
The Women Who Killed Too Many

Contagion (Steven Soderbergh, 2011) and Female Virality

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As opposed to their male counterparts, female murderers in the cinema tend to be portrayed and classified attending to the psychological drive and intentionality of their crimes.¹ We tend to speak of the female psycho-killer dominated by her irrational emotions,² of the revenge-murderer who has been victim of a previous crime such as rape,³ and of the evil, oversexualized *femme fatale* and the “super-bitch killer beauties”⁴ whose main aim is to tempt men. The academic literature devoted to this figure typically focuses on the film genres where these murderous women most frequently appear—namely, horror, melodrama, and film noir—and on the specific historical times where each type proliferates. Regardless of the film genre and typology of the murderer, one constant is the binary dynamics under which these female killers operate, systematically oscillating between nurturer and castrator, victim and perpetrator, and inspiring both repulsion and erotic desire.⁵ This dualism is present in feminist film criticism as well. One of the sustained quandaries in critical discussions is whether women killers may be read as projections of patriarchal anxieties—what Barbara Creed calls the “monstrous phantasy of woman as castrator”⁶—or, on the contrary, as agents that contest patriarchy, subverting the traditional “feminine” roles ascribed to women as passive victims.⁷

In this chapter, I propose a reading of a yet underexplored staple character in a yet underexplored film genre—the Patient Zero in virus narratives—that brings together these opposing meanings and that, for reasons that will be addressed below, tends to be characterized as female. Even though it may appear counterintuitive to speak of crime or murder when dealing with a virus carrier, contagion films have a tendency to criminalize the first infected person or originator of the epidemic—what is popularly known as the Patient

Zero or, in scientific jargon, the “index patient”—by personifying the killer virus through them. These peculiar types of murderers blur and problematize questions of intentionality, as they frequently kill their victims unknowingly and are themselves victims of the virus. Yet they are constructed as serial killers who share traits with the classic types of female murderers and are even associated with the same generic conventions.

Focusing on this figure through a diachronic approach that ranges from two real-life Patients Zero, Mary Mallon and Gaëtan Dugas, to three film incarnations of female index patients in *The Killer that Stalked New York* (Earl McEvoy, 1950), *Rabid* (David Cronenberg, 1977), and *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011), this chapter aims to provide a new perspective on the female killer. The films, a classical film noir, a Canadian exploitation movie, and a contemporary Hollywood blockbuster, reveal the evolution of the female Patient Zero with relation to different discourses and views on feminism. The last section focuses on the character of Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) in the more recent *Contagion*, analyzing the meanings that the controversial star persona of Paltrow adds to this figure and endeavoring to assess to what extent it complicates discussions on postfeminism. By means of this historical overview, I aim to draw attention to this singular killer, while disclosing the fruitful meanings that the “fertile” terrain of viruses offers in relation to questions of gender.

The Female Carrier in *The Killer that Stalked New York* and *Rabid*

Mary Mallon and Gaëtan Dugas are perhaps the most infamous super-spreaders in the recent history of epidemics. Mallon was an Irish immigrant who worked as a cook in New York in the early 1900s—an asymptomatic carrier who unknowingly spread typhoid fever in every household for which she worked, thus earning the title of “Typhoid Mary.” Dugas, a French-Canadian flight attendant, was, in the 1980s, wrongly accused, as a recent study demonstrates,⁸ of being the Patient Zero of the AIDS epidemic in the United States.⁹ In spite of the eighty-year gap, the stories of Mallon and Dugas share the same narrative of criminality and stigmatization ascribed to the figure of the Patient Zero. Even if typhoid is not a venereal disease, Mallon was coded by the media and health authorities as an unclean, “fallen woman,”¹⁰ condemned for her sexual activity and unmarried status. Similarly, Randy Shilts’s 1987 novel and the subsequent HBO adaptation *And the Band Played On* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1993) portrayed Dugas as a

callous and extremely promiscuous homosexual man who, even after being aware of his sickness, continued to sleep with men, and thus disseminated the disease, in the multiple cities he traveled to as a steward. Both Mallon and Dugas were pictured by the media as murderers and transgressors who acted either out of maliciousness or on account of their reckless practices and plain ignorance. Moreover, as itinerant workers and part of minority groups, one an immigrant woman, the other a homosexual man, both were instantly cast as embodiments of otherness, their disease serving to simultaneously manifest and punish their deviance, understood in both cases in sexual terms of promiscuity and depravity.

