CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Embodying Contagion: The Viropolitics of Horror and Desire in Contemporary Discourse, edited by Sandra Becker, Megen de Bruin-Molé and Sara Polak
Authors	Roberts, Maggie
Publication date	2023-12-20
Original Citation	Roberts, M. (2022) 'Embodying Contagion: The Viropolitics of Horror and Desire in Contemporary Discourse, edited by Sandra Becker, Megen de Bruin-Molé and Sara Polak', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 24, pp. 206-211. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.19
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.24.19
Rights	© 2022, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-17 10:29:11
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13973

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 24, 2022, pp. 206–11
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.19

Embodying Contagion: The Viropolitics of Horror and Desire in Contemporary Discourse, edited by Sandra Becker, Megen de Bruin-Molé and Sara Polak. University of Wales Press, 2021, 288pp.

Maggie Roberts

Two years into living our own dystopian narrative where Covid-19 has ravaged the world socially, politically, and economically, dismantling contemporary society and irrevocably altering ways of life as we knew them, people continue to use film and television as means of reprieve. Amongst this reinvestment in escapist media, however, reverberated the eerily premonishing contagion narratives of both the past and present. It is within (and among) these porous boundaries of fiction and fact that *Embodying Contagion: The Viropolitics of Horror and Desire in Contemporary Discourse* is located. The collection compiles a series of diverse essays that attempt to negotiate contagion and virality both within their mythological and symbolic contexts, but also examine how these allegorical understandings of infection produce material consequences, which primarily affect marginalised groups. According to Sandra Becker, one of the editors of the volume, "understanding these obsessions [with contagion] and their histories can help us to make sense of our current situation, and hopefully to recognise these patterns and prejudices more quickly in future moments of crisis" (2). The essays constitute a troubling manual for the ways in which outbreak narratives expose the failures of neoliberalism—marking what kind of bodies are valued, and which are monstrous, polluted and viral.

The book is divided into two main sections: "Epidemic Fantasies in Reality" and "Epidemic Realities in Fantasy", each containing five essays. While this separation serves a structural purpose in the physical text, its function is ultimately moot—and somewhat ironic—as both parts symbiotically feed off one another. In each chapter fact bleeds into fiction and vice versa, emphasising the inseparable nature of contagion as both a symbol and a social catalyst.

Chapter One commences in Russia. Peter Burger introduces the reader to Krokodil, a desomorphine-based opioid that is brutalising users across the country, inducing psychosis, and resulting in severe self-harm injuries. Dramatic images of open sores, raw flesh and barren bone begin to proliferate in news headlines across America and Europe. It is not just the home-brewed drug itself, which is addictive, but the visual nature of this epidemic. The shocking and sensationalised images contribute to the epidemic's contagious quality as "horror movie scenarios

© *Maggie Roberts*
This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited

[bleed] into concerns about real-world threats" (23). Here, the drug-affected body becomes monstrous, paradoxically marked as an object of pity and abhorrence.

Burger also touches on issues of xenophobia that play into Western understandings of contagion, fueled by the fact that Krokodil is a localised drug, primarily effecting The Balkans. Not only is the infected body disfigured, but it is exotic, creating two layers of dehumanisation through transnational and intermedial mediation. As Burger notes in his conclusion, these graphic images do not just display the problem, but perpetuate it—media itself becomes the contagious agent.

Like the Krokodil outbreak and the rapid spread of its visualisation via social media and news, *Embodying Contagion*'s second chapter, by Sarah Polak, examines the Ebola scare in the US in conjunction with government promotional material and didactic media. Simultaneous to the highly publicised Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa**,** the American Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a comic-based, informational pamphlet in 2011 encouraging Americans to practice "disaster preparedness" (41). Polak's essay, entitled "'Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic' and the Ebola Scare", argues that the seemingly humorous campaign significantly affected the ways Americans understood and reacted to the crisis abroad, posing pressing ethical questions related to whose lives are worth protecting and who is expendable (42).

