



MARION COTILLARD MATT DAMON LAURENCE FISHBURNE JUDE LAW GWYNETH PALTROW KATE WINSLET

**NOTHING SPREADS LIKE FEAR**

**CONTAGION**

WARNER BROS. PICTURES PRESENTS  
 IN ASSOCIATION WITH PARTICIPANT MEDIA AND IMAGINATION ABU DHABI A DOUBLE FEATURE FILMS/GREGORY JACOBS PRODUCTION "CONTAGION" MARION COTILLARD  
 MATT DAMON LAURENCE FISHBURNE JUDE LAW GWYNETH PALTROW KATE WINSLET BRYAN CRANSTON JENNIFER EHLE SANAA LATHAN CASTING BY CARMEN CUBA, C.S.A.  
 EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS LOUISE FROGLEY MUSIC BY CLIFF MARTINEZ EDITED BY STEPHEN MIRRIONE, A.C.E. PRODUCTION DESIGNER HOWARD CUMMINGS EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JEFF SKOLL MICHAEL POLAIRE JONATHAN KING  
 WRITTEN BY SCOTT Z. BURNS PRODUCED BY MICHAEL SHAMBERG STACEY SHER GREGORY JACOBS DIRECTED BY STEVEN SODERBERGH

participant media imagination  
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# Contagion

Director: **Steven Soderbergh, (2011).**

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*Contagion* was likely one of the most-watched movies during the COVID-19 lockdown. It was released in 2011 and originally went largely unnoticed. However, it has become one of the biggest hits of the COVID-19 pandemic, being among the most downloaded films on both Amazon and iTunes. It even became the second most in-demand title, surpassed only by the Harry Potter saga.

The premise of *Contagion* is based on a quote by Professor Stephen Morse: “Mother Nature is the world’s most dangerous bioterrorist”. Screenwriter Scott Z. Burns and director Steven Soderbergh decided from the outset that the new virus in the film should have a natural origin. No secret military lab leaks or shadowy political conspiracies. It also had to be realistic and not sensationalized. So, no ultra-contagious virus that wipes out 99.9% of humanity or infected people covered in oozing sores.

To do his research, Burns interviewed epidemiologist Lawrence Brilliant, known for his work in eradicating smallpox. Brilliant told him that the key question about a pandemic wasn’t *\*if\** it would happen, but *\*when\** it would happen. He also connected Burns with Ian Lipkin, a virologist from Columbia University, to “design” the film’s MEV-1 virus. Lipkin based it on the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak to imagine a realistic scenario, and came up with the idea that the virus could be a fusion between two paramyxoviruses: a Nipah-like virus from a bat and a porcine rubulavirus. The goal was for the virus to have the high lethality of Nipah and the high contagion level of the rubulavirus that causes mumps. In the

film, the character of Professor Ian Sussman (played by Elliot Gould), who discovers how to grow the MEV-1 virus in the lab, is a tribute to Ian Lipkin. Burns completed his script after the 2009 H1N1 swine flu outbreak, which featured scenarios of lockdowns and the spread of pseudoscientific rumors on social media.

Soderbergh made this film in a style similar to what he had previously done in *Traffic* with the world of drugs. He weaves together a series of parallel stories, all connected by the common thread of the epidemic. Each storyline reflects a different facet of how modern society deals with such a serious situation. We see ordinary people, doctors trying to fight the outbreak, scientists working to develop a vaccine, politicians making decisions that will affect millions, and even schemers without scruples trying to profit from others’ suffering. It’s truly remarkable how this 2011 film managed to portray so many scenarios that we experienced ourselves during the pandemic years.

For the production, Soderbergh was able to count on a stellar cast. Matt Damon plays the average citizen directly affected by the pandemic, as his wife (Gwyneth Paltrow) is one of the first victims. Laurence Fishburne and Kate Winslet portray CDC epidemiologists who must face the disease while also dealing with political decisions. Marion Cotillard plays a WHO epidemiologist who embarks on a detective-like mission to understand the origin of the virus, identify patient zero, and discover how the disease is transmitted. Finally, Jude Law plays a conspiracy-theorist blogger who seeks to profit

by promoting a homeopathic pseudotherapy as a cure for the virus.

Burns' screenplay and Soderbergh's direction show that it's not necessary to rely on sensationalism or gore to make a compelling film about a pandemic, and that scientific accuracy is not incompatible with entertainment. There are relatively few scientific inaccuracies—for example, when Laurence Fishburne looks at a 3D structure of a protein on a computer and refers to it as "the virus." But there are far more notable scenes that have proven to be prophetic. One I particularly like is when Kate Winslet has to explain the incoming public health crisis to a group of local politicians. In just five minutes, she clearly and concisely explains what fomite transmission is and what the R0 reproduction number means.

Other situations portrayed in the film that we've experienced ourselves during the COVID-19 pandemic include home lockdowns, stockpiling of supplies and materials, social distancing, and the race to find a vaccine. Unlike other films where crises are resolved within days, *Contagion* shows that the scientific process is slow, painstaking, and meticulous—it takes months. And that progress depends as much on government support as on pharmaceutical companies (it's refreshing that the film avoids the cliché of the evil biotech corporation trying to make profits from the dire situation). In the vaccine development storyline, there's a scene where the virologist played by Jennifer Ehle tests an experimental vaccine on herself in order to speed up the development process. During the pandemic we saw a large number of volunteers to test the various vaccines being developed against the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

One of the few prediction that this film (thankfully) got wrong was the behavior of healthcare workers. At one point, it's mentioned that the medical staff went on strike out of fear of infection. Fortunately, that circumstance did not happen anywhere in the world. —quite the opposite, in fact. Healthcare professionals acted in an exemplary manner, even when they lacked adequate personal protective equipment. But where Burns and Soderbergh were absolutely spot-on was in portraying the dual problem of, on the one hand, misinformation spread by charlatans, and on the other, the lack of transparency from the authorities when it comes to communicating sensible information. This dual issue is perfectly illustrated in the televised debate scene between Laurence Fishburne and Jude Law. There are several layers to analyze in that scene. On one level, we see how the media makes the mistake of placing a scientist and a swindler on equal footing in the name of false balance. Then we have the scientist, played by Fishburne—a seasoned epidemiologist who, despite his expertise, doesn't know how to communicate effectively and believes that withholding some information will help avoid public panic. Finally, we have the conspiracy theorist, portrayed by Jude Law, who accuses scientists and the government of hiding the truth and claims that he alone is being honest. Is a fact that several of such "debates" have been aired on various networks known for sensationalist programming. With this scene, Burns aimed to show that fear spreads as quickly as the virus—and can be just as harmful.

A must for microbiologists.

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