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Urban Atmospheres in Pandemic Times

Between Science Fiction and Reality

Fatma MRAD¹

Abstract. March 2020, I find myself in confinement at home feeling a myriad of intense emotions with the impression of living the scenario of the film *Contagion* by Steven Soderbergh (2011). I am thinking about this anticipation thriller that describes - or predicts? - similar atmospheres to those that the world is currently going through. The aim of my proposal is to explore some links between the filmic atmospheres of epidemic horror films and urban atmospheres of our daily lives through the emotions they arouse. Through this example that we will analyze, we will discuss whether it is possible to consider science fiction cinema as an investigative tool on the way in which contemporary environmental and social changes affect the sensitive world, its atmospheres and the way of living them.

Keywords. Urban Atmospheres, Filmic Atmospheres, Epidemic Horror Films, Emotions

The Transformation of the Sensitive Experience of the City

The Covid-19 health crisis that has recently hit the world was qualified as the worst crisis to which the humanity was confronted since the Second World War. Considered as common enemies of humanity, epidemics are disrupting our relationship with the world. Within a few weeks, our lifestyles have been completely jostled, half of the world's population has been confined.

The most disturbing aspect of this extraordinary event was the fact that our awareness was brutally heightened. No anticipation was planned beforehand, the unpredictable blew up in our faces and the world was disarmed in the face of its threat. And yet, films, which never cease to feed our imagination, have already warned us, offering us the spectacle of the speed of the spread of the contagion, the geographical extent and the impact that an epidemic can cause on our relationship with the world.

Priscilla Wald², a specialist in contagion studies, speaks of "epidemic horror films," referring to a film corpus regrouping films that describe an epidemic process of contagion; in her book *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, she postulates that these films would allow us to better understand the interconnectedness of our world.

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2. Literary critic and professor at Duke University. In her book *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), she explores the methods used to describe disease by highlighting the social impact of disease through the creation of fictional narratives.

Hugo Clémot³, also a specialist in contagion studies, postulates in his article “*Une lecture des films d’horreur épidémique*” that these films would lead to a form of skepticism about the world.

Indeed, by opening up infinite possibilities of existence, they liberate and nourish our imaginations but also our perception of our environment. By confronting us with our reality, filmmakers “like poets, seek more to restore presences of the world than to create representations of it”⁴.

On the other hand, the diegetic cities in epidemic horror films provide the built environment and spatial organization that reflect the dysfunction of societies that have been affected by a virus. The work of the filmmaker reveals an unprecedented atmospheric potential. It transforms cities that were once home to ordinary and rather peaceful lives into worrisome, even threatening, cities.

With the aim of highlighting the potential of filmic atmospheres to report and reveal new aspects of our urban atmospheres, the objective of this article is to attempt a reflection on the transformation of urban space that this coronavirus epidemic has induced through a comparative descriptive approach between the change in our daily lives and the atmosphere that epidemic horror films portray. To this end, we propose an analysis of some scenes from Steven Soderbergh’s film *Contagion* (2011) using ambiances as a method of investigation. The aim here is not to provide a film critique but to weave connections between fiction and reality in order to contribute to the reflection on how contemporary environmental and societal changes affect the sensitive world, its ambiances and the way they are experienced.

How do epidemic horror films contribute to our apprehension of the world in the event of a health crisis? And what can they teach us about our relationship to the city? Can we talk about the influence of our emotions and feelings in this report? In what way does the quality of our presence in the world and especially in our cities depend on our emotions?

These films project disturbing possible scenarios using plausible aesthetic representations of a world affected by phenomena beyond our understanding.

If we consider Cavell’s thesis, in his book *Pursuits of Happiness - The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, which states that the reason we adhere to a film is that it has something to teach us about our world and the order of things, we can be interested in the contribution of epidemic horror films as a tool for reflecting on our urban condition in times of crisis.

To argue in favor of this thesis, we will study some sequences from the film *Contagion*, which is particularly remarkable for the disturbing similarity of its actions to the recent events we have been through, namely the health crisis created by the Covid-19 virus.

This feature film describes the spread of a pandemic caused by a virus called MEV-1, which appeared first in China by contaminating a pig with a bat virus followed by genetic recombination. Its mode of transmission is close to that of coronavirus and influenza viruses responsible for severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

Let’s go back to one of the highlights of the film: the opening scene.

