chef is preparing it for cooking, rubbing and shoving garlic or spices in the pig's mouth. The chef is interrupted, wipes his hands quickly on his apron, and then we see him on the casino floor shaking hands with . . . Beth! The words "Day 1" appear on the screen, and we have arrived, finally, at the beginning, at the first moment of transmission that only Mitch has unknowingly seen in the badly lit pictures on the small digital camera. The film's insistence on closing the causal loop creates a circular pattern: Beth is an executive of the company that destroyed the forest and displaced the bats. She was there to celebrate the groundbreaking ceremony for a new factory, perhaps to celebrate that very bulldozing of these very trees.

Here again we see the melodramatic transformation of scientific causality into a narrative of responsibility. The film presents a well-documented chain of contagion, modeled on the Nipah virus that was transmitted from bats to pigs, and from pigs to humans, in Malaysia in 1999. Zoonotic viruses and animal to human transmissions have been well documented in recent years. The film could have just used this process to model virus transmission routes for viewers, as it explains other complex scientific concepts. But instead, the film uses the scene to tie up its loose political ends and present a narrative of responsibility that we did not know was needed. This origin story is, in fact, a morality tale, a circle of global processes

and effects: the medical, governmental, and scientific responses that save the day present the advantage of a networked and connected world. At the same time, it is global processes that cause the outbreak, by enacting Western corporate interests and neoliberal policies upon the natural landscape of faraway places (Murray and Heumann 2009; Reber 2010). The first victims of this corporate global agenda are the plants, the trees that are cut down, then the animals that are killed or displaced, then the animals raised for human consumption, and then the people who work with and consume these animals. In a connected world, the effects of imperialist economic actions do not remain in their original place but instead jump easily from forests to fancy casinos, from the East to the West, from the South to the North, and from bats to pigs and then to people. This didactic causal chain is quite strict in its indictment of one company. The tendency toward melodramatic forms of closure in the film collapses the relation of cause and effect, bringing the end figuratively and literally to the beginning. And in the process, it creates a narrative of moral responsibility that scapegoats Beth in more ways than one. Because of her participation in the corporate plan, Beth carries a form of moral liability for the contagion, not just as the first victim or the transmitter but also as the metaphorical cause. This is the redirected culmination of the adultery subplot. Her sexual affair undermines Beth's moral standing; in the melodramatic layering of the story, she then has to also embody the proverbial sins of the virus and the corporation, the two impersonal and disembodied entities that cause the disease but cannot be held responsible. Their faults become her fault.

Why does the film need this clear and circular causal mapping of the disease? The melodramatic use of Beth as the culprit reveals that it is difficult for the text to sustain a critique of the corporation, of environmental destruction, and of global capitalism, without a specific, individual, and personalized villain. In its fundamental tendency to personalize and embody, the melodramatic mode here offers an important insight, that in fact abstract or diffuse entities such as corporations and governments are made of people, who decide and act while also disguising their actions as the impersonal and unemotional actions of the corporation. In the virus origin story, the film presents corporate actions as part of a mathematical equation in which environmental destruction equals death. But then somehow this cannot stand alone as a statement of political or historical fact. In the film's expressive dimension, the indictment of global corporate capitalism also hides under the indictment of Beth, in a basic melodramatic gesture that personifies moral positions or abstractions into particular embodied characters. It's not slavery, it's Simon Legree. It's not capitalism, it's one company, it's one executive, it's Beth. The effect is further complicated by the film's choice of villain. Even a film as thoughtful as *Contagion* cannot fully revise two major blind spots of American cultural and cinematic populism: the inability to fully criticize capitalism, and the inability to fully accept women's professional success and sexual freedom. Beth's opportunistic sexual encounter in Chicago aligns her with the opportunism of self-involved characters like Alan, and personifies the opportunism of the corporate executives who can only see the short-term benefits of bulldozing the jungle, and, indeed, the opportunistic randomness of viral infection.

This connection ability the film cannot assign moral accountability as a moral quality because the disease have just one action As melodramatic v no discernible moti must do what they renders them utterl disable the moral v causality: viruses h intentions; they hav ice; they are deadl victory feel hollow, not resent being de The virus will not s The virus mutates potentiality, capabl concerns. In the 19 computers and netw of data and the au scary in itself as a could be lurking an the invisible threat suddenly violent or does not look like a whose motives may

