

Erin Welsh

Hi, I'm Erin Welsh and this is This Podcast Will Kill You. If it's your first time tuning into one of these TPWKY Book Club episodes, welcome, happy to have you here. And if it's not, welcome back, thanks for being a listener. We've been on quite a journey this season with this book club and sadly that journey is almost over, with just one more book club episode planned for this season. But before we get into the topic of the day, I've gotta go through the usual business of telling you where you can find the list of all of the books featured in this and last season's book club, which is on our website [thispodcastwillkillyou.com](http://thispodcastwillkillyou.com). Under the EXTRAS tab, you'll find a link to our [bookshop.org](http://bookshop.org) affiliate page which has a link to all of the TPWKY Book Club books as well as lists for other books featured on the podcast. So many books about disease and medicine and history to fill your shelves.

But maybe reading really isn't your thing or maybe it is but you just want a break from the page and you find yourself drawn to the world of disease movies where instead of reading about epidemics or outbreaks, you can watch them play out on the big screen. A confused Cillian Murphy waking up in an empty London hospital in *28 Days Later*, a horrified Kate Winslet realizing she's infected with the deadly virus in *Contagion*, a desperate Donald Sutherland fleeing the pod people in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. These scenes and the feelings they evoke, terror, despair, unease, sprinkled perhaps with a tiny bit of hope, they stay with us long after the credits roll. Movies featuring disease, whether supernatural like zombie movies or more realistic like *Contagion*, have long been a part of cinema. But over the decades, trends in the plot trajectories, the tropes, the portrayal of heroes and villains, and the final resolution in these movies have evolved to reflect changing societal preoccupations.

How can we use disease movies as a lens through which to view American society? Who do we value as heroes and who do we perceive as a villain? Does science solve the problem or does it stand in the way of progress? And what does that mean in light of the COVID pandemic? Robert Alpert, Merle Eisenberg, and Lee Mordechai, authors of *'Diseased Cinema: Plagues, Pandemics, and Zombies in American Movies'* join me in today's book club episode to discuss the answers to these questions and many more.

Robert Alpert is an intellectual property lawyer turned film professor. He has taught at the City University of New York and Fordham University also in New York City and his courses and writing center on cultural myths, AI, and digital media. Dr. Lee Mordechai is an environmental historian and a Byzantine historian and his work centers on historical environmental disasters as well as diseases. Lee teaches history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and is currently on a fellowship at Princeton University. Dr. Merle Eisenberg is a late ancient and early medieval historian and also works on historical diseases and pandemics. Merle is an assistant professor at Oklahoma State University and just completed a fellowship in Oslo, Norway, conducting research at a pandemic center to better understand the history of pandemics.

In *'Diseased Cinema'*, Robert, Lee, and Merle survey how the narrative landscape of disease movies has changed over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st, exploring how a rise in individualism and a drop in trust of science and governmental institutions has shifted the focus of these movies. I'm guessing that most, if not all, TPWKY listeners have a favorite disease-themed movie. What makes it your favorite? Who saves the day? Or is there even a day to be saved? Personally, and probably predictably, I like the movies with kind of a happy ending, especially when science saves the day. But what seems to dominate these days is an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic storyline where humanity is too far gone to be saved and the only course forward is to start fresh. What does that say about our modern society and whether it views the glass as half full or half empty?

This book was such a fun and eye-opening read and I guarantee that this episode will be on your mind when you pick out your next disease-themed movie to watch or rewatch. We've got a lot of cinematic ground to cover in this interview, so let's go ahead and get started.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Welsh

Lee, Merle, Robert, thank you all so much for joining me today. I am thrilled to chat disease movies with you.

Lee Mordechai

Yeah, thanks so much for having us here.

Merle Eisenberg

Yeah, thanks so much for having us on.

Robert Alpert

We very much appreciate it.

Erin Welsh

Diseased cinema was such a fascinating and eye-opening read and I was blown away by how much the prevailing themes, character stereotypes, and even plot lines follow these larger trends reflective of societal concerns over the past few decades. To start us off, can you give me the big picture view of how films about disease have changed over the period that your book covers?

Lee Mordechai

Our argument, which is not I think a unique argument or novel in any way, is that these movies reflect the current culture of the time, right. So the politics and other aspects of the time in which they were made. And within this context, the same films can also help change existing culture, right. So you can't really separate both of these. This becomes clearest if you try to watch one of these movies that was made in a different context, right. So if we would go and watch a movie from the 50s, for example, it would seem very foreign, right. Because part of the things, the discourse or the tropes that that we would see in those films are speaking really to audiences in the 50s and if we try to watch that 75 years later, it would seem a bit discordant, let's say.

What we found in our research for the book is that films really change over time, right. So early on, films let's say from the 1920s to the 1980s tend to focus on some heroic government affiliated doctor who tends to sacrifice his personal, often financial well-being, essentially to protect the state, his community, and otherwise anonymous people. Modern audiences and students really would probably find that these films again are a bit strange, right. These are not the kind of stories that we tell these days about pandemics, right. We're used to other stories. If we move forward to to the 1990s, so we see a transitional period in which we still have heroic doctors but at this point in time these heroic doctors tend to look out for their immediate family or perhaps are rewarded for their work.

And if we move to the time that most of us probably know best, right, 21st century movies essentially, there are many other changes, right. So this move from people in the film containing a disease to films depicting a deadly global pandemic either happening or has happened when the film takes place. In more recent films pre-COVID, and we can maybe just talk talk a bit more about that, we see this uncontrollable apocalyptic pandemic. So that's like the main argument I think of the book.