3. Professor of philosophy at the University of Tours, associated with the Centre for Contemporary Philosophy at the Sorbonne, specialist in film philosophy and author of several articles on the cinema of horror.

4. Maury, 2011, p. abstract.

First of all, we can see that the narrative scheme of the film as well as the question of the spread of the virus and its mode of contagion seem to be exposed from the first scene. Indeed, the narrative scheme follows a chronological breakdown by day of contagion. We are directly in the second day of the spread of the virus, the scene begins with the coughing sound of a young woman from Minnesota returning home from Chicago airport, she is back from a business trip in Hong Kong. A close-up on the bowl of dried fruit that the woman has touched, then another on her credit card that the waitress retrieves to make the payment gives us a small glimpse on the spread of the contagion which, obviously, can be by fomite⁵.

This scene is directly followed by sequences that fragment the filmic space by showing scenes of the first affected people all over the world: Hong Kong, London, Minneapolis, Tokyo. We will return later to the scene that explains the transmission of the virus in these cities.

This fragmented aesthetics specific to films allows us to travel from one country affected by the virus to another. This sequence is striking in this respect, since its function is to introduce the chain of transmission and to set the spatio-temporal context of the fiction. The property of the medium to articulate several spatialities through editing and teleporting us from one place to another shows the causal relationship between the events.

Another scene sheds light on how the virus has spread in the cities of different countries. Indeed, a WHO⁶ epidemiologist suspecting the American to be patient zero returns on a surveillance video filming the woman in a casino in Hong Kong, which allows us to link the first affected cases. The American woman participating in a poker game contaminates the Japanese player next to her, who travels to Beijing a few days later, blowing into his dice before he throws them on the table. Then, on her way to the bar for a cocktail, she calls an old friend and offers to meet him in Chicago since she will have a stopover there before returning home to Minneapolis. While picking up cocktails at the bar, she forgets her phone and an Ukrainian woman, who went to London a few days later, notices it and hands it to her. The waiter clearing her glass will be the first Chinese she has contaminated.

This scene films the microscopic, i.e. the virus which is invisible to the naked eye, the sequence here reflects the contagion. By placing the camera as close as possible to the individuals, this scene emphasizes the fact that our most insignificant gestures can be threatening. It seems that the film has the capacity to let the most banal movements draw attention to them and allow them to offer themselves as a spectacle to us. Moreover, wouldn't the images of this last scene lead us to think that "the interactions that make us sick are also those that constitute us as a community"?⁷

In another scene, Steven Soderbergh shows us a Minneapolis emptied of its inhabitants and means of transport; the streets no longer resonate with the conversations of pedestrians; the roads are deserted. An almost apocalyptic atmosphere resulting from an unprecedented health crisis. From then on, we can see that a health catastrophe creates new relationships between human beings and their environment. Indeed,

5. A fomite is any inanimate object (also called passive vector) that, when contaminated with or exposed to infectious agents (such as pathogenic bacteria, viruses or fungi), can transfer disease to a new host.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fomite>

6. World Health Organization.

7. Wald, 2008, p. 2.

these films explore the world we have in front of us and make us see that the city, which constitutes our social environment and place of interactions, is fully constructed when its users make it exist through a logic of appropriation of urban space by actions, the simplest everyday gestures, which normally go unnoticed, and which would manifest the harmony of what Kracauer calls, in his book *Theory of film: the redemption of physical reality*, “the flow of life.” From this, we deduce that “the place is based on the idea of an active subject who must constantly weave the complex links that give him his identity while defining his relationship to his environment”⁸.

In fact, during the Covid-19 health crisis that we are experiencing, our daily life has become punctuated by new notions that were foreign to us: confinement, barrier gestures, the use of masks, physical distancing, quarantine. By isolating the individual and cutting him off from his world, the only possible means of social interaction is now through a screen.

In view of the new circumstances, the typical behaviors of urban users have changed and harmony has broken down. Inhabitants who used to take over the terraces of bars and restaurants, enjoying the good weather in society with serene carelessness, are now suspicious of each other and content to stock up on food and go home. The urban experience is lived in a completely different way, being outside, in the city has become synonymous with risk; the city becomes an unknown and enigmatic space. Our relationship to the world has literally been turned upside down.

