

NEW FLESH, OLD DEMONS
CONTAGION NARRATIVES
IN POST-COLD WAR U.S. CULTURE

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FLORIAN ANDREI VLAD

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INTRODUCTION

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

(Poe b 10)

”I want your ugly, I want your disease”

(Lady Gaga, ”Bad Romance”)

Contemporary background and relevance

In August 2014, President Barack Obama signed Executive Order 131295, mandating the apprehension and quarantining of Americans ”showing signs of respiratory illness”. This extraordinary act, considering the special circumstances perceived as such by the general public, reminiscent of the quarantine policies of medieval European cities, was taken against the backdrop of media hysteria and paranoia about Ebola, the exotic, blood-borne disease that has caused thousands of victims in Africa and which has superficially similar symptoms to a zombie

apocalypse. On September 18, 2014, another presidential executive order declares that combating antibiotic-resistant bacteria is a national security priority, contagion now, in an age of interconnectedness and interdependence, having a global reach, and defining the spirit of our times, in the opinion of Alison Bashford and Claire Hooker:

Defying fantasies of control, corroding internal integrity, and ignoring the borders that define and defend identity, contagion is considered a threat to individual, national and global security. [...] the metaphors and corporeal experience of contagion, resistance and immunity greatly exercise the spheres of government, biomedicine and popular culture, as well as post-structuralist theory and history (Bashford and Hooker 1).

Rewind to October 16, 2011: the second season of the zombie series *The Walking Dead* premiered on AMC, at 7.3 million viewers becoming the most watched episode in the history of cable television drama (beating the record set by the first season premiere of the same series, and eclipsing immensely successful series such as *Mad Men*). A month earlier, Karl Lagerfeld caused a sensation with a post-apocalyptic themed collection for *Chanel*, drawing inspiration from the zombie apocalypse, vampire and dystopian genres. The month before that, just across the Atlantic, the streets of London erupted in mindless, gratuitous violence that left sociologists, journalists and political activists both left and right baffled and unable to give a coherent explanation.

The outbreak of contagious violence looks eerily reminiscent of the bloodthirsty frenzy scenes one would expect from a zombie movie. This was not the explosion of pent-up social rage as was the case with the Los Angeles riots in 1992, or the organized, politically-motivated

violence manifested in the Genoa or Seattle riots. People of all ethnicities, skin colors and social classes (from street thugs to professional athletes to the children of millionaires) were beating the hell out of each other and smashing shop windows to steal sneakers or Ipods, in what looked more like the notorious shopping mall zombie rampage scene in *Dawn of the Dead* than a “traditional” riot. Back in the US, contagious, mindless violence has manifested itself in a series of school shootings, or, less lethally in viral acts of violence like “the knockout game”, where teenagers assault unsuspecting strangers, and put the footage online.

In 2012, in the Republican presidential debates in the US, candidates such as Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich listed apocalyptic-level biological threats as realistic dangers. Also in 2012, all-American icons got infected by the bug of apocalypticism: Hollywood heart-throb Brad Pitt unleashed upon the public (as both actor and producer) the film version of Max Brooks’ acclaimed zombie novel, *World War Z*, while the American historical icon Abraham Lincoln was fictionalized as the scourge of the undead in *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*. On our side of the Atlantic, the European Union has been facing an existential threat due, at least in part, to a snowballing “financial contagion” that seems to be the harbinger of the Euro-apocalypse. And had Scotland voted for independence, Europe would also have experienced a “plague” of separatism.

In short, the trope of apocalyptic, pestilential contagion is, pun intended, more virulent than ever. And if we were in any remaining doubt of its cultural immediacy, one need only remember the headlines caused by Dutch virologist Ron Fouchier’s claim to have created an airborne

strain of the avian influenza virus that has the potential to exterminate half of the world's population. Martin Enserink, in a 2011 online Science Insider article, described the news as a “media storm,” although the consequences of the new creation might lead to pandemics and apocalyptic destruction (Enserink). Slightly less impressively, the Japanese virologist Yoshihiro Kawaoka engineered a version of the H5N1 virus that would only kill 400 million people. And in the summer of 2014 the media abounded in rumors that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, known primarily for their viral videos of beheading infidels, have been working on creating an engineered version of the bubonic plague, which wiped out a third of Europe's population in 1348-1349.

Approaches and conceptual framework

The biological body as a metaphor highlighting a variety of meanings both for individual and collective frailty made its way into both visual and narrative art, medieval art using it to stress the *memento mori* message, in the context of the epidemics that more than decimated Europe's population, while the rise of the middle class and of the modern nation provided these narratives with considerable ideological and political weight.