Epidemic film narratives tend to reify the connotations of Mallon's and Dugas's stories by commonly picturing their Patients Zero through gender, sexual, and/or national markers of alterity. The three following case studies will serve as examples of how these meanings converge particularly well with representations of gender.

Set in 1947 and based on an actual smallpox scare that took place that year in New York,¹¹ *The Killer that Stalked New York* tells the story of Sheila Bennet (Evelyn Keyes), a woman doubly betrayed by her criminal husband Matt (Charles Korvin), a diamond smuggler who cheats on her with her sister and runs away with the diamonds Sheila had smuggled from Cuba on his behalf. In her journey from Cuba, Sheila unknowingly "smuggles" smallpox as well and disseminates the disease while wandering about the streets of New York, looking for Matt to exact revenge on him.¹²

Coded as a classic *femme fatale*, Sheila is *doubly* characterized as a criminal—both a diamond smuggler and a killer-virus carrier. The film's male voice-over narrator makes sure to stress this idea by using a moralizing and outright sexist tone when describing her in the opening scene [1:03–3:30]. He dubs Sheila "Death" and "the killer" and objectifies her by overemphasizing her looks, while claiming that "*it* was something to whistle at" and "*its* name was Sheila Bennet: A pretty face with a frame to match, worth following [my emphasis]." He continues:

The odd part about the whole thing is the customs cop [. . .] never suspected the blonde target was a killer. Oh no, she didn't deal death out of the end of a gun or off the point of a knife. She delivered it wholesale. Just by walking through a crowd [. . .] Better than wholesale. For free. No charge. The tragedy was she didn't know she was Death, either.

Sheila is presented as the title character: a large-scale killer of the Typhoid-Mary kind who puts the city of New York in danger. As the film progresses and Sheila gets sicker, she seemingly becomes proportionally more evil,

apparently possessed by the maliciousness of the virus, which she seems to impersonate. She shoots at the doctor who tries to help her, is described as having “murder burning in her eyes” [41:27], and her wardrobe gets darker by the end of the film. Her thirst for revenge connects her with the long list of female avengers in the cinema, a vengeance the virus helps her exact, as when, for instance, she indirectly “kills” the bar owner who had previously attempted to force himself upon her.

Yet at the same time, Sheila’s double criminality is rendered as a twofold victimization. She is subjected, on the one hand, to her criminal husband and, on the other, to the virus, whose destructive power she cannot control either. In fact, neither she nor the virus succeeds in killing Matt, who eventually dies by falling off a building, thus problematizing Sheila’s actual agency in her revenge plans. All in all, the film seems to warn us that Sheila’s transgression, fueled by her love for the wrong kind of man, leads to a flawed model of womanhood that is punished by the virus, which ultimately kills her. In a conversation with a young girl at a hospital [9:57–11:20], Sheila confesses her desire to be a mother. However, the film makes sure to emphasize how, instead of giving life, Sheila infects and “kills” (as the doctor later tells her) that same girl, as well as many other children, with her poisonous touch. Her criminal behavior—her apparently active and mobile role in the film—is presented as a destructive force that annihilates the nurturing traits stereotypically associated with femininity, a fact that the perverse reproductive capacity of the virus and its pregnancy-like expansion inside her body aptly convey.

With its correlation between crime and infectious disease, *The Killer that Stalked New York* casts a reactionary look on gender roles in keeping with its times. Sheila’s “transgressive” behavior is actually based on a relation of submission to her husband. Moreover, her body becomes an object to be contained, monitored, and surveilled by the (male) health and police authorities who relentlessly chase and finally “hunt” her down, preventing her from committing suicide in a final chivalric scene [73:20–74:37]—a frustrated attempt that confirms once again her actual lack of freedom and even control over her own body. In the end, Sheila, who is described by the voice-over as a “sick animal” [65:42], is trapped either by iniquitous male forces that precipitate her downfall or by normative male authorities that attempt to control and correct her disruption of the status quo. With her mixture of virus-impersonator *femme fatale*, passion-fueled avenger, and unintentional serial killer on the one hand, and of suffering victim on the other, Sheila brings together a multiplicity of meanings that ultimately become a call for the restoration of patriarchal order celebrated by the male voice-over. In her study of women killers, Sylvie Frigon argues that murder committed by women “contradicts their socialized roles, which depict them

