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Diseased Cinema: Plagues, Pandemics and Zombies in American Movies, by Robert Alpert, Merle Eisenberg and Lee Mordechai. Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 264 pp.

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The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the mass inequalities experienced in late-stage capitalism. This recent rediscovery of the sociological shifts enabled by disease makes *Diseased Cinema* an appropriately timely book. Wholly co-authored by Robert Alpert, Merle Eisenberg and Lee Mordechai, *Diseased Cinema* delves into a comprehensive history of the links between cinematic depictions of disease and the societal problems revealed by changing cinematic responses to these diseases. From silent depictions of diseased others in films as far back as 1922's *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau) through to apocalyptic visions of disease-ridden worlds seen in modern-day film, *Diseased Cinema* offers an accessible tour through the chronology of filmic disease.

Centred around the mainstream success of Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995), Alpert, Eisenberg and Mordechai divide their history of disease in US films into three sections. The first explores early cinematic depictions of disease in films from 1950 to 1980, with case studies of important films such as *Panic in the Streets* (Elia Kazan, 1950) and *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero,1968). The second section delves into *Outbreak* and the transitional period of disease movies from this era, looking specifically at the changes in depictions of disease containment, and the introductions of fast zombies as carriers of disease. Concluding this historical section of the book is a breakdown of the apocalyptic disease films of the modern era. This section explores the renewed focus on individual choice in the disease film, and the possibilities for the renewal of society following an apocalypse triggered by an out-of-control virus.

Proceeding from this chronological breakdown, the book examines changing attitudes toward disease through case studies of two film series: the first being a sequence of remakes of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, Don Siegel), up to 2019. These remakes offer a look at how reaction to infection tends to change within narratives which appear similar to one another at first glance. The second series, the *Resident Evil* film series (Paul W.S Anderson. 2002–16), offers a look at a franchise whose inconsistent depictions of disease enable a look at the contemporaneous mainstream depictions of disease applied by each film in the series. *Diseased Cinema* concludes with a quick glance at the politically charged landscape of the Covid-19 pandemic and the comforts of the filmic narratives offered at the time, while simultaneously acknowledging the inability of mainstream cinema to fully predict the disparate range of suffering experienced during this recent pandemic.

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The first section of the book, titled "Early Disease Movies: American Norms and Containment" readily engages with the recurring theme of the diseased other in the context of films released in the mid twentieth century through to the release of *Virus* (Kinji Fukasaku, *Fukkatsu no hi*) in 1980. This chapter delves into the common origin of cinematic disease from this era being attributed to foreign carriers, and the often racist plots that stem from this trope. Many examples of this trope are provided throughout the chapter, highlighting the disease films of the era as undeniably problematic. These xenophobic portrayals of the origin of disease are paired with the affirmation of American values found in the plots of the films described. These plots advocate for state-managed capitalism according to the authors, as well as for the necessary sacrifices that individual characters must make for this status quo to be upheld. Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* is offered as the quintessential disease film of the era, combining the typical approach of the time to state-managed capitalism with the foregrounding of the disease's spread to America being the consequence of foreign immigration. While the chapter's engagement with other academic texts is limited, effective examples are given to back up the analysis offered. The chapter offers a brief look at Bergman's *Seventh Seal* (1958) as an example of a non-American film that advocates for individual levels of empathy and faith as a more effective means of mitigating the threat of disease than relying on capitalist structures. The chapter continues with an analysis of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which the authors argue is the first disease film to offer an "expression of discomfort with the social norms of contemporary American society" (12), a trend which would spill from this film into pictures such as *The Crazies* (George Romero,1973) and *The Andromeda Strain* (Robert Wise, 1971). This chapter concludes with a look at *Virus*, a Japanese production chosen as it became one of the first films to offer a filmic scenario in which the disease gives way to an apocalyptic ending, offering a bridging look into the films of future decades in which these apocalyptic visions of disease would become the norm.

