

## **Narratives of the Virocene: a visual ethnography with basis on the film *Contagion***

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**Abstract:** Over the recent years, some authors have questioned the hegemony of mankind (Anthropocene) over nature. The recent virus outbreak known as COVID19 starts a new period known as “violence” where humans are forced to recede to the private sphere. The COVID19 pandemic not only alerted the health authorities but also disposed of extreme measures which included the close of borders, airspaces, as well as the imposition of lockdown and social distancing. Not only global commerce but also the tourism industry was placed on the brink of collapse. In this grim landscape, the problem of climate change is far from being solved. While steps to reverse the greenhouse gas emission should be taken globally coordinating efforts among nations, the current climate of tension without mentioning the geopolitical discrepancies (among countries) impedes the formation of global sustainable institutions to monitor and regulate the effects of climate change. The present article centers on a visual ethnography on the film *Contagion*, to lay the foundations towards a new understanding of ideology and its effects on ecological justice.

**Key Words:** COVID-19, Ecological Justice, Virocene, Crisis, Ideology, Contagion.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The current virus outbreak, SARSCoV2, baptized by experts as COVID-19 not only paralyzed the global trade but also ground global capitalism to an unparalleled halt. As Slavoj Žižek (2020) puts it, COVID-19 signals the end of capitalism. This unprecedented pandemic accelerated a much deeper social decomposition mainly marked by a sentiment of mistrust for the Other. The imposition of social distancing intensified this disconnection with Others. In this vein, it is safe to say that globalization as well as the tourism industry were the main carriers and victims of this virus (Baum et al 2020; Korstanje & George 2021). Some voices have

applauded the idea that the crisis precipitated by the pandemic leads humanity towards more sustainable forms of consumption (Gossling, Scott & Hall 2020). Thus, we cannot speak of the COVID19 pandemic without touching upon the problem of sustainability and the *Anthropocene*.

The anthropocene has been defined as a new epoch organized and administered by humanity. This administration is centered on a direct intervention of humans to consume (if not exhaust) the non-renewable resources. Human activity (industry) has directly influenced the environment so much that it has constituted a new distinct geological epoch (Lidskog & Waterton, 2016). Some scholars have alerted on the negative impact of human intervention, connected in various ways to the global virus outbreaks of SARS or COVID19 (Kumar, Kuroda & Dhargar, 2020). Aronson & Hold (2020) hold the thesis that the alternations introduced by the capitalist economies to boost the biosphere or to optimize the agricultural industries led invariably into a gridlock. The closest contact of human with other species has opened the doors to unknown viruses for which we have neither efficient cure nor vaccines. The opposite is equally true; some dangerous viruses (i.e. SARS or COVID19) come from the manipulation of wild animals from tropical regions, which are brought in contact with humans through hyper-industrialized food markets. Whatever the case may be, COVID19 not only interrogated furtherly the capitalist system, as well as the inter-class asymmetries and inequalities but also a new concept known as Virocene.

This paper dissects the plot of a premonitory film entitled *Contagion* (2011 directed by Steven Soderbergh). The cast includes celebrities such as Matt Damon, Kate Winslet, Gwyneth Paltrow, Jude Law and Laurence Fishburne (only to name a few). The plot takes place in Hong Kong (China) where Beth Emhoff (Paltrow) starts her business travel. She inadvertently is the carrier of a lethal virus. *Contagion* can be seen as a symbolic narrative that pushes the dilemma of human contact, secrecy and the inter-class hierarchy into the foreground. The movie describes not only the stereotyped discourses of the West regarding the Orient and China, but also the limitations to contain a pandemic in overcrowded cities that are mainly connected by thousands of international flights, domestic trains and subways. *Contagion* deals with a slippery matter, crystallized in the case of COVID19; the fact that global cities are more subject to lethal virus outbreaks than any other human groups.