as being naturally loving and nurturing.”¹³ In *The Killer that Stalked New York*, this unnatural monstrosity has, like the virus, no cure and no turning back (only preventive measures such as vaccination can be taken against it), and so, the only possible ending for Sheila is her death, which miraculously restores order in the city, as if she were, quite implausibly, the only infectious agent in the narrative.

This cautionary and reactionary message connects the film with traditional readings of the *femme fatale* in classical film noir as being a “symptom of male fears about feminism.”¹⁴ Thus, despite driving the narrative, the female protagonist in *The Killer that Stalked New York* is filtered through a male perspective and, literally, through a male voice-over that acts to contain her. The narrator is in keeping with Kaja Silverman’s discussion of the “disembodied voice-over” in classical cinema, which “speaks from a position of superior knowledge, and which superimposes itself ‘on top’ of the diegesis,” an authoritative role reserved for “an exclusively male voice.”¹⁵ Sheila’s role as Patient Zero advances the multiplicity of forms and meanings this figure will be capable of adopting in future instances of the genre (as the following example from a 1970s exploitation film proves), while at the same time converging here with the gender ideology of classical Hollywood cinema as described by classical feminist film theory.¹⁶

Rabid, one of David Cronenberg’s early films, introduces the character of Rose (Marilyn Chambers), a woman who has the urge to feed from people’s blood by stinging them with an appendix grown in her armpit as a result of an experimental surgery. Every time she attacks a new victim, she infects them with a rabies-like disease that eventually spreads throughout the city of Montreal. Like Typhoid Mary, Rose is an asymptomatic carrier, the Patient Zero of a disease whose symptoms she does not suffer as such and of which she is completely unaware. Much like Sheila, she is depicted as oscillating between the roles of perpetrator and victim. Her appendix looks, in fact, like a combination of male and female genitalia, her body fluctuating between normative parameters of gender. Her attacks evoke not only sexual penetration (an idea reinforced by Chamber’s fame as a porn star, which the film reverses here by picturing her in the position of penetrator) but also function as a displaced representation of the virus’s own urges to invade the healthy cells of her victims. The sexual innuendoes make her multiple attacks on men, women, and even animals hint at a promiscuity that, as she claims, she cannot help, and which enrages her boyfriend [77:21–78:31]. The disease is, therefore, coded as a sort of sexually transmitted ailment in a context where the most infamous and dreaded venereal disease, AIDS, had not yet emerged.

Rose claims she feels strong and powerful as her new murderous self. Her sting becomes an empowering weapon that even protects her in situations

where she would have otherwise felt vulnerable, like in a lonely barn at night when a drunken farmer attempts to sexually assault her [22:16–23:19]—a scene that resonates with Sheila’s own sexual assault and, more generally, with the rape-revenge genre. Yet at the same time, she is profoundly disgusted at her own abject body and deeply conflicted about her acts. Even more so than Sheila, Rose’s characterization shows a bipolarity that William Beard refers to as a “schizoid state,”¹⁷ a dualistic alternation between a “monster and a person,”¹⁸ between a sexualized object of desire and a suffering human subject.¹⁹ Her personality does, in effect, oscillate between that of a cold-blooded murderer who lures men in order to attack them, and that of a remorseful, even childish, victimized woman. She eventually dies at the hands of one of her rabies-infected victims while trying to prove her innocence—somehow punished, as in Sheila’s case, by her own destructive forces.

