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## DUALITY IN NOVELS AND FILMS ABOUT PANDEMICS

**Abstract:** *Both literature and films have been dealing with a disease outbreak for a long time. This paper will deal with the metaphorical aspect of viruses especially in the view of today's pandemics. First, a brief overview of such novels and films will be given starting with Daniel Defoe and his A Journal of the Plague Year and films such as Twelve Monkeys, Contagion, Outbreak.*

*The emphasis will not be on the virus itself but on its metaphorical meaning and the duality in novels and films – e.g. between good and evil, order and chaos. The paper will mostly focus on the novels The Stand by Stephen King, and the film Twelve Monkeys. The main idea which connects them all would be a virus as a metaphor, the end of humanity, and everlasting fight between good and evil.*

**Keywords:** *pandemics, fiction, film, The Stand, Twelve Monkeys*

### 1. Introduction

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there have already been several health crises starting with the Spongiform Encephalopathy, known as mad cow disease, then SARS in 2003, avian flu in 2005, influenza A pandemic in 2009, Ebola epidemic, Zika, West Nile, SARS and finally SARS-corona virus-2 (Payne, Kelly et al, 2020: 518).

Due to all these epidemics, fiction dealing with epidemics has become more relevant and a frequent subject of not just novels, but also films and video games.

Doherty and Giordano (2020: 1) mention that the current interest in pandemic fiction is the result of people's interest in knowing what could happen and the reflection on what is going on. Thus, both fiction and movies balance the factual and fictitious helping the readers/the viewers to perceive the familiar through the presentation of the unfamiliar. This difference between the facts and fiction is also a duality in fiction/movies.

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The same authors insist that in any portrayal of a pandemic, fear is central and a reminder of human vulnerable character showing that we care and want to protect. They also mention that the worst source of fear is getting in contact with a rumour.

Pandemic movies/fiction represent a struggle for authority between a scientist and a politician.

The next chapter will be dealing with the history of the epidemics in fiction.

## **2. A historical overview of epidemic fiction**

A lot of works of fiction have shown the uneasiness of society in the face of possibility of an epidemic with devastating consequences, starting already in the Old and New Testaments (plague), ancient times (Lucretius, Ovid, Sophocles) (Riva, 2014: 1752).

In most of these works plague was observed as the results of sin – e.g. in Homer's *Iliad* and Sophocles' *Oedipus* (Riva, 2014: 1753).

Some authors, like the Greek historian Thucydides (460-395 BC) and the Latin poet Lucretius (99-55 BC) (Riva, 2014: 1753), concentrated on the fear of contagion among the public when describing the plague, indicating that plague was caused by the loss of social conventions and increased selfishness.

The same disease was also present in the Middle Ages in works of *The Decameron* by Boccaccio (1313-1375) and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* where the human behaviour in such terrible times led to moral and physical death (Grigsby, 2004: 39).

However, the focus in this paper will be on novels which are also concerned with duality, particularly between good and evil. One of the first such novels is *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe. It deals with the epidemic of bubonic plague in 1665 and though at first it seems like a historical account of the event, there are a lot of fictional elements (Riva, 2014: 1755).

Mary Shelley in *The Last Man* (1826) and Jack London in *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) deal with the fictional epidemic (Riva, 2014: 1755). In both novels human population is almost extinct and particularly *The Scarlet Plague* uses duality between the past and the present and questions the values of Western culture, showing the ancestral fear of humans toward infectious diseases

(Riva, 2014: 1754). After the plague, the few survivors fought for survival which represents a criticism against the society, the primary culprit of the world's destruction. This novel predicted the Spanish influenza of 1918-1920 which also raised the fear of the end of the civilization. The third similar novel is *The Plague* (1947) by Camus which deals with the bubonic plague but also, as the previous two novels, is an allegory of the social crisis, in this case, World War II (Holgado and Perdiguero-Gil, 2011: 45).

Carroll (2020) mentions some other novels dealing with pandemics: *The Beauty Salon* (1994) by Mario Bellatin, *The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance* (1995) by Laurie Garrett, *Blindness* (1997) by Jose Saramago, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood, *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History* (2005), *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy and *World War Z* (2006) by Max Brooks.