## THE ANTHROPOCENE AND COVID19

As mentioned, the multiplication of different virus outbreaks and the Anthropocene seems to be inextricably intertwined. This happens simply because the human technology and innovative techniques applied to improve the food industries make closer contact with wild animals. As a result, unknown viruses hosted by these animals mutate and skip to human bodies (Fukurai, Hiroshi & Krooth, 2021). For the sake of clarity, we shall focus on how the social imaginary constructs discursively the concept of Anthropocene and sustainability.

In the recent years, some voices have cautioned on human hegemony over nature. The COVID-19 pandemic also begins a period labelled as Virocene, where humans are pressed to recede to the private sphere (Bolten 2016). The pandemic caused the enforcement of extreme measures which included the close of borders, airspaces, as well as the imposition of lockdown and social distancing. Global commerce and the tourism industry were placed on the brink of collapse (Chinazi et al, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). But the pandemic also ignited a long-dormant sentiment of hostility against the foreigner. Hostile expressions against Asian tourists and anti-migratory discourse were put on to the foreground. We witnessed the rise of a new world where globalization set the pace to political atomization and fracture; where each nation struggled to prevail.

In this grim landscape, the problem of climate change is far from being solved (Seyfi, Hall & Shabani 2020; Korstanje 2021; Mostafanezhad, Cheer & Sin, 2020). While steps to reverse the greenhouse gas emission should be taken globally, coordinating efforts among nations, the current climate of tension and geopolitical discrepancies impedes the formation of global sustainable institutions to monitor and regulate the effects of climate change. Far from being a solution or the start of de-growth consumption a new opportunity for the human race, as many voices overly applauded, the COVID19 pandemic created a climate of feudalization where a coordinated campaign against climate change seems to be almost impossible (Korstanje & George 2022).

Madhusudan Subedi (2020) argues convincingly that the Anthropocene results from the active expansion of global capitalism, which indexed local economies and territories. Although much has been said about virus proliferations, less is known about the long-lasting effects prompted by

capitalism in the environment. Pandemics and virus have been around on the earth from its inception. However, recently the risks to face a pandemic have triplicated because human activity is a determinant factor causing environmental changes; it remains uncertain to what extent the next pandemic is coming. Subedi also coins the term ‘capitalcene’ to signal not only the economic inequalities between the Global North and South, without mentioning the fast capital flows, but also the exploitative inter-class relations that remain unspoken in the media. The richer countries which contribute directly to climate change effects are better disposed to go through than the poor countries with low levels of contamination. The current COVID19 pandemic showed the current deficient health system in the Global South. At the same time, it also highlighted the problems of coordination in the global North, characterized by high level mobility, equating to higher levels of infection. This point invariably led some scholars to proclaim that COVID19 is the beginning of an ecological justice or opportunity towards an egalitarian society (Powers et al 2021; McIntyre-Mills, 2020; Rastegar & Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). COVID-19 pandemic begs a more than pungent question: is the virocene this type of ecological justice?

## SUSTAINABILITY AND THE VIROCENE

The term virocene was originally coined in the philosophical fields to denote the human vulnerability to the outbreaks of several viruses mutated from contact among species. In this vein, virocene is defined as a new epoch where the viral force interrogates (if not pushes) human intervention. The virocene casts humanity out from its throne, placing instead another species, viruses (Fernando, 2020a; 2020b). Paradoxically, viruses infect bodies while replicating to skip to another host. In terms of Jacques Derrida (2000), the virus (like the parasite or the migrant) is an undesired guest that ultimately escapes to the local law, like the migrant whose solicitude of hospitality is neglected, and is sought by security forces. Then, it is important to discuss the parallel between the figure of the virus (as an undesired guest) and ecological justice (Sultana, 2021).

As Jude Fernando (2020a) eloquently observes, the virocene shows two important things. On one hand, the inequalities and racial hierarchies, which are constructed by the capitalist system, designed to silence some

ethnic minorities. On the other, viruses (like COVID-19) defy directly not only the human hegemony over the planet, but also human-nature relations. The COVID-19 pandemic created a turning point, leading humanity towards virocene. At the same time, it could open the door for a new epoch of ecological justice, which Fernando dubs the “*lovecene*”, a time of respect and harmonization of all species and the planet.