Rose’s role has inspired contradictory gender-related readings on the film. Most famously, Robin Wood has criticized the sexual politics behind Cronenberg’s first films, arguing that they are reactionary patriarchal nightmares that project “horror and evil onto women and their sexuality, the ultimate dread being of women usurping the active, aggressive role that patriarchal ideology assigns to the male.”²⁰ Wood argues that, in films like *Rabid*, chaos and horror result from the male scientists’ attempt to change society, but that, tellingly, it is the women, in this case Rose, that are ultimately blamed for the ensuing mayhem. He interprets this as an attack on second-wave feminism and the sexual liberation of women.²¹

Other scholars refute Wood’s reading by claiming that the male scientist’s primary responsibility can point to the existence of a “lurking patriarchal culprit,”²² while others hold that the actual horror derives from technology and from the “nightmare of human behavior reduced to the mechanical activity of propagation.”²³ I would indeed argue that Rose’s adoption of an active and transgressive role endows her with an empowering agency that can be understood as a form of subversive revenge on patriarchy itself, especially in those scenes where she attacks men who attempt to rape or take advantage of her.

In any case, the binary way in which Rose is portrayed—as both a vulnerable victim and a cold vampire “huntress”—hinders the simplistic interpretation of her role as either active or passive, rebellious or monstrous, transgressive or reactionary. In the end, the true villain of the film can be said to be the infectious disease. Rose’s body, very much like Sheila’s, becomes a weapon (a flesh and blood machine) for the virus to use at its own will, urging her to penetrate other bodies so that it can replicate and survive. Rose’s feelings of satisfaction when she stings a new victim may be read, after all, as voiced manifestations of the virus itself, which is physically embodied in her

new morphed self. Cronenberg himself stands by this position in what has become one of his legendary quotes, soliciting spectators to “see the movies from the point of view of the disease.”²⁴ Rose is, like Sheila, at the mercy of forces she cannot truly control—her body manipulated by a Frankenstein-type scientist and by the virus—even though she assumes a much more active and conscious role in her killings. Thus, horror derives from her abject body and from the pathogen that invades and transforms organic life.

Both *The Killer that Stalked New York* and *Rabid* offer relevant examples of the way the Patient Zero type facilitates the articulation of questions of gender that traverse different film genres, discourses, and contexts. The duality of this staple character helps to offer a rumination on difference and otherness that the disease brings out and renders visible. This connects with Linda Williams’s well-known notion of the likeness between the monster and the female victim in classical horror films, the monster being a mirror or a “double for the women,”²⁵ as both pose a potential threat to patriarchy through their otherness. The interplay that the virus establishes between sexuality, reproduction, death, and bodily transformation is fittingly embodied in the criminal/victim body of the female Patient Zero, suggesting a confrontation between conventional gender roles of femininity and motherhood, and these characters’ continuous trespassing of normative lines. The following section will attempt to provide a more contemporary look on this figure, aiming to highlight both the continuities and points of difference with respect to these earlier versions of the female Patient Zero.

The Postfeminist Super-Spreader in *Contagion*

Unlike Sheila and Rose, the Patient Zero character in *Contagion*, Beth, appears on screen for a total amount of barely six minutes of the film’s run-time.²⁶ The movie, a multi protagonist story about the global outbreak of a highly lethal microorganism—the fictional MEV-1 virus—narrates the running-against-the-clock efforts of health authorities to trace the original carrier, contain the epidemic, and develop a vaccine against the virus. The multiple narrative strands attempt to offer a holistic and scientifically accurate vision of epidemiology, as director Steven Soderbergh himself explained.²⁷ And like the virus, these narrative lines, each led by a renowned star, spread and multiply in a sometimes intersecting network.

Among the many science-related characters, one of the storylines focuses in particular on the family of the first infected victim: the index patient, Beth Emhoff; her husband, and then widower, Mitch Emhoff (Matt Damon); Mitch’s teenage daughter from a previous marriage, Jory (Anna Jacoby-

Heron); and Beth's six-year-old son from a previous marriage, Clark (Griffin Kane). The film opens precisely with a short prologue that introduces an already sick-looking Beth sitting at a bar in O'Hare International Airport in Chicago [0:41–2:01]. The virus manifests itself in the form of ominous coughs that anticipate the ensuing disaster, while Beth eats peanuts from a shared bowl and then passes her credit card to the bartender. The narration underscores the virus's intangible presence through its ill-omened fixation on the contaminated objects touched by Beth, documenting through extreme close-ups the quick process of transmission in a way that invites us to imagine, rather than actually see, viruses traveling from Beth's mouth to her hand, from her hand to the peanut bowl and credit card, from her credit card to the bartender's hand, and from the bartender's hand to the cash register screen (Figure 11.1). In a few seconds, germs pervade Beth's surrounding space, waiting for the next unsuspecting victim to catch them.