Chapter Two, "Disease Movies in Transition: Globalization and Imagined Containment", picks up this history in the mid 1990's at a nexus between a rise in global fears of disease following the worldwide spread of the AIDS virus and greater connectivity further solidifying the ease of access diseases have to channels of transmission in the modern world. The authors link the changing tropes of the genre during this period, which depicted responsibility for protection against disease change from a governmental to individual level. As part of a further look at *Outbreak*, the chapter illustrates the common thread seen in films of the era in which nostalgic plots of disease containment contrasted with the new global reality of diseases which can no longer be simply cured or removed from society. While academic engagement remains sparse throughout this chapter, the insights into the relationship between changing attitudes toward disease containment and the changing depictions of disease in films of the era continue to engage. The authors then turn towards the post-millennium zombie film in analyses of *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and the *Dawn of the Dead* remake (Zack Snyder, 2004) which link new depictions of faster zombies with a world in which communication technologies offered faster means of informational spread. The chapter notes the increased pessimism present in films from this period by addressing the common lack of a "greater good" for characters to strive toward, with an acknowledgement that "by attributing the disease to human nature and insisting upon [individual] heroics, the film offers no alternative and instead endorses capitalism in which each person is alone and out for him or herself" (72). This pessimistic turn in the genre continues through analyses of George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005) and Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (2007), culminating in the apocalyptic ending of *28 Weeks Later* (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2007), a sequel

whose full embrace of an apocalyptic takeover by disease would be further developed in the films discussed in later chapters.

Chapter Three, "Post-Apocalyptic Disease Movies: Pandemics and Posthumanity'", looks at a modern wave of films that accept catastrophic disease as a given and instead focus on reactions to these apocalyptic pandemics. In these films, all hope in social norms and institutions has evaporated, leaving the individual to wade through these infected landscapes alone. The chapter's analyses of *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) and *Black Death* (Christopher Smith, 2010), respectively, situate faith at the forefront of their disease narratives. *Children of Men* presents individual faith and sacrifice as an alternative to the failures of science and capitalism. *Black Death* on the other hand revels in a pessimism that attributes disease to the failures of human nature and institutions in a narrative devoid of hope. The chapter moves then to its main focus, a spotlight on *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011) and the 2010's revival of the *Planet of the Apes* franchise (1968–2024). Alpert, Eisenberg and Mordechai remark that *Contagion'*s fascination with familial connection disguises an undercurrent of regressive gender politics which punishes female characters for sexual promiscuity. The book once again affirms the failure of governmental bodies in aiding to combat the disease and instead prioritises individual action and family bonds. The critique of regressive gender politics continues through the book's dissection of zombie films *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013) and *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009), as both films place the ability to guide humanity past the breakdown of modern infrastructure in the heroic patriarchal hands of the film's respective lead characters. The chapter's concluding focus on the *Planet of the Apes* franchise offers astute observations into the franchise's storied history, and how the older films from the twentieth century "focus on nuclear war as opposed to the new trilogy's focus on disease [which] reflects each period's assumptions about the causes of the End Times" (100). The chapter puts forward the idea that the prequel/reboot films propose a posthuman world for apes to rebuild society, before describing the apes' eventual recovery of a human corruption that makes them no better than the humans whose extinction enabled their ascension.

Chapter Four "Remaking Humanity: The Body Snatchers" marks the book's move away from a strict history of the genre toward a detailed look at the series of remakes of Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers* (1955). This chapter demonstrates an acknowledgment of changing values surrounding the spreading of disease over the past seventy years, even if the films' plots remain largely similar. Each of the five films discussed revolves around the spread of an infectious alien-life form that targets and replicates humans, except for the human-created life form seen in the most recent film, *Little Joe* (Jessica Hausner, 2019). Each analysis delves into the different fears represented by the replicating life forms, whether they represent the spreading of conformity in the original 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the military's ability to enforce such conformity in 1993's *Body Snatchers* (Abel Ferrara), or the fear that such conformity may actually generate a more equal, satisfied society in *The Invasion* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2007), and *Little Joe*. As the authors observe, "[t]he remakes of Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers* transition over the course of the past 70 years from the blissful ignorance of a segregated world in which the white, heterosexual male represents the norm to a post-cultural identity world in which everyone consciously chooses to be the same and in which capitalism enables and benefits from that sameness" (132).