In his book *Cultural immobilities and the Virocene*, social theorist Rodanthi Tzanelli also proffers an interesting argument. The COVID-19 unveils an ongoing state of terminal crisis in the capitalist system which evinces the vulnerability of the disciplinary mechanisms of controls. Over years, the authority of states was mainly based on medical reasoning as well as the efficiency to control borders. The virocene exhibits the expanse of plague and the circulation of viruses that elude borders and controls. High-mobility societies fell prey to COVID19, and the medical discourse fell short of giving rapid and efficient answers, so that political authorities were gradually discredited. The complexity of the pandemic lies on the fact that the economic crisis, systematically dramatized by the mass media, covers other much deeper crises, such as the ecological crisis, the migratory disaster, or the rise of racism and intolerance.

Tzanelli introduced the term viropolitics to debate to what extent medical expertise is never questioned. Despite their failures to contain the pandemic its authority was re-affirmed without correcting what in essence is an ecological malfunctioning. Here two issues should be highlighted. First, the fact that social distancing and other restrictive measures have marked the difference between those who live and those who die, marking the ontological separation between the infected and the healthy. Secondly and most importantly, the virus circulation engages directly with long-dormant racist discourses forged in the colonial period. Hence the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the material asymmetries between the former colonial center and its peripheries.

Needless to say, the Anthropocene sets the pace to the virocene but this does not authorize us to say that we can embrace a new epoch of ecological justice. For Tzanelli (2021), Anthropocene and virocene show a type of symbiosis, imposing a type of bio-discipline efficiently managed and administered by the biomedical establishment. The goal of medicine –far from extending life- is becoming oriented to domesticate uncertainty. As a result, the notion of immobility, immortalized in the lemma “stay at

home”, evokes a sentiment of recrimination associated with conspiracy. This sentiment of mistrust was directed against Asian tourists as well as China, where the first cases were reported. Furthermore, the author toys with the belief that COVID-19 shed light on two contrasting tendencies: the rise of xenophobia (against foreigners) and the local discontent for unmet demands. The virus infects and kills randomly at its own discretion. Nobody knows the virus itinerary nor its mortality. While some are infected and finally die, others suffer mild symptoms. This engenders a sentiment of mistrust against the Other that creates a gap between citizens and their authorities.

## METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Some complex topics are very hard to study without the introduction of qualitative methodologies. Over the recent years, visual ethnography helps illustrate the dark sides of themes that otherwise would remain inexpugnable to the human eye. Visual ethnography focuses not only on the core of discourses, allegories and narratives emanated from the ruling elite but also deciphers the intricacies of politics (Schwartz, 1989). Visual ethnography includes different techniques associated with the analysis content of novels, films, photography, to name a few. It centers on approaches that describe how the world is constructed and communicated to others (Ardevol 2012). As a qualitative method, visual ethnography should be limited to the object of study (in this case the film) and cannot be extrapolated to other universes.

## CONTAGION

*Contagion* is the title of an American Film released in 2011 and directed by Steven Soderbergh. The cast includes stars such as Matt Damon, Laurence Fishburne, Jude Law, Kate Winslet and Gwyneth Paltrow. The main plot refers to the spread of a lethal (highly contagious) virus that rapidly disseminates in the US and the world. At a first glimpse, the virus is transmitted by respiratory fomites in which case it is very hard to stop. Not only the medical authorities are questioned but also society enters in a state of chaos, looting and violence as never before. The story begins with (Paltrow) Beth Emhoff’s return from a business travel to Hong