As we can infer from her phone conversation, Beth is returning home to Minneapolis from a business trip in Hong Kong. During her layover in Chicago, she has taken the opportunity to have an extramarital tryst with an old boyfriend, John Neil (Robert G. Beck). Unaware of the deadly virus she has contracted in Hong Kong, she infects (and kills) no less than six people in a short period of time. Her international mobility and multiple social interactions facilitate the simultaneous outbreak of different global clusters of which she is held responsible. Taking into account the reproductive rate of the virus, which at the beginning of the story is R-2—meaning that each carrier is prone to infect an average of two people—Beth's astonishing levels of infectiousness instantly situate her as a super-



Figure 11.1 *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2011): Gwyneth Paltrow in the role of the victim/killer Patient Zero.

spreader that inevitably brings to mind the characterization of Dugas as a promiscuous and itinerant host.

However, and despite her A-list star persona and her major opening appearance, Paltrow's character does not stay alive for long. Some eight minutes into the narrative, she is already dead, and the film hurries along without apparently giving it a second thought, even unglamorously displaying her peeled scalp over her face, while medical examiners peer inside her skull in a passionless autopsy. Her early death and the negative light in which her character is portrayed were read by various film critics as a nod to the acrimony stirred up by the actress.²⁸ Wesley Morris even suggested that the "entire movie is a kind of joke whose punch line is 'Gwyneth Paltrow makes the whole world sick,'" and added: "I don't know what this woman has done to win the schadenfreude of so many, but Soderbergh has turned her into a 21st century Veronica Cartwright."²⁹

Like Chambers in *Rabid*, Paltrow's star persona adds a specific set of meanings to her Patient Zero, and the film definitely plays on them. Usually deprecated by the press and the public, Paltrow was even ranked as the most hated celebrity in a poll carried out by the tabloid *Star Magazine* in 2013. The reasons given for this animosity are the actress's self-proclaimed role as a "healthy lifestyle" guru in her business/website *Goop* and her elitist, frivolous, unfortunate, and sometimes pseudoscientific advice and remarks on issues such as nutrition and parenthood, which have been described as showing a "Marie Antoinette-esque detachment from reality."³⁰ Paltrow's image has, in effect, been inscribed within what scholar Jorie Lagerwey calls a postfeminist "brand mom": a white, upper-class celebrity who uses her fame and motherhood as a brand in order to sell her products to her "fan-consumers"³¹ in an "individualist, neoliberal, and brand-saturated culture."³²

It can be argued that the postfeminist model that Paltrow incarnates is based on an image of entrepreneurial success and libera(liza)tion that seems to imply the idea that feminism is no longer necessary or that equality has been already attained, while at the same time displaying and demanding, from a clear position of privilege, a woman's success in every professional, personal, and physical area of her life—thus falling into a pernicious model of femininity much criticized by feminist scholars like Angela McRobbie.³³ In an article in *The Guardian*, however, Elizabeth Day claims that Paltrow is a "curiously polarizing figure"³⁴ that is either extremely loved or loathed. Paltrow's fixation with health issues, her pseudoscientific well-being remedies, her defense of open relationships, and, more generally, her controversial star persona ironically come into play in a film that cherishes science and the crucial role of scientists, appropriately casting her as the equally demonized and victimized stock character of the sick Patient Zero.

