

NEW FLESH, OLD DEMONS. CONTAGION NARRATIVES IN POST-COLD WAR U.S. CULTURE

Florian Andrei Vlad (Author)

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Anca-Teodora ȘERBAN-OPRESCU¹

Upon first thought, the idea of disease, of pestilence, of plague, of exposed contaminated flesh or tissue, may provoke repulsion and ontological fear, or trigger questioning the author's reasons for tackling such a topic. However, upon closer look and reading of the first pages in Florian Andrei Vlad's book, one quickly understands and becomes an adept of the author's endeavor.

The volume under review is concerned with the visual and narrative constructions of disease, or contamination in post-Cold War American film and television, with insightful stops along the way into literature, while placing emphasis on circumstance, context and history of the phenomenon in post-Cold War U.S. culture.

Displaying an Introduction, three Chapters and a Conclusions section, the book reveals the 'roots' of this contamination perspective in the influence of the Gothic tradition and covers historical turning points in the representation of plague, of diseased or contaminated surfaces, both biological and ideological, starting with the end of the Cold War, continuing with 9/11 events and closely associated "war on terror", then further on, to the contemporary enterprise toward security-oriented policies, border defense, or nationalist manifestations.

In the beginning, F.A. Vlad mentions the notion of 'network', as defined and described by the sociologist Manuel Castells and highlights the similarity of the network with the epidemic-like spread of the networking logic, both connecting and disconnecting, changing functions and mechanics of processes, leading to unexpected outcomes, encompassing everything, restructuring, altering, transforming with utmost speed. In fact, arguing similar ideas as Eugene Thacker or Steven Shaviro, F.A. Vlad underlines that contagion itself becomes "a paradigm in human communication in the network age, illustrated by epidemiological structures, strategies and/or terminology in forms of communication ranging from marketing to military rhetoric" (Vlad, 2019: 20). This is the initial hypothesis

¹ Anca-Teodora Șerban-Oprescu, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, teodora.oprescu@rei.ase.ro

which is to be illustrated and validated in the following chapters of the book. The outspoken preference of the author to exemplify and argue his ideas with film as primary source of analysis is interesting and compelling, also appealing to a larger audience than the traditional avid reader of on-page text, whether paper, tablet, computer or Kindle screen. As the author acknowledges, there is a well-established tradition of literature on “plague fiction” - Daniel Defoe, Edgar Allan Poe, Camus (Vlad, 2019: 15). Nevertheless, visual representations of plague, images or film, are far more enthralling, with far stronger visual impact on the viewer. As F.A. Vlad asserts (16), not many read Defoe, but image-like or movie-like representations of Death, or of the beaked medieval “plague doctor”, zombies, undead, affected or wounded bodies, are much more intense to the public.

Chapter One sets in the theoretical framework, focusing on certain moments, emerging concepts and, the development, in general, of narratives that have come to place two central Gothic creatures – the vampire and the zombie – in the center of attention. It also shows how the dark heritage of the Gothic imagery, the rise of the 18th century Gothic stories connect to the rise of the middle classes and lead to a more distinctive national consciousness in Europe and America. This is also the chapter where more frequent incursions into literature are made: starting with the Gothic reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, references to Poe, Hawthorne, Melville and a discussion of the central figures of American Gothic in connection to British predecessors, the changes taking place on the American cultural scene, the concept of the terrible Other in relation to the American Dream.

Chapter Two takes the metaphorical and literary descriptions of plague on to the more visual and raw representations of violence and the body in what Linda Williams (1991, qtd. In Vlad, 20) calls the branches of body narratives: horror, pornography, melodrama. A very interesting and timely discussion on the concept of ‘quarantine’, as well as on the parasitical nature of the global capitalist Empire, following Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s seminal work *Empire* brings the theme(s) analyzed in the volume into a very real present context of ‘contagion’, as concept, as well as actual tangible reality (ironic, since the book becomes so relevant for the 2020 Coronavirus epidemic, even if published in 2019).

Chapter Three looks at fear, terror and horror as esthetic and narrative strategies and analyzes these categories in the context of their history, philosophical makeup and ideological load. Using examples from zombie films such as *The Walking Dead*, *Land of the Dead*, or the TV series *True Blood*, F.A. Vlad seeks to expose how the aesthetics of the obscene, of the abject or of cruelty acquire kind of familiar and affectionate features through recourse to sympathy, solidarity, or irony, even humor.

For those of us, unsettled by the topic of the book, F.A. Vlad’s assertion that horror narratives, of any kind, be they death, contagion, disease narratives, are ways to

shock in order to re-arrange, to question cultural certainties, to disquiet reality in a very postmodern manner gives new meaning to traditional manners of perceiving society, culture, or even history. It is, in fact, an invitation to start from this new take on things and look for answers, for fresh views, for unthought-of reality-checks.

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