The comic centres on a young white couple preparing for the encroaching zombie apocalypse. Though this premise was likely inspired by the zombie apocalypse narratives that were popular in film and television series at the time (e.g. *The Walking Dead*), this dramatised set-up, combined with fear-mongering media coverage of the Ebola virus, worked to unveil deep-rooted racist understandings of disease, infection and the zombified body.

Because the viral images of Ebola victims primarily consisted of black bodies, the CDC comic helped bolster visual associations with blackness and zombies—a connection which draws historical links to demeaning accounts of the slave trade, characterising enslaved Africans as "disposed and turned into a mindless, but threatening horde" (47). "Knowingly or not", Polak writes, "the text plays into a dynamic of dehumanizing victims of epidemics", within a racist context (43).

The collection's third chapter, "The Zika Virus, Ebola Contagion Narratives and US Obsessions with Securitising Neglected Infectious Diseases", continues the previous discussion of immunology rhetoric, but transitions from the popular media space to scientific discourse. The essay adopts a critical praxiological framework, which prioritises materiality "that illustrate[s] how particular theories are actually put into practice on contentious debates about public health 'emergency' or 'security settings'" (62). The authors focus on the militarised language which many medical journals mobilise to discuss the Ebola and Zika viruses, referring to these outbreaks as an "ongoing war with the 'fatal' disease" (73). The chapter posits that such framing aggrandises the risks of these diseases, subsequently deterring effective immunological work. The aggressive linguistic schema not only alienates the "exotic" bodies and sufferers of the virus—the monstrous other—but also privileges a combative means of handling the infection, rooted in securitisation, and militarisation.

Moving on from literal virality, the fourth chapter, written by Angela M. Smith, focuses on more abstract forms of infection, specifically affect and the digital. "An Affectionate Epidemic: How Disability Goes Viral on Social Media" considers the phenomenon of "like-farming", a Facebook scam where sock accounts steal photos of disabled individuals and create posts asking for users to like, comment and share on behalf of the pictured (86). These images provoke pity to bring online engagement to the original poster's post and make the poster money. Ableist affect becomes the viral operative, "travelling amongst social media users who 'catch' it and pass it along" (86). In many cases, those who like and share these stolen images believe they are promoting acceptance, sending well-wishes and spreading awareness for someone in a dire medical situation. However, these gullible individuals turn out to be carriers of this affective disease themselves.

Smith concludes her chapter by highlighting the ritualistic quality of this social media scam. Through the act of spreading these images on Facebook, no matter the intent, users are condemning people with disabilities, briefly engaging with their decontextualised image and launching them back into cyberspace without a trace. Smith refers to this as a way of "segregat[ing] potentially threatening difference", under the guise of empathy (87). Here, contagion feeds into ableist ends, whereby healthy bodies both provide (unsolicited) commiseration and fear the disabled body. The digital space, Smith concludes, allows the vitriol of ableism to spread more easily.

Part I of this collection concludes with a chapter discussing the intersection of the so-called "obesity pandemic" and the media coverage of the climate crisis. Provocatively titled, "'Fatties Cause Global Warming': The Strange Entanglement of Obesity and Climate Change", Francis Ray White's chapter investigates the apparent rhetorical entanglement of obesity and climate change, perpetuating the prejudicial view of fat bodies as contagious, pollutants and the embodiment of death. "Medicalized discourse of the 'obesity epidemic'", White argues, "already constitutes fat bodies as contaminated […] and contagious" (110). By likening climate change to larger bodies, which the author shows happening in a myriad of ways and within differing contexts, media promotes the discourse that fat bodies are diseased and justifies their subjugation and exclusion from dominant society.