The film introduces Beth as a successful woman who flawlessly balances her work and family lives. She is the Global Marketing Operations Manager at the AIMM Alderson firm in Minneapolis and seems to be the provider for her family, as her husband is apparently unemployed. However, from the very opening scene to the final revelatory coda, Beth is marked as disruptive and morally dubious. On a personal level, she is unfaithful to her loyal husband with a man who practically does not appear on screen and who dies right at the beginning, thus hampering any chance of sympathy with, let alone interest in, him or their love affair. Her family is not a “traditional” one either, in the sense that both Clark and Jory are children of previous relationships. The fact that she prefers to delay her flight home in order to be with her lover also seems to call into question her motherhood. Meanwhile, Mitch, played by a sympathetic Matt Damon, the epitome of the Nice Guy in Hollywood, is depicted as a devoted husband and father who spends most of the film mourning the loss of his wife and appalled by her infidelity. Quarantined at home, he jealously safeguards Jory’s health and, metaphorically, her virtue, from her teenage boyfriend, whom he forbids her to see. Mitch’s efforts to control Jory may, indeed, be read as an expression of his frustration and repressed anger over the lack of control he had over his wife’s life. Only when he comes to terms with her death at the very end of the film does he allow Jory to come into physical contact with her now vaccinated (and, therefore, prophylactic) boyfriend, even if this occurs at home and under his careful supervision [99:36].

Unlike the rest of the female characters in the film, who all have active roles outside their homes, Mitch assumes a static, domestic role that subverts traditional gender stereotypes. The film seems to highlight Mitch’s castrated role in their marriage and, therefore, Beth’s empowered role as castrator. The fact that she unintentionally infects (and kills) both her lover and her son Clark speaks both of her predatory praying mantis skills and her horrific Medea-like motherhood (Figure 11.2). Compared with Sheila’s and Rose’s crimes, Beth’s are judged as being much more execrable, especially the “killing” of her son. It is, perhaps, for this reason that the movie does not allow her to remain alive for more than a few minutes of screen time.

Despite Soderbergh’s insistence on the idea that the virus in *Contagion* is not a metaphor,³⁵ the film relies on the long-standing myths that surround epidemics. The idea of punishment—or of exoneration in the case of Mitch, who is, coincidentally, immune to the virus—looms over the narrative. The film activates the conventions of the disaster genre through its set of stock types like the profiteer, its emphasis on the traditional family (dis)unity, and its cautionary subtext of moral retribution. The fact that Beth, John, and her son Clark die, whereas Mitch and his daughter Jory are spared from the



Figure 11.2 *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2011): Beth Emhoff 's monstrous motherhood epitomized by her lethal hug.

plague, invites us to inevitably think of a sort of divine sentence, as several critics duly noted.³⁶ One of the most common questions raised by journalists in press conferences was whether Beth's disease was a retribution for her infidelity, which both Soderbergh and Paltrow categorically denied.³⁷

And yet, on a professional level, Beth is also representative of destructive late-capitalist practices. Her corporation's outsourcing and environmental damage in rural China is the explanation the film gives for the virus's inception in a final revelatory scene. The coda shows an AIMM Alderson bulldozer cutting down trees in the Chinese rainforest. Bats are driven out of their habitat as a result, and one of them, presumably infected, comes into contact with a pig, which is later used by the restaurant chef where, coincidentally, Beth eats dinner, becoming, in a rather implausible way, the index patient. This corroborates that, even if Beth's infidelity and castrating role in her marriage may not be the actual (at the most, the metaphorical) trigger of the epidemic, she is literally to blame for it as the corporation's leading manager of the exploitative practices for which she travels to Hong Kong. Her damaging influence, misbalancing both her family and the world's ecosystem, translates perfectly well into the deterministic role of the Patient Zero.

The film thus brings together in one single character a representative of late capitalism, globalization, and postfeminism, all cast in a negative light. Beth stands for a new emancipated femininity that is in tune with neoliberal discourses of individualism, empowerment, and an ethos of success associated with agency and global mobility. Authors Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff contend that postfeminism and neoliberalism cannot be understood

separately, as the former is “not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas.”³⁸ The film’s toying with the mythical idea of individual and collective retribution both unveils our preconceived need to read plagues (and narratives) following a causal pattern, and confirms the prevalence of hierarchical top-down structures of power that determine the economic, environmental, and social inequities of the world. This top-down exploitative influence can be read as being turned against itself, as symbolized by Beth’s status as the literal victim of her own (family-, corporate-, and epidemic-related) “sins.”