More specifically, as a metaphor of the biological body for the potentially volatile body politic, it has a long story in Western political culture, from Plato's conceptualization of *bios*, *nosos* and *nomos* in *The Republic* to contemporary discourses on the “organic” as encompassing everything from food to definitions of community or urban organization. Epidemics (with the political, cultural, geographical and religious upheaval they

entail) have historically played a significant role in this tradition. While the earliest notable example of politically loaded “plague writing” is Thucydides, the plague as a rhetorical and artistic trope first became prominent during the Black Death, and enjoyed cycles of prominence that often overlapped not only with epidemiological crises (tuberculosis, syphilis, cholera, AIDS), but also with periods of political crisis and turmoil (such as the 1848 revolutions or the emergence of fascism).

The concept of plague, or pestilence, refers to much more than a biological crisis; derived from the Latin *plaga* (wound) and *pestilens* (unwholesome, noxious), plague and pestilence signify the literal and figurative rupturing of the body and imply, to synthesize conceptualizations of plague by Antonin Artaud, Rene Girard, Susan Sontag and Michel Foucault, a moral and biological crisis whose most threatening aspect is not the prospect of death *per se*, but the mutation and alienation of both the biological body and the body politic, and the converse dangers of intense sociopolitical disruption on the one hand, and disciplinary political reterritorialization as a containment strategy on the other hand. While plague also refers to a specific disease (bubonic plague, caused by the *Yersinia Pestis* virus), I will be using it in its broader, cultural sense, rather than its strict medical sense. Plague and pestilence here are used as synonymous terms – admittedly, that in itself may be a point of debate, but it is not a debate that plays a part in this project.

This dissertation addresses the visual and narrative constructions of pestilential bodies in post-Cold War American film and television, with incursions in literature, and places a strong emphasis on contextualization and historicization, beginning with an acknowledgement of the

impact of the Gothic tradition on significant developments leading up to the current cultural stage. Beyond discussing both historical continuity and rupture in representations of plague, its focus upon the contemporary frame covers important critical junctures: the end of the Cold War and 9/11 with its subsequent “War on Terror” and drive toward a more security-oriented government.

Both critical moments have been much mythologized as “exceptional” events which disrupted the course of history. This historical period overlaps with the emergence of *the network* as a dominant discursive paradigm in a broad variety of areas, from information technology and communication sciences to philosophy, political activism or military theory. One of the most influential contemporary sociologists, Manuel Castells, made his name with such books as *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age – Economy, Society and Culture*, in which he describes the (epidemic-like) spread of networking logic that considerably changes the functioning of all socio-cultural processes, in addition to serving as the most adapted instrument for the contemporary economic flows. Networks of course have similar structures to the propagations of epidemic disease. Theorists such as Eugene Thacker or Steven Shapiro have argued that contagion itself is a dominant paradigm in human communication in the network age, illustrated by the epidemiological structures, strategies and/or terminology in forms of communication ranging from marketing to military rhetoric. Mechanisms of virulence, with their reliance on self-reproduction and on de- and re-territorialization are essentially, as Jussi Parikka notes, “a mode of action inherently connected to the complex, non-linear order of network society marked by

transversal infections and parasitical relationships.” (Parikka 288)

Thacker has correlated such views on the dominance of contagion with his own brand of pessimism and nihilism expressed in *Horror of Philosophy*, in which the author discusses the situation of the “unthinkable world” as represented in the horror genre. Referring to his ideas, like to Shapiro’s as challenges more than as theories to be faithfully followed, will be one of the many theoretical concerns of this dissertation, a similar approach being taken toward ideas and concepts from cultural studies, cultural history, art history and history of film and literature.

Artaud is also important, once again as an intellectual challenge rather than as a mentoring presence, in this study of the impact of contemporary pestilential narratives with his famous, persistent ruminations on the disruptive possibilities opened up by the plague. He compared it to the transgressive nature of theatre. One of his typically nightmarish depictions of this, in his essay “The Theater and the Plague” (in *The Theater and Its Double*) reads like this, a very peculiar, apocalyptic way of discouraging potential youngsters contemplating a theatrical career, while motivating epidemiologists in their “dramatic” confrontation with pestilence:

The last of the living are in a frenzy: the obedient and virtuous son kills his father; the chaste man performs sodomy upon his neighbors. The lecher becomes pure. The miser throws his gold in handfuls out the window. [...] Neither the idea of an absence of sanctions nor that of imminent death suffices to motivate acts so gratuitously absurd on the part of men who did not believe death could end anything. And how explain the surge of erotic fever

among the recovered victims who, instead of fleeing the city, remain where they are, trying to wrench a criminal pleasure from the dying or even the dead, half crushed under the pile of corpses where chance has lodged them. (Artaud 24)

In his more lucid way, and in an approach that has definitely influenced the development of cultural studies, Foucault cannot fail to note the disciplinary potential of the plague (in *Discipline and Punish*), which fulfills the apparently contradictory projects of total exclusion and total social control (which he illustrates with the different ways in which authorities in the Middle Ages dealt with leprosy and with the Black Death: while leprosy was tackled by excluding lepers from the city under pain of death, the Black Death was controlled total concentration and regimentation).