The second section of *Embodying Contagion*, "Epidemic Realities in Fantasy", inverts the previous chapters, by starting with fictional contagion narratives as the primary object of study that then propagate from the imaginary to the real. Chapter Six, the first chapter of Part II, performs a close reading of *The Strain* (del Toro, 2014–17), an FX original television series detailing a vampiric viral outbreak brought on by a mysterious plane accident. The author of this chapter, and co-editor of the collection, Sandra Becker, claims that *The Strain* echoes a sense of anti-intellectualism which fueled the Trump administration's harmful policies in the US.

Drawing on American historian Richard Hofstadter's distinctions, Becker locates *The Strain* as reflecting two types of anti-intellectualism in the United States: "populist anti-elitism", which rejects higher education and prioritises experiential learning, and "unreflective instrumentalism", which prioritises "capitalistic profit" above all else (133).

Through a close reading of several episodes, Becker shows how the heroes of *The Strain* learn to distrust science, instead turning towards consolidating the white nuclear family unit and promoting white fatherhood as society's saving grace. Referencing Welsh socialist writer and critic Raymond Williams, the chapter sees the television series as "symptomatic of the 'structure of feeling' in the early twenty-first century United States, which is marked by a bleed-through between reality and fantasy" (148–49). Fantastical contagions ultimately erode the boundaries between stories and the real, questioning knowledge, scientific study and promoting anti-intellectualism across America.

Chapter Seven, authored by co-editor Megen de Bruin-Molé, pivots from analysing one particular series or film to looking at the evolving mythology and representation of zombies in popular fiction. Previous essays in the collection—specifically chapters Two and Three on the zombified body and their attached racialised rhetoric—noted that zombies are frequently used to represent and criticise the mindless consumer, sedated under the crushing pressure of capitalism. "The earliest zombie", Bruin-Molé writes, "is already a symbol of colonialism and capitalism gone wrong" (160). However, the chapter argues that this infamous figure is making an evolution, transitioning from a critique of neo-liberalism to being co-opted into its system.

Bruin-Molé puts emphasis on contemporary zombie texts such as *iZombie* (Thomas, 2015-19), *Santa Clarita Diet* (Fresco, 2017–19) and *Warm Bodies* (Levine, 2013), which privilege mindful consumption and the white body. One example the chapter uses to illustrate this shift from mindless to mindful zombies is the *iZombie* series, where Liv, the show's white female zombie protagonist, gains the memories, skills and experiences of those whose brains she eats. Consumption becomes a means of "sampling 'exotic' identities for the audience's entertainment" (173). In modern zombie narratives, less emphasis is put on the negative effects of consumer culture and, instead, the act of consumption becomes, itself, a spectacle. The author sees this as a troubling shift, in which a once subversive and somewhat radical figure is being interpolated into the very system it was created to critique.

Mica Hilson advances this evolved (or devolved) zombie archetype in Chapter Eight, "Networks, Desire and Risk Management in Gay Contagion Fiction", applying the zombified body to a queer studies framework. While traditional viral fiction aligns viewers or readers with survivors, gay erotic outbreak tales make audiences root for the virus.

In "Four Weeks Later" (Magus), a queer erotic short story based on the popular film *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2003), zombies are infected by a virus called Lust which makes the infected, as the name aptly suggests, lustful and queer. Readers are on the side of the virus, as catching the disease results in a continued erotic spectacle. This subverts traditional representations of the queer body as feared—a site of contagion stemming from the AIDS epidemic—because in the case of "Four Weeks Later", the virus is a pleasurable contraction. Hilson summarises this paradox as follows: "what makes gay erotic transformation fiction so distinctive is its complex ambivalence towards the contagion it represents and the individuals who seek to resist it" (193).