Later in the twentieth century, the theme of epidemics has become even more important in fiction. Foertsch (2017: 4-5) mentions that the epidemic has established itself as one of the most important narrative myths of postmodernity, thus becoming the key for the interpretation of historical, social, and political phenomena like the Cold War or the AIDS pandemic. However, London's *The Scarlet Plague* was an inspiration for other novels, such as *Earth Abides* by George R. Stewart (1949), *I Am Legend* by Matheson (1954) and *The Stand* by King in 1978, as well as some movies such as *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), and *Contagion* (2011) (Foertsch, 2017: 6).

The increased interest in both fiction and films about pandemics especially now, during COVID 19 outbreak, helps people in better handling the psychological effects than those who do not have the experience with this genre. Such novels and films enable people to see and understand the skills relevant to these situations (Scrivner et al, 2021). Also, numerous works represent the criticism of contemporary society and of individual alienation processes.

Belling (2009: 57) thinks that fiction about pandemic may be divided into two groups – those novels written by authors who were living at the time of the pandemic (e.g. Katherine Anne Porter's novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*) and the second one which includes historical fiction trying to reconstruct the accounts of the pandemic (e.g. Myla Goldberg's *Wickett's Remedy*). According

to Belling (2009: 58), the characters in these novels go away from the chaotic world into their private chaos caused by the illness, in this case, the flu. She also mentions that many accounts of the Spanish influenza show that the illness distorted perception and most patients had delirium. Another of her remarks is that in *The last Town on Earth*, Mullen makes the body / mind division explicit, thus using the duality. The main character, Philip, becomes a microcosm of the town of Commonwealth, where the inhabitant of his body is the mind, thus making the comparison with the town.

However, there is a third group of fiction which includes novels dealing with the pandemic as a metaphor for other issues occurring in the society. This group also includes Stephen King's *The Stand* which will be used in this paper for the analysis of the duality.

### 2.1. Duality in the Stephen King's *The Stand*

Stephen King's *The Stand* is an apocalyptic novel about the outbreak of a virus which kills many people. However, those who survive, decide to form a new society, opting either for the good or for the evil.

Apocalyptic fiction allows the reader to examine isolation, desperation, and frustration within society (Compura, 1998: 11). Most of the population dies of the terminal virus called "Captain Trips" – which escaped from a government laboratory. The emphasis is not on what happened at the lab or why the virus escaped, but King focuses primarily on the near annihilation and reformation of society (Compura, 1998: 4).

Winter (1982: 56) claims that the novel brings 'dual life' or 'dual landscape' which can be found in most Gothic fiction. Therefore, the duality present in this novel enables the reader to investigate the individual's views of American society. The world before the superflu is compared to the desolate post-apocalyptic world. Destruction of the old world is necessary so that a new world can appear.

Apart from the duality of landscapes, there is also a duality of emotions. After the apocalypse, there is hope of renewal.

One of the reasons for the duality is the structure of the society. There should be an authority on one side and subordinates on the other side. Human beings need society and

society needs power structure although this structure might again create a new virus like Captain Trip.

The post-apocalyptic world offers two types of structure: a good one, represented by Mother Abigail and an evil one, represented by Randall Flagg. The characters are attracted to them by their dreams which provide them with the direction. Those who opt for the good go to Boulder, Colorado, while the others go to Las Vegas, the town which has always represented vice. Flagg's Las Vegas does not differ much from Hitler's Germany – anybody who has a different opinion from Flagg is eliminated.

Duality can also be seen in the genre and references made to other genres. Hitchcock (2014: 11/12) gives several such examples – e.g. when King alludes to H.G. Wells, writing “the night was yellow and orange and feverish with flames... it reminded [The Trashcan Man] of a Classic book he had owned as a child, an adaptation of H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (in Hitchcock, 2014: 12). Hitchcock (2014: 12) also mentions other writers that King referred to though they are not representatives of his preferred genres, like William Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll, and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Even the structure of the novel has a duality characteristic. The first half deals with the spread of the virus and destinies of the main characters, while the second half shows what happens to those characters after the virus and their choices regarding good and evil.