Susan Sontag, in her equally famous *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, defines the plague as not merely a catastrophic epidemic in terms of human cost (since not all large-scale epidemics, such as polio or influenza, get labeled as plagues) but as a moral and biological crisis that “transform(s) the body into something alienating” and is perceived as collective retribution performed by “foreign” agents (251). Plagues function as “the highest standard of collective calamity” and, in artistic work, as she exemplifies with Capek’s *The White Plague*, can be interpreted as “the irruption of death that gives life its seriousness” (258). Thinking in terms of contagion, contamination, plague or pestilence as *influence* (influenza was inadvertently left out in the previously evoked list of calamities) has long been part of the way people describes

the spread of information, ideas, values, beliefs, knowledge, sometimes seen as dangerous, sometimes being appropriated and used in their own interest by the powers that be. L. Andrew Cooper, in his book on the influence of horror fiction on modern culture, comments on such fears, as inspired by what he identifies to be the threat in the Gothic's foundation, at the time the Gothic mode emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries:

[...] communicable ideas, when bad, could function like communicable diseases, infecting all who encounter them. Gothic fictions center on the representation of the outre, the violent, and the horrible, so critics often treated them as the worst of bad form, destined to communicate bad ideas. Any writing had the potential to be a bad influence, but Gothic writing seemed to realize that potential just by being Gothic (Cooper 25).

The rationale for choosing film as the primary medium on which this dissertation focuses is twofold. On the one hand, while there is a long tradition of "plague fiction" (one can easily think of Daniel Defoe, or Edgar Allan Poe, or Camus), it has been (audio) visual culture in which representations of plague have been most compelling, for the simple fact that the (figuratively and literally) visceral nature of such representations have more immediacy in an audiovisual medium, not only because they exploit special effects engendered by sound and visual images, but because of the combined effect of what are called *multimodal metaphors* (Eggertsson and Forceville), metaphoric complexes working together to increase the impact on the viewer.

Not everybody has read Defoe, but more or less everybody is familiar with the image of the medieval

representations of the Dances of Death, or of the beaked “plague doctor.” In a contemporary context, in terms of popularity and sheer volume of work, (audio)visual representations of plague (film, video games, graphic novels, body art, and various forms of design, from album covers to skateboard design) vastly outnumber literary production (despite the immense popularity of literary genres such as vampire fiction and the medical thriller). And then, to quote Slavoj Žižek on the reality of cinematic fiction, “It’s only in cinema that we get that crucial dimension which we are not yet ready to confront in our reality. If you are looking for what is, in reality, more real than reality itself, look into cinematic fiction”(qtd. in Riegler 109).

On the other hand, one staggering aspect overlooked by cultural critics, but pointed out by a team of Greek medical doctors in an article called “Infectious Diseases in Cinema: Virus Hunters and Killer Microbes” (Pappas et al, 939-942), is the eerie parallelism between the development of cinema and of that of clinical microbiology. Noting that infectious diseases have been the most successful area of medicine to make it onscreen, as they can “offer cinema the required suspense” they point out that

The discovery and widespread use of antibiotics coincided with the appearance and spread of the “talking pictures”; the incidence of and problems associated with antibiotic resistance increased in parallel with the threat to cinema presented by television; the HIV epidemic coincided with the “VCR epidemic” in the early 80s; and the beginning of the 21st century saw a bright future lying ahead both for science, in the form of molecular genetics, and for art, in the form of the digital revolution. (Pappas et al 939)

Thematic framework

Chapter One aims to sketch a significant outline featuring a number of moments, figures, emerging concepts, in the development of narratives that have come to gradually combine, with time, the more general plague narratives and those of two central Gothic monsters, the vampire and the zombie, the significant aesthetic, ethical, political difference that such conjunctions have made. It points to the dark heritage that this history has brought to the current cultural stage, the ways in which the new flesh being represented in contemporary pestilential narratives can be traced back to a long Gothic tradition, thus the long shadows of the past throwing the new figures into sharper relief. While an incursion into the more distant past was inevitably selective (focusing on cultural aspects from Ancient Greece, medieval Western Europe, as well as the Balkan area), since the rise to considerable prominence of the Gothic in the 18th century, the current approach followed a narrower path, following the connection between the British and the American developing Gothic traditions, as part of a more cohesive, Anglophone world.