While Hilson touches on the influence of the AIDS epidemic on viral queer erotica, the collection's ninth chapter, by Astrid Haas, examines AIDS narratives more directly using two plays by Larry Kramer: *The Normal Heart* (1985) and *Destiny of Me* (1993). Haas analyses these

pieces to show how the image of the contagious gay male body "pursue[s] an ambivalent political agenda" (200). The fears of contagion in these plays express larger social fears regarding societal change. By making the queer body monstrous, and "stigmatis[ing] gay men as powerless outsiders," the two plays codify the very heteronormative systems they seek to obliterate (204). The most striking claim Hilson makes comes at the end of his essay when he states that the covert conservative values of these plays, such as the condemnation of casual sex and citing queer promiscuity as a reason for the spread of AIDs, predicts the "de-radicalisation of mainstream gay political activism since the 1990s" (213). Contagious ideologies of heteronormativity and other forms of subjugation thereby permeate not just diegetic boundaries, but temporal bounds as well. From 1985 to 2022, the feared queer body remains a troubling trope that justifies heteronormativity in the contemporary moment.

Embodying Contagion concludes with its most abstract form of contagion yet, one which connects each realm previously discussed—fictional, social, and temporal. Chapter Ten, written by Elana Gomel, examines contagious histories.

Conventional history is full of epidemic stories, from the Black Death to the Spanish Influenza to the onset of Covid-19, and time has been marked and altered by a series of viral travesties. However, in her chapter, "The Epidemic of History: Contagion of the Past in the Era of the Never-Ending Present", Gomel reworks history, understanding it as less wrapped up in fact and more invested in fiction. She argues that "fantastic tropes of monstrosity can do what historical fiction cannot: represent not just specific moments in the past but *pastness* itself" (220). Fantastic images of contagion represent social anxieties that haunt our histories. It is only through a reinvestment in these fictional viral narratives, Gomel argues, that we can understand and effectively address contagion in the present material world.

What *Embodying Contagion* seeks to construct is a rough sketch of the ways in which various media, both fantastical and didactic, negotiate with virality as both an oppressive and liberating force. From imagined narratives like film, television and theatre, to non-fiction sources like governmental promotional material, news coverage, political discourse and social media, the efficacy of contagion as a sociopolitical theme infects each of these realms.

While this collection was in the works long before the onset of our own contemporary outbreak narrative—the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic—*Embodying Contagion* acts as a potent reminder that the inequalities and injustice that were emphasised during Covid-19 are not new, but have been permeating the cultural unconscious for decades. It took a devastating immunological virus to stress the prevalent social virus of neoliberalism; so the question is, where do we go from here? If Becker et. al. are to be believed, it is through the fictional rhetoric of contagion—the fantastical—that the real can be saved. Hopefully it is not too late.

References

Boyle, Danny, director. *28 Days Later*. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2003.

Darabont, Frank, developer. *The Walking Dead*. AMC Networks and Entertainment One, 2010.

del Toro, Guillermo and Chuck Hogan, creators. *The Strain*. FX Productions, 2014.

Fresco, Victor, creator. *Santa Clarita Diet.* Kapital Entertainment, 2017.

Kramer, Larry, playwright. *The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me: Two Plays*. Grove Press, 2000.

Levine, Jonathan, director. *Warm Bodies.* Make Movies, 2013.

Magus. "New Story: 4 Weeks Later." *The Evolution Forum: Male Muscle Growth*, 2003.

Thomas, Rob, developer. *iZombie. Warner Bros*. Television, 2015.

Suggested Citation

Roberts, Maggie. "*Embodying Contagion: The Viropolitics of Horror and Desire in Contemporary Discourse*, edited by Sandra Becker, Megen de Bruin-Molé and Sara Polak." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 24, 2022, pp. 206–11. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.19.

Maggie Roberts is a graduate student studying Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. She previously completed her B.A at McGill University and has published in journals such as *Film Quarterly*. She will also be presenting at the upcoming Society for Cinema and Media Studies annual conference in April 2023. Her research focuses on avant-garde and experimental film and their intersections with body horror, examining how these cinema styles can sketch new affective representational models, specifically with regards to issues of gender, race and decolonial theory.