Another example of duality in the novel is the love that Harold Lauder feels towards two completely different women – Frannie Goldsmith, his everlasting childhood desire and Nadine Cross, a woman placed by Flagg as temptation when his love to Frannie could not have been realised. These two women are quite opposite – Frannie is good, understanding, and pregnant with her ex-boyfriend. On the other hand, Nadine is a bit wild. She is a virgin and does not want to lose her virginity before she meets Flagg. She is a tool in his hands, trying to seduce Harold so that he fulfils the tasks given by Flagg (destroying Boulder and their committee).

There is also duality between two characters. The first one is Glen Bateman, who dies before the final battle between the good and the evil. He can be compared to society since he is isolated and destroyed, thus symbolising the end of the old

society. The second one is Lloyd Henreid, Flagg's right hand, who is loyal to him to the very end. When Flagg's kingdom starts going downhill, and many people start abandoning him, Lloyd stays by his side. One of his explanations was, "He told me more of the truth than anyone else bothered to in my whole lousy life." (King, 1978: 1057). Though Flagg got him out of prison, he continued living in another prison, the prison of evil, temptation, constructed by Flagg. He dies in the same fire as another Mother Abigail's man, Larry Underwood, showing another duality destroyed by the same destiny.

Also, Nick Andros, a deaf-mute and Tom Cullen, a mentally retarded man, represent a duality. They continue their voyage together though they cannot communicate. Nick Andros communicates in writing, while Tom cannot read. Despite that, they remain very good friends till the very end.

Naturally, the last duality between characters is present between Randall Flagg and Mother Abigail. They are both a kind of supernatural beings who first appear in dreams of the survivors trying to lure them into joining their cause. Mother Abigail wants the people to meet her at her home in Nebraska to travel together to Boulder, while Flagg coaxes people into joining him in Las Vegas. It could be argued that Flagg is present in the form of a technological civilisation which was responsible for the Superflu outbreak. On the other hand, Mother Abigail is more connected to nature, the land. Another contrast between them is that Flagg is a young, white male, while Mother Abigail is old, black female – thus representing three underprivileged groups. Though Mother Abigail is treated like a supernatural being, she has a lot of human characteristics shown in her realisations of sins. She also emphasises the importance of traditional values, particularly friendship and faith. She also thinks that she was sent by God comparing herself to Noah and Moses. Moslemy and Pishkar (2018: 147) also think that when she returns from her trip into the wilderness, she returns completely exhausted, looking like a mummy, genderless and ageless, representing not one person but many. In the similar way, at the end of the novel, Flagg is destroyed by the bomb and only his clothes remain.

Duality is also present in some characters themselves who change their opinion. The first example is Whitney, one of Flagg's supporters, who started doubting him when Flagg began encountering problems. Apart from starting to doubt Flagg and

trying to convert Lloyd, he dared to confront Flagg, when he was about to crucify Larry and Ralph, claiming that it was not what Americans do. Therefore, he had to be annihilated.

The second example is Donald Elbert, the Trashcan Man. Trash had always been obsessed with lighting fires in mailboxes. In Vegas, he was accepted for what he was. Realising the falsehood of Flagg's charms and triggered by the sentence, "People who play with fire wet the bed, Trash" (King, 1978: 1005) he wires everything with explosives, killing all of the pilots. In this way, Flagg's plans to bomb the Free Zone were made impossible. Still, Trash tries to redeem himself in Flagg's eyes and goes to the desert where he finds the atom bomb. He wants to bring it back to Las Vegas and comes at the same time when Larry and Ralph are about to be crucified and Whitney is speaking out against Flagg. Therefore, in a way, Trash has redeemed himself. Though Trash found the bomb for the wrong reasons, he still can tell the difference between right and wrong, thus ending the threat from Las Vegas.

### 3. The overview of epidemics in films

Epidemics, due to their morbidity and mortality are attractive for films as they are dramatic and destructive and frequently metaphors for evil. Therefore, they enable us to explore different aspects of disease and death at various levels, like political, cultural, emotional. Holgado and Perdiguero-Gil (2011: 45) mention films with cholera cases, yellow fever, diphtheria, typhus, and measles. Such films show the epidemics resulting from coloniality but also a distinction between urban and rural environments.