Robert Alpert

The early films, as you watch them, the characters are, as long as you're American and that is defined in a very narrow kind of way; as long as you're American everything seems like really very satisfactory and peaceful and nice. You have as Lee said doctors who are solving problems. The movies are about curing. The idea of uncontained disease is just completely alien. But again it's subject to your being part of what's defined as American, if you're foreign, and that's a whole other subject, if you're foreign of course well then you are the cause of the disease obviously. And the transition is slowly over decades.

And as again we pointed out in the 90s especially it begins to change while there's not that kind of sense of public good which was in the earlier films. There is a sense, even if it's nostalgic, that people can actually still contain disease. And then it eventually goes to the point where there is no public good and everybody is sort of the same. Everyone's alike. Everybody has an equal, seems to have an equal stake and is treated the same. But the consequence seems to be in the opposite direction in terms of ability to solve problems. There's complete chaos because everybody is really ultimately on their own. So it's a slow deterioration process of the American culture.

Erin Welsh

I want to kind of touch on some of those aspects in a bit but first, what counts as diseased cinema and what doesn't? Like how did you go about choosing which movies to include in this book?

Merle Eisenberg

Yeah, this is Merle. That's a great question and one we spent a long time discussing, debating, dithering about. And there's lots of movies that I think could fit. But one thing we were particularly keen on was to treat film, as we all think, as a form of literature and as a form of art. And so that was one keen aspect, we wanted movies that expressed a viewpoint. We decided that we had to kind of make two decisions. One was we focused on American movies, not because other movies aren't super important, they absolutely are and we have some in the movie but just we had to focus on some subset in American culture, certainly in the 90s onward drives a lot of other international themes.

And so we came up with a list of about 100 major disease movies and we watched many of them, many of them I wish I could have my time back but so be it. And we selected films we thought were historically important, those we found cohesive, right, that we can actually write about, and those that best represent their time period as well that Lee and and Robert laid out. The other thing I should say as well, we also did choose some movies that we personally did not like or we found incoherent. And this was probably the hardest chapters to write or the hardest sections because writing about a movie that most or all of you really don't like is just really hard to do.

Robert Alpert

Well what movies are you referring to?

Merle Eisenberg

Those would mainly be, and I'm sure they'll come up in a little bit, the-

Lee Mordechai

The famous Resident Evil movies, Merle.

Merle Eisenberg

You're right.

Lee Mordechai

How can you forget that? I mean after long hours of arguments about those movies.

Erin Welsh

So terrible that you just want to erase your memory of them.

Robert Alpert

Right. I think Merle has repressed it as have I, the worst chapter to write.

Erin Welsh

Okay, well that makes my next question at least a little bit easier. So I have some like rapid fire questions. Because the whole time I was reading I was thinking okay, what is everyone's favorite movie? What is everyone's least favorite? Sounds like Resident Evil. But if we could just like rapid fire a few of these. So first, what was each of your favorite movies featured in this book and what do you love about it?

Robert Alpert

Let me put it this way, it's a little hard. I can't just give you a bullet point because it depends, sorry, it depends on how you mean favorite. But my favorite in terms of just the pleasure of just watching as an action movie was World War Z. It has so much action, it's wonderful. My favorite in terms of like intellectually in a way was Little Joe, the last of the Invasion of the Body Snatchers, because I think it's the most in your face movie in terms of really saying where we are as an American or global culture. But the best movie in terms of what I think was the most interesting and not so down, frankly, was Night of the Living Dead simply because of its style and its ability to document what was going on in America at the time.

Lee Mordechai

So Lee here, I would probably go with Children of Men. It seems to me to be the most prescient film that stays relevant somewhat 20 years after it was made, so very well done. That that's my favorite.

Merle Eisenberg

And probably for me, I actually thought long and hard about this as the other two people were going, it's probably Shivers which is a very campy horror movie by David Cronenberg who I think just came out with a new movie that just showed at Cannes recently. Mostly because it's just a funny movie in the guise of a horror movie and I hadn't seen it before and so it was something different vs some of these other ones I had actually watched before.

Erin Welsh

Answers all across the board, I love it. All right, so I feel like the least favorite was probably universally the Resident Evil series.

Robert Alpert

Without question. Although Lee may be a dissenter on this.

Lee Mordechai

I mean yeah, I'll dissent here. I mean for me, I would give probably two. I mean Resident Evil we can talk about this and kind of revisit some of our heated debates, let's say, from a few years ago. But the least favorite movies that I had so were The Invasion, which is like a 2007, another remake of the Invasion of the Body Snatchers which is like a bad movie. And also Robert's favorite movie, one of his favorite movies, right, so Little Joe. I mean I had major issues with it especially because it was very slow and I never actually connected to that.

Merle Eisenberg

I'll just add in that The Invasion is probably on my list aside from the Resident Evil movies because it's a very Hollywood movie that's very in your face but also extremely, I would say, regressive in its themes. And it also has some deeply troubling scenes actually which I'm surprised no one picked up vis-à-vis COVID where the CDC are the bad guys and they're the ones actually spreading the disease in the movie. And I didn't actually see any allusions during COVID to this but maybe it was just such a bad movie that no one wanted to rewatch it.

Erin Welsh

Let's take a quick break. And when we get back, there's still so much to discuss.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Welsh

Welcome back, everyone. I