Kong. Once back, she does not go to her home but meets up with her ex-boyfriend in Chicago. Secrecy and lies occupy a central position in the film and in Soderbergh's work in general. Beth's husband Mitch (Damon) brings her to a hospital after she suffers a seizure. In a question of days, she and her son (Clark) finally die. Naturally immune, Mitch remains isolated with his teenage daughter (Jory). Pushed to live in quarantine at home, both witnesses how the world they know definably disappears. Echoing Marx's paragraph, in the capitalist system all that is solid melts into air. Father and daughter are immune to the virus but they do not know this first. Meanwhile, at the headquarters of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Dr Cheever (Fishburne) is met by representatives from the Department of Homeland Security who alert on the outbreak of a new lethal virus considered a potential bio-weapon. Cheever delivers his colleague, Dr Erin Mears, to Minneapolis, the city where the first cases were originally reported. She is instructed not only to trace back the virus origin but also to form a committee to give answers to authorities. Mears is finally infected and dies. The first discoveries are far from being encouraging and promising; the virus (MEV-1) is a combination (mutation) of genetic material from bats that mutated to pigs. This virus is very contagious and virulent. At the same time, conspiracy theorist Alan Krumwiede (Law) publishes a set of material and videos in his blog vindicating he has a homoeopathic cure for the virus (forsythia). This produces a set of lootings in pharmacies in quest of forsythia. The streets are chaotic and dangerous. The vaccine is discovered, but there are not sufficient dosis for everyone, and the Center for Disease Control declares a lottery marked by birthdates. In the meantime, in Hong Kong, the World Health Organization expert, Dr Orantes, is kidnapped by a local group to obtain free vaccines. WHO officials give the vaccine to the group but they are placebo. Lastly, Mitch returns home with Jory applauding and waiting for the vaccine.

The movie shows an uncanny parallelism with the COVID 19 pandemic. Back in 1994, Slavoj Zizek explained that ideology says more for what it covers than for what it overly says. This applies very well to the film's plot. *Contagion* structures according to four key axioms: social contact as an act of solidarity, secrecy, biomedicine, and the stereotypes against China as a space without proper sanitation. Each axiom is detailed with accuracy in the next lines.

## SOCIAL CONTACT

Over centuries, philosophers and social scientists questioned the key factor that keeps society united. They concluded that human reciprocity not only keeps society functioning, but also citizens' solidarity. Social contact is based on political authority which marks how this process of solidarity should be ritualized. As Michel Foucault (2003) puts it, the lepers constituted a primordial group that inspired fear in the community. The medical discipline not only scrutinizes but also isolates those sick bodies that place society in jeopardy. It is difficult to resist the impression that there is a clear parallelism between Foucault's approach and *Contagion's* plot (as well as the lockdown imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic). The first course of action is the enforcement of restrictive measures that encompass border controls and air traffic control, accompanied later by self-isolation and quarantine. After his loss, Mitch even is obliged to be in isolation at his home (to be safer). The world as we know it simply disappears when governments suddenly prohibit social contact. The Other, the neighbor, the friend becomes a potential carrier of an invisible enemy, the virus. This discourse enacts a type of bellicose metaphor which emanates from the net of experts (doctors) who play a leading role in locating and eradicating the threat. However, these experts cover up reality to preserve social harmony.

## SECRECY

As declared in the previous section, influential people often cover up the truth or manipulate vital information. In the movie, this is the case of Beth, an important businesswoman who deceives her husband. Secrecy also involves Dr Cheever when he manipulates classified information about the vaccine to give a privileged position to his wife. The gap left by this manipulation invariably is filled by bloggers and pressure groups who threaten the official story. The nature of the conspiracy, as David Kelman (2012) notes, speaks of two irreconcilable worlds. The official story, incredible for the citizens, and the conspiracy plot, which narrates seemingly credible events that cannot be empirically tested. This dichotomy represents a clear form of politics where leaders maintain



legitimacy. Beyond the conspiracy lies the veil of secrecy which is ideologically posed to preserve this legitimacy.

### *BIOMEDICAL POWER*

The figure of legitimacy is vital to understanding how biomedical power works. In *Contagion*, medical authorities and the Center for Disease Control struggle to discover the nature of the virus nature, its itinerary and its velocity of replication, trying to trace patient zero. Once the virus genome is discovered, the WHO and biomedical authorities work hard in two directions. On one hand, they devote efforts to the application of a crisis committee to help mitigate pandemic effects in urban cities. On the other, doctors work against the clock to find a cure or a vaccine. The vaccine finally is discovered and gradually the order is restored. However, a philosophical dilemma surfaces: who deserves to be inoculated? Why and under what pretexts some citizens are excluded? Why are citizens in rich countries vaccinated while poor countries are left adrift?