A group of films deals with viruses with fatal outcomes – for example, *28 Days Later* (2002) where a virus escapes from a lab and sweeps through England. *Quarantine* (2008) is a film where a mysterious virus turns humans into bloodthirsty killers, while *Carriers* (2009) is about a few virus survivors who are trying to find their new life. *Contagion* (2011) is about the epidemics and the fight of people to survive. (Riva, 2014: 1757).

Other films range from those dealing with vampires (e.g. *Nosferatu* 1922, *I am Legend* 2007) and zombies (e.g. *Night of the Living Dead* 1968) to those where the threat comes from outside like *Alien* (1979) by Ridley Scott (Brown, 2018: 27). Rodriguez Sanchez (2011: 69-79) gives a review of vampire films from

1980s and 1990s where vampirism is a metaphor for epidemics, addiction while the traditional values of family and religion are an antidote.

There are also films which deal with negligence in using scientific-technological knowledge, to which belongs *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) by Terry Gilliam.

Disease is always used as a dramatic resource, a metaphor for destruction. Hart (2002: 2) mentions that there are movies which serve as metaphors for the disease instead of being explicit representations. He made a list of 40 movies which deal with AIDS, where 32 were available. He also emphasises duality in such films – between gay people and others, the city versus the country, where the city is represented both as gay utopia and AIDS dystopia; and finally, innocent victims versus guilty villains. This dichotomy ‘us’ versus ‘them’ has been constantly shown in American society.

The example given by Holgado and Perdiguero-Gil (2011: 49) is of a metaphor about human passions, the power of love and destruction in *Death in Venice* (1971) by Luchino Visconti or *Love in the Time of Cholera* (2007) by Mike Newell. Another metaphor they mention is political and social, such as plague connected to immigration and communism in *Panic in the Streets* (1950) by Elia Kazan; historical, like Black Death with existential issues in *The Seventh Seal* (1957) by Ingmar Bergman. The appearance of Ebola (1976) has made it into a metaphor for negligence and/or corruption of the system. (Holgado and Perdiguero-Gil, 2011: 51). The example is given in *Outbreak* (1995) by Wolfgang Petersen. Such films offer many possibilities regarding the experience of epidemics, both on an individual level – our fears and at the level of socio-economic, political, and cultural consequences (Holgado and Perdiguero-Gil, 2011: 51).

This paper will describe in more details a film *Twelve Monkeys* because of dualities which appear there.

### *Duality in the film Twelve Monkeys*

The film is about a viral outbreak, the world destroyed with sickness. In order to defeat it, the scientists send a convict, named Cole, on an expedition to travel back in time and gather as much information as possible about the virus to save the world. Therefore, Cole travels back and forth between 1990s and his decade, 2030s, suspecting the Army of Twelve Monkeys to be



responsible for the leak of the virus. The first duality is spatial and temporal - between these two decades - the past and the present. Flannery-Dailey (2000: 3) thinks that the film typifies both the historical apocalypse as well as the otherworldly journey.

Another duality is between the objects of search - a virus and the human terrorists who disseminate it. Also, in 2035 the underworld has become the dwelling place of people since the above ground is uninhabitable. The underworld symbolises hell in comparison to the life in pure air of 1990s, so this environmental devastation leads to the apocalyptic plague. Cole's return to 1990s has the function of trying to find a cure so that people could return to a purified earth.

The film is also a criticism of experimental medicine and psychiatry. In the dialogue between the psychiatrists there is another dichotomy as they believe that Cole cannot predict the future and that they can only decide what is right and what is wrong, therefore, who is crazy and who is not. They only rely on science, so Cole's revelation of the future represents to them only fantasy, which equals madness. In the modern world, science is worshiped thus replacing God which, as Flannery-Dailey (2000: 9) mentions, is shown in the example of Jeffrey Goines when he screams about his famous father the virologist and the ground shaking when he is upset. She (2000: 9) thinks that this dichotomy of sanity / insanity which corresponds to the rejection or acceptance of Cole's revelation is the central motif of *Twelve Monkeys*.