In so doing, the film offers a problematic vision of (post)feminism. Unlike Sheila and Rose, who were at the mercy of male superior forces, Beth appears to occupy a liberated position. However, her assumption of what has been traditionally presumed to be the male patriarchal role of provider seems to be, as in previous cases, castigated by the film through its virus and, especially, through the casting of the much-execrated Paltrow in the much-demonized character of the Patient Zero. Beth is informed by Paltrow’s incarnation of a postfeminist discourse of choice that encourages women “to embark on projects of individualized self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices.”³⁹ As the film seems to convey, this model cannot possibly escape the global structures of power that are capitalist and patriarchal in nature, and of which Beth is at once the representative and victim. The film makes clear that getting infected is not simply a matter of accidental exposure and bad luck; geographical, gender, racial, political, social, and especially economic factors play a fundamental part in the process. By exposing its greater incidence on the Chinese rural areas, for instance, the film’s epidemic not only ascertains that we are living in an interconnected global world, but it also brings to light the unbalanced order of that world, the unequal distribution of wealth that results in a corresponding unequal distribution of disease and of other natural and human disasters.

The rest of the main female characters featured in the movie corroborate this idea. They are actually celebrated as devoted scientists ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of humanity, but they appear to have no family lives, no (illicit) sex lives, and no positions of power, which are reserved for their male colleagues who stay safely in their offices. The film seems to offer a critical commentary on questions of gender and privilege, even if it is never explicit about its own position, nor does it present itself clearly as an ironic subversion—as a “joke,” as Morris suggested—of the conventions of the disaster genre, a genre that has been characterized by some as being inherently reactionary.⁴⁰

What is certain is that Beth bears the heavy burden of the Patient Zero and that, unlike Sheila and Rose whose destruction was restricted to the cities of New York and Montreal, respectively, hers is a large-scale massacre. Her greater libera(liza)tion and trespassing of normative patriarchal customs seem to cause an even superior form of damage. Like Sheila and Rose, Beth kills unknowingly, but she is criminalized through the connotations of sexual license, faulty motherhood, and unruly entrepreneurship that the virus helps to unveil. The fact that she privileges her career and sexual desires over her family is rendered as a form of monstrosity. As Ann Jones claims, maternity has been traditionally linked to self-sacrifice, and any trace of “self-interest [is] condemned as unnatural and monstrous.”⁴¹ In this respect, Beth does not last long as a killer because she is soon punished by the virus, but her sins and bedlam linger for the rest of the film.

Conclusion

The Killer that Stalked New York, *Rabid*, and *Contagion* reveal the contradictory meanings the figure of the female Patient Zero helps to bring out in relation to feminism. Fluctuating between murderer and victim—and sometimes sharing conventions with the rape-revenge heroine-victims, the femmes fatales, and the passion-led killers—this figure activates discourses on gender and sexuality through the virus’s penetrating, reproductive, and body-transforming qualities. More often than not, these infected and infectious women are presented as transgressors associated with sexual promiscuity and with a deadly form of procreation and motherhood that draws connections with the also infectious and, in some cases, infected economic system of consumer-capitalism.

Ranging from the blatantly objectified character of Sheila or, as the narrator calls her, “the blonde death” [65:38], to the porn-star implications of Chambers and the feminist movements of the 1970s to, finally, the brand-mom star persona of Paltrow in the postfeminist era, these three characters provide a diachronic vision of the female index patient and their ongoing subjection to, and fight against, the structures of patriarchal/capitalist power. Even though each of these examples belongs to three different time periods and genres, and thus, each of them translates the Patient Zero differently, the narrative of the fallen woman and the mythical idea of retribution and penitence surface in all of them, each picturing attractive but threatening characters and actresses who get punished for and by their transgressions. These women’s destructive capacities succeed, at least, in momentarily