Challenging the views by Fiedler and Berthin that Gothic ghosts have abandoned an improbable purgatory, a limbo between life and death, between Heaven and Hell, a world of dreams and of repressed guilts and fears since the emergence of Gothic narratives, the aim of the chapter is to see how, reluctant to be relegated to the unconscious, these old demons that the Gothic tradition have brought back to life continue to haunt not only the past, but also current narrative representations.

Another concern will be to investigate the possible connections between the rise of 18th century Gothic

narratives, driven by fears and threats not necessarily caused by, but attributed to the alien, the Enlightenment, the rise of the middle class and of national consciousness in Europe and America. This investigation involves the study of figures involving hostile individuals, strange, alien, places, foreign cultures, linking the initial trends in British Gothic to point to a distant place, past, culture and their monsters and the discourse defining identity in relation to alterity that Edward Said described in his *Orientalism*.

The chapter initiates research, which will be continued in chapter 2, upon the recourse to a communication pattern that gothic art appears to evince. This pattern appears to allow audiences to express a range of emotions linked to a fascination with the alien and the sinister that social conventions have a strong tendency to tame or even to repress. One important trend in Gothic art is to address the body and to exacerbate identification with, rather than encourage critical detachment from, the imagined world of the narrative. This extreme “suspension of disbelief” paralyzes not only the innocent or helpless victim facing inexorable doom, but also the Gothic fan. Gothic terror as another variant of this dark narrative causes apprehension and anxiety, far from paralyzing its victims (damsel in distress, credulous, oversensitive reader) quickens the pulse and the heartbeats, stimulating the audiences’ minds to identify with the threatened victim inside the Gothic narrative, while also activating self-defense strategies and the willingness to deal with the situation as in what would develop in parallel as literature of detection, the two sometimes coexisting and “infecting” each other.

The second section of the first chapter (The plague, the *pharmakos*, the *pharmakon*) starts from a ritual

examined by James Frazer in his *The Golden Bough*, more specifically the abridged 1936 edition of *The Golden Bough: The Scapegoat*, which shows an undertaking that would become known as the process of *scapegoating*, which has been useful in approaches to human communities ever since. Under examination will be the connection between the physical death of the pharmakos and his or her sacrifice's symbolic significance, between his death and the symbolic death of the plague, the story of the pharmakos and the pharmakon being a narrative that, through its symbolic significance, contributes to an understanding of subsequent pestilential rituals and narratives.

The next subchapter introduces the necessary Gothic concepts of horror, terror and the sublime, how they emerged in the age of the Enlightenment, how they acquired the meanings that are relevant to a discussion of the complex phenomena they refer to, how they directly relate to the rise of the Gothic romance. It also deals with how apparent advocates of Sense in the age of Sensibility and the Sublime, such as Austen, both evoke and undermine the literary icons of the new genre (Anne Radcliffe, in opposition not only to Austen, but also to less "proper" male authors such as Walpole and Lewis). What is the direction in which these central figures of 18th century Gothic (Radcliffe, Walpole, Lewis) steer its narrative flows? The section refers to the literary competition between horror and terror, between a "philosophy of terror" and "Dionysian horror." The second and the third chapter will mainly illustrate the "gory," "pestilential" adventures of the winner of these two central Gothic concepts.

The fourth section (The uncanny: defamiliarizing the "homely") starts from an observation made by historian and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov about the difficulty of

disciplining the unruly horror in relation to fantastic literature. He thinks it preferable to define it in relation to the Freudian concept of the uncanny. Using the interplay between the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* of the Freudian tension in the uncanny and referring to the *pharmakon-pharmakos* relationship, the rest of the subchapter discusses the relevance of the Gothic heritage in the reading of Tony Morrison's *Beloved*, ending with the special effects associated with the uncanny in the overt competition between elite and popular cinematic productions (*Beloved*'s 1998 film version, directed by Jonathan Demme, and the horror comedy *Bride of Chucky*), trying to explain why the less respectable turned out to be the more effective in its use of the Freudian concept for creating a powerful audiovisual impact

The next subchapter (Poe, Hawthorne, Melville and the rise of the house of terror) discusses the central figures of American Gothic in relation to their British predecessors, to the American cultural scene, as well as to subsequent developments, to persevere in the Gothic language previously used, how their "ghosts" (both as general authorial influence and as specific artistic representations) "haunt" future Gothic narratives, both literary and cinematic, as the expression of the sinister Other in relation to the American Dream.

Chapter Two (Irreconcilable bodies: flesh beyond metaphor) interrogates and challenges the metaphorical interpretative framework of fictional plagues in relation with and in opposition to more visceral engagements with the raw representation of violence and the body in what Linda Williams calls one of the three branches of *body narratives*: horror, pornography, melodrama.