Another duality is the appearance of Cole as both a child and an adult and he even witnesses his death. He has been hunted by a dream which turns out to be his memory. Lashmet (2000: 58) claims that Cole is a type of Christ, suggested by his initials J.C. (James Cole). Apart from that, he also has a dual role - in the 1990's he is a hero, coming back trying to find the answers for the future, while in 2035 he is a prisoner, a convict forced to do what he has been told to. Martins (in Medeiros, 2015: 287) mentions that for the director of *Twelve Monkeys*, Terry Gilliam, time travel stands as a mirror of society and ourselves. For him, cinema is also a form of time travel.

Next, Cole goes with Kathryn to see Hitchcock's movie 'Vertigo' and realises that the scene from the film is similar to what is happening to him: a man stuck in a time that is not his

and a woman trying to help him. He also realises that he will not be able to change the course of events as time works in a circular motion.

Del Rio (2001: 386) mentions that there is a constant double game in the film between questioning the reality of Cole's claims as a traveller from the future but at the same time believing in the solidity of the claims. She also interprets it using Heidegger and his critique of realism in *Being and Time*, mentioning the importance of a being to immerse in the world. Only in this way the subject is reassured of its own existence.

Another duality is in the references of the phrase 'Monkey Business': the first is the Marx Brothers' film, in which the brothers make high society look foolish. The second is the title of a September 1992 article that appeared in the magazine section of the *London Independent* which dealt with Curtis's case against Hillary Koprowski who defended the vaccine trials of the Wistar Institute from 1986 to 1988 (in Lashmet, 2000: 57).

The director Gilliam also chooses two cities in the film – Baltimore and Philadelphia. As Lashmet (2000: 59) mentions, the Centre for Human Virology was established there in 1996, while Philadelphia was the home of the Wistar Institute. In the film, Philadelphia airport was ground zero of the epidemics. Lashmet thinks that the film represents the explanation of the origin of AIDS.

Though the ending of the film might seem pessimistic, as Cole is killed, there is a glimpse of hope. The virologist sits down on the plane next to a 2030's scientist. We can presume that she will complete Cole's mission and take one of the vials back in order to find a cure. Thus, she could be seen as Cole's doppelganger. In this way, future is predicted, though it might be difficult to live in it.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Pandemics has been a popular theme in both fiction and films. The purpose of this paper was to scrutinise the duality in both novels and films, depicting one representative in each – the novel *Stand* by Stephen King and the film *Twelve monkeys* directed by Terry Gilliam.

The overview of both fiction and films dealing with pandemics shows that there have been two main types – those about a virus itself – either told from the own experience of the

author or from somebody else's recollection and those which use a virus as a metaphor. The second category was more interesting for this paper as it also shows duality.

The history of fiction shows that there were quite a few novels about viruses which use it as a metaphor – e.g. London's *The Scarlet Plague* and films – e.g. *Outbreak* and *Contagion* where viruses are also shown as God's punishment for man's destruction of nature.

Stephen King's *Stand* was chosen because it does not only show the impact of virus on mankind but also its aftermath. It is full of dualities – starting from the everlasting fight between good and evil, dream and reality, the world before and after the virus, technology and nature, men and women, authority, and subordinates. Though the novel has seemingly happy ending – the evil was defeated, still at the very end Randal Flagg reincarnates, this time called Russel Faraday. In this way, the duality remains indicating future troubles.

The film *Twelve monkeys* also shows a lot of dualities primarily between the past and the future (or present), craziness versus sanity, environment and devastation, underworld and hell above the ground. The film has a pessimistic ending – the main character does not succeed in preserving the mankind and cannot even save himself.

It can be concluded that duality in pandemic fiction and films serves to show apocalyptic imagery indicating that a virus itself has a dual nature – it does not originate only in nature, man is also responsible either for its creation or distribution. It turns out that man is their own worst enemy, in constant conflict with nature leading to disaster and destruction. Salvation relies completely on human effort.

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