overturning the existing system for the duration of the epidemic. The annihilation they provoke becomes, after all, not only the result but also the mirror of their own subversion of the status quo, a subversion that lingers far beyond the realm of each film.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the two blind reviewers for offering their insights and providing me with some very good ideas for improving this manuscript.
- 2 Steven J. Schneider, “The madwomen in our movies: Female psycho-killers in American horror cinema,” in A. Burfoot and S. Lord (eds.), *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), pp. 237–50; Helen Birch, “Introduction,” in H. Birch (ed.), *Moving Targets: Women, Murder, and Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 4.
- 3 Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (ed.), *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).
- 4 Karlene Faith, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Confinement and Resistance* (New York: Seven Stories, 2011 [1993]).
- 5 Sylvie Frigon, “Mapping scripts and narratives of women who kill their husbands in Canada, 1866–1954: Inscribing the everyday,” in A. Burfoot and S. Lord (eds.), *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), p. 3.
- 6 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2007 [1993]), p. 7.
- 7 Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 4; Susan Lord, “Killing time: The violent imaginary of feminist media,” in A. Burfoot and S. Lord (eds.), *Killing Women: The Visual Culture of Gender and Violence* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), p. 177; Sylvie Frigon, “Mapping scripts and narratives of women who kill their husbands in Canada, 1866–1954,” in *Killing Women*, p. 18; Steven Jay Schneider, “The madwomen in our movies: female psycho-killers in American Horror Cinema,” in *Killing Women*, p. 240; Jyotika Viridi, “Reverence, rape—and then revenge: Popular Hindi cinema’s ‘women’s film,’” in *Killing Women*, pp. 251–72.
- 8 Michael Worobey et al., “1970s and ‘Patient 0’ HIV-1 genomes illuminate early HIV/AIDS history in North America,” *Nature*, 539 (2016), pp. 98–101.
- 9 “Patient Zero” is a coinage that originated fortuitously in relation to Dugas. As Worobey et al. explain, Dugas was initially labeled Patient “O,” an abbreviation that stood for “Outside-of-California.” The letter was misread as a “zero” and the captivating expression soon caught on, inaccurately employed from then on to refer to the index patient.

- 10 Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 84–94.
- 11 Jeff Stafford, “The killer that stalked New York,” *Turner Classic Movies Blog*. Available at <https://goo.gl/aDm7X5> (accessed June 7, 2017).
- 12 Susan Sontag remarks that there is a “need to make a dreaded disease foreign.” Most virus films situate the origin of the disease in a distant land. The fact that, in *The Killer*, this land happens to be Cuba adds political innuendoes in tune with a context of growing anxieties regarding the territorial and ideological invasion of communism. These anxieties are similarly enunciated by other epidemic films of the time, as is the case of Kazan’s *Panic in the Streets* (1950), where an Eastern European migrant introduces pneumonic plague in the United States. The medieval undertones of some of these sicknesses not only indicate territorial distance but also, in most cases, evoke primitiveness, suggesting a kind of temporal distance as well.
Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor: AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1977, 1988]), p. 133.
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- 24 Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: Horror on Screen since the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011 [1988]), p. 156.
- 25 Linda Williams, “When the woman looks,” in B. K. Grant (ed.), *The Dread of Difference: Gender in the Horror Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015 [1996]), p. 22.
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- 29 Morris, “*Contagion*.” Veronica Cartwright starred in the 1978 version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Philip Kaufman), as well as in other horror and science-fiction movies.
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- 36 Morris, “*Contagion*”; Peter Travers, “*Contagion*,” *Rolling Stone*, September 8, 2011. Available at <https://goo.gl/yzPufs> (accessed February 10, 2017).
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Filmography

Contagion, directed by Steven Soderbergh, written by Scott Z. Burns, produced by Michael Shamberg, Stacey Sher, Gregory Jacobs, performances by Marion

Cotillard, Matt Damon, Laurence Fishburne, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Winslet, Cliff Martinez, music by Cliff Martinez, cinematography by Steven Soderbergh, edited by Stephen Mirrione, Participant Media/Imagination/Abu Dhabi Double Feature Films, 2011. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2012.

The Killer that Stalked New York, directed by Earl McEvoy, written by Harry Essex and Milton Lehman, produced by Robert Cohn, with Evelyn Keyes, Charles Korvin, William Bishop, Dorothy Malone, music by Hans J. Salter, cinematography by Joseph F. Biroc, edited by Jerome Thoms, Robert Cohn Productions, 1950. DVD. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2010.

Rabid, written and directed by David Cronenberg, produced by John Dunning, with Marilyn Chambers, Frank Moore, Joe Silver, Howard Ryshpan, cinematography by René Verzier, edited by Jean LaFleur, Dunning/Link/Reitman, 1977. Via Vision Entertainment, 2016.