In its second analysis of a film series, the book looks at Paul W.S Anderson's critically panned yet financially successful *Resident Evil* series. The chapter claims that the original *Resident Evil* (2002) and its first few sequels use the bio-engineered T-virus to offer a hollow critique of corporations while offering no alternative or criticism of the power structures that enable these institutions. The chapter also critiques the latter films in the series starting with 2007's *Extinction* (Russell Mulcahy), which switches the setting to an apocalyptic landscape in keeping with the trends in disease film at the time. These latter films set up an imagined posthuman landscape, in which the evil Umbrella corporation strive to create a "better" world, which the authors describe as shallow given that no description of "better" is given in any of the latter films in the series. This chapter makes interesting observations on how these films change their generic paradigms to reflect trends in the genre as the series progresses, most notably in the change from the supposed containment of the T-virus in 2002 giving way to the apocalyptic diseased landscapes of the latter films, along with remarks on the changes from shambling, slow zombies in the first film to swift mutant monsters in the final films. Despite these observations, much of this chapter consists of plot breakdowns of the series' six films without offering much in the way of academic discussion or attention to the films' virus. While the chapter acknowledges the general lack of academic attention given to this film series, its focus on plot breakdown over theoretical engagement makes the contribution toward filling that research gap a minute one.

One of *Diseased Cinema*'s most interesting and timely chapters is saved for last. "Movie Myths: The COVID-19 Pandemic" examines the intersection between the cultural expectations for real-life pandemics as set by disease films, and the reality experienced during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The chapter looks at the spikes in online popularity surrounding films such as *Contagion* and *Outbreak*. The authors acknowledge the role that these films provided in offering a form of cinematic coping mechanism through tales of pandemics which go on to be contained and overcome. There is a simultaneous acknowledgment however that fictional tales of global disease takeover also inspired fear and panic over the false notion that Covid may induce the total breakdown of society as seen in apocalyptic disease pictures. This final chapter conveys the common use of filmic imagery as shorthand for discussions surrounding day to day life during the pandemic, such as Britain commonly likening their scenes of deserted urban spaces to scenes from *28 Days Later*. The chapter also critiques the often troubling aspects to the global pandemic response that have not been anticipated in film, such as the very real occurrence of virus profiteering which enabled the wealthy to exponentially increase their capital while those less well-off were forced to work in dangerous environs. All the book's forementioned filmic examples failed to predict the fact that "(e)conomics and individual choice, not empathy or basic public health, drove America's response to COVID" (174). With a strong engagement with recent Covid literature and relevant observations which tie disease films to current events, the final chapter of *Diseased Cinema* stands as one of the strongest.

Diseased Cinema offers the reader a multifaceted look at the history of the filmic virus. The book's detailed chronology does a great job of tracking the three major paradigm shifts in the genre, giving detailed analyses of relevant cinematic examples along the way. This chronology is bolstered by two case studies which cement the ideas provided in the previously given history of the genre. Insights into how characters react to these viruses depending on the real-world contexts of American capitalism makes for strong connection between the history of the genre and the history of late-stage American capitalism itself. The book's breakdowns of its cited films are

accessible and filled with observant criticisms by the book's three authors. The book's fantastically relevant final chapter highlights fascinating connections between filmic disease and the recent Covid-19 pandemic and is sufficient to make *Diseased Cinema* recommended reading by itself. This brilliant final chapter caps off an entertainingly observant study of filmic infection.

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Little Joe. Directed by Jessica Hausner, BFI Distribution, 2019.

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Kane Geary O'Keeffe is a PhD researcher in Film and Screen Media at University College Cork. Their PhD project examines the myriad ways in which diegetic screen technologies have responded to the recent COVID-19 pandemic within the context of the horror genre. Their research explores the intersections between horror studies in film and video games with studies in gender, online cultures, and technology.