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This connection, in which Beth's adultery grounds all the other forms of accountability the film cannot deliver, brings us surprisingly close to the deployment of virtue as a moral quality in nineteenth-century stage melodrama—surprising because morality or “virtue” seem out of place in a film full of procedures, scientific analyses, and material conditions. Despite the difference in style and scale, *Contagion* resorts to an implicit, formative, and clearly traditional moral move that seems out of synch with its technical and scientific references and edgy style. In the quest to assign moral accountability, the film creates a series of personified wrongdoers, because the disease itself offers no such option. In melodramatic terms, viruses make for excellent if frustrating villains. They are so simple and efficient that they have just one action, they infect their hosts and then replicate and infect more hosts. As melodramatic villains, anthropomorphized here for added effect, viruses have no discernible motives other than survival, they cannot be dissuaded, they simply must do what they do, as if acting out of pure selfishness. Their single-mindedness renders them utterly inhuman and as irrepressible as a natural force. Viruses also disable the moral vocabulary we might like to employ to understand actions and causality: viruses have effects but no motivating causes; they have actions but no intentions; they have results but no goals; they are destructive but not out of malice; they are deadly but not evil. And the impersonality of the virus makes even victory feel hollow, because a virus does not care that some hosts survive, it does not resent being defeated by a vaccine. One cannot gloat over or punish a virus. The virus will not say, as the film clearly wishes it would say, “Rats! Foiled Again!” The virus mutates or remains unscathed in a different host species and becomes a potentiality, capable of beginning again in the future. Viruses also evoke political concerns. In the 1990s they were implicitly associated with technology, especially computers and networks, and the loss of control that accompanies the digitization of data and the automation of processes. In the 2000s and 2010s a virus is pretty scary in itself as a reference to actual pandemics, but because it is invisible and could be lurking anywhere, it is also a good conduit for many contemporary fears: the invisible threat of ideology or political extremism; the sleeper terrorist cell; the suddenly violent or murderous classmate, coworker, or neighbor; the person who does not look like an enemy, who is only identified as such after the violent act, and whose motives may never be understood.

To return to my layered approach to melodramatic narration, most of *Contagion* engages with specific and solvable questions about the global response to the virus, delivered in the cool tones and procedural style of up-to-date response scenarios. When we recognize the film's melodramatic investments, however, we see how they add complex implicit and explicit meanings, an integrated and foundational sense of order in the way the story unfolds, and a narrative of ethical and political responsibility. In addition to presenting the human impact of the pandemic, the film's melodramatic layers and multiple endings build up to an intensely apocalyptic denouement, arriving at the origins of the infection and the real villains of the film, the corporations that have caused the destruction of the forest. And yet, even when we see that this specific company, AIMM Alderson, created the conditions for the transmission of the virus, there is no way to prosecute or

hold them accountable, sue them for the costs of the global pandemic, change their corporate agenda or protocol. The implicit and unsolvable question that the narrative choices of *Contagion* point toward is whether predatory capitalism is in fact the only truly global engine, far more dispersed and operational than our lagging political and social processes. Despite the film's imagery of proximity and responsibility, these institutions remain distanced from the effects of their opportunistic and destructive actions.

The operations of the melodramatic mode in *Contagion* and other end-of-the-world narratives reveal the political and ethical paradoxes of our cultural moment. The disaster genre's depiction of global context is, in fact, one of its most meaningful contributions to political discourse. Narratives of the threat of total destruction always activate the concept of the Earth as one entity. The fear of nuclear annihilation that emerges after WWII produces a singular weapon, The Bomb, a singular planet, Earth, a singular "human race," and a singular purpose, survival. In recent years, this sense of connectivity encompasses questions of economic globalization, the Internet as a global mode of communication, global surveillance through satellite imagery and GPS navigation, remote controlled wars through the use of drones, cyberwarfare, and concerns about pandemics, the production and transportation of food, environmental destruction, and climate change.

Our current dilemma is that we have modes of global communication and experiences of shared global danger, yet we have no means of global governance. We cannot make a decision, vote, or act as Earth citizens, completely beyond the geographical boundaries of the region, or the political boundaries of the nation. Even in our disaster films, the depiction of global threats and global solutions is asymmetrical, with threats often coming into the First World from other places, and solutions going from the First World to other places. A neocolonial logic revises both historical legacies and contemporary realities, forgetting the ways in which the First World's voracious energy consumption, colonial agendas, and stranglehold on capital affect and disrupt political, economic, and social realities in the rest of the world. Disaster films showcase the processes and effects of globalization implicitly, and unevenly. In cinematic spectacles of destruction, sometimes the dream of global fairness becomes a nightmare equilibrium, in which the developed world's economic immunity is shattered when everybody is subject to a much more precarious common denominator of life conditions. The films produce heroic narratives of saving the world in order to evade the active and evolving fears that accompany our desire for connectivity, and our implicit recognition of the neocolonial politics of the twenty-first century.

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Melodrama Unbound

Across History, Media, and National Cultures



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