In reality, urban materiality has remained unchanged, yet its atmosphere has been transformed, a heavy, even claustrophobic atmosphere hovers over the cities. This reflection highlights the fact that urban space is conceived through forms but also through typical behaviors that have a considerable effect on the atmosphere. The urban atmosphere during these crises pushes us to reexamine the balance of the collective life of an urban population. Thus, we can postulate that health crises affect the sensitive world, its ambiances and the way of living them.

It can be seen that the narrative pattern is very similar to the course of events linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, firstly by the mode of contagion of the virus, which is respiratory and by fomite, and secondly by the crisis management which had a considerable impact on the general atmosphere in the cities affected by the virus.

Arriving on day eighteen, after the Emergency Operations Center drew up the crisis plan, the authorities decided to close the airports, mobilize the National Guards to block the roads, stop public transportation and close the Board of Trade and schools. The patients have been isolated and those who may have been in contact with the virus were quarantined.

We watch the urban wanderings of Mitch who, after losing his wife and stepson to the virus, is now thinking only of his daughter’s survival. Fear and despair are written on his face as well as on the urban space that he crosses.

The horror reaches its peak when the fear of the inhabitants turns into panic. They rush to banks, gas stations, food stores and pharmacies. Thus, little by little, the long queues in front of the shops turn into crowds of inhabitants who lose patience and turn to violence. They jostle each other, break up, vandalize the shops to get supplies and set fire to the streets to show their dissatisfaction with the state’s policy in dealing with the crisis.

8. *Berdoulay & Entrikin, 1998, p. 118.*

These images convey the fear and anguish of city dwellers in the face of the unknown, the feeling conveyed is similar that of having to deal with a war against an invisible enemy.

Appalled by the animosity of the people and by this collective paranoia, Mitch abandons the idea of making food supplies and prefers to go back home. On his way, he drives through the city and shows us the anarchy that this health crisis has created.

Each fragment of the city that the film brings to our attention exposes the chaos that society is experiencing. Streets, successions of buildings, squares, commercial buildings: bits of the city reflect an apocalyptic atmosphere where time seems petrified. The urban space presented to the spectator is fully productive of meaning and emotions, it is a reflection of his anguished and disoriented society. The representation of the city as a place of perdition reinforces the horror and the dramatic effect of the situation. This scene highlights the influence of the emotional relationship to the urban space on the perception and representation of the city by underlining the porosity of human beings to their urban space. Thus, by emphasizing the interactions between body, emotions and environment, the epidemic horror films expose the way in which the atmosphere transforms us and how we transform it individually and collectively.

The different aesthetic features of this scene of urban chaos come together to express the horror of the epidemic scenario, bringing to a climax the anxieties of a society whose emblem is the city. As the matrix of the narrative, the film city offers an image of what awaits the city dweller in his confrontation with the world during a pandemic by sending back to him the image of his own behavior in the city. In short, such a health catastrophe reveals to us the importance of the active part played by the users of the urban environment, which strongly affects the sensitive world.

In sum, the use of fiction to illustrate experiences of global health crises exposes our human need for security and makes us see the invisible: the fragility of our mastery of these phenomena as well as that of our daily safety and comfort.

At the crossroads where filmic and real-life atmospheres meet, this analysis highlights how sensitive the urban environment is and how it can be reactive to societal transformations. That is to say that our projections in the city where we evolve are in close connection with our emotions and feelings that allow us to qualify the quality of the atmosphere of the place.

Thanks to the richness of its potential, the film medium makes us attentive to the sensitive world and the quality of our presence in the world. Epidemic horror films allow us to spot the sensitive characters of the city and the way in which it affects us and the way in which we affect it in return through our emotions and our actions/ behavior.

Such horror films reveal the unprecedented ambient factors in the transformation of the sensitive experience of urban space.

Finally, can we say that the city is defined not only by its urban forms but also by the movements that animate it, which themselves translate the emotions of its users? And finally, could the city really have fixed characteristics if it is constantly metamorphosing according to the experience of its users?

What can we conclude from this, except that the virus is perhaps not the most dangerous enemy? Isn't it a transformation of the atmosphere that is in itself monstrous?

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