All these quandaries resolve in one point: the lottery which is based on the scarcity principle. All citizens are equated in egalitarian conditions while having the same probabilities to be chosen. Like other films like *The Carriers*, *Contagion* revolves around the problem of individuality as well as the dichotomy between sickness and life. The infected persons are automatically isolated against their wishes. They are sick and potentially they are carriers of a lethal disease. The individual wish succumbs to the power of the majority. The net of experts (doctors) elaborate the indicators that signal who is sick (infected) and who is not. They also create the health protocols that should be applied. Last but not least, this legitimacy over the medical reasoning is given because barriers and measures adopted to impede disaster simply failed. In this case, the public opinion needs a fabricated foe: China, the Asian Giant.

### *CHINA AS DEFYING THE GLOBAL ORDER*

China represents a growing economy that has become leader in the global economy. Nonetheless, China continues to be portrayed as a disorderly space without proper sanitary conditions. Ideologically, the US, which embodies the spirit of Western civilization, takes on the role of saving the

world of a problem that originated in China. The argument is that MEV-1 arose not only because of the lack of governmental regulations, but also poor sanitary conditions in the local markets where wild animals are sold. The ideological core of this narrative inscribes China as the Non-Western Other, incapable of containing the threat. In *Contagion*, this translates in violence and in Dr Orantes' kidnapping. Some parallelisms can be drawn between the movie and Trump's racist discourses on "the Chinese virus" during the COVID-19 pandemic, examples of ideological narratives shaped by biomedical issues. Again, this raises the question on the possibility or not of ecological justice after COVID-19.

In this respect, *Contagion* shows that after the huge magnitude of the crisis, all the injustices and the problems, the world returns to normal. However, on occasions like this, the influence of political ideology becomes apparent, often covering up real causes. As Geoffrey Skoll (2014) describes, it is important to mention that Hegelian dialectics signals the synthesis of two objects into a third new one. In doing so, the causal relationships between them might remain obscure. For Skoll, this exhibits the possibility that real causes of events are often hidden. He gives the examples of Marxism and Psychoanalysis, which are self-explanatory. Marxism sees capital as a factor that somehow mediates between the means of production and the workforce. At the same time, the unconscious foregrounds a play between reason and repression. As social construes, neither capital nor the unconscious give us a firm background to understand the objects of study of these disciplines. Freudian psychoanalysis centers on the belief that there are unknown forces that operate in the human mind. In this vein, the notion of subjectivity is placed under the lens of scrutiny by experts. Psychoanalysts imposes diagnosis even if the patient has no instruments to deal with such a story. Like the worker who is enslaved by capital, the unconscious operates in the darkness of irrationality. The agent should be receptive to the expert's opinion. As Skoll puts it, the problem with this westernized conception lies in the fact that direct correlation between causes and effects is certainly upended.

*Contagion's* plot is mainly marked by the need to stress who are the heroes and villains in a struggle of forces and counter-forces, while the essence of the ecological crisis is misjudged. In this context, a more sustainable society after the pandemic seems to be a panacea.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the influence of ideologies in social functioning with reference to COVID-19, and the movie *Contagion*. The plot of the film is structured following four clear-cut axioms: social contact as an act of solidarity, secrecy, biomedical control, and the stereotypical images of China as a space without order and sanitation. The COVID-19 pandemic inspired some voices to claim that the virocene might replace to Anthropocene and inaugurate a climate of ecological justice. However, as this paper has demonstrated, the complications of ideological constructs occlude the possibility of ecological justice.

**Acknowledgements:** This research has been developed within the project "On Material Ecocriticism's Connotative Meanings of Cultivating a Community with a Shared Future of Mankind" (2022EWY000), funded by Shanghai Social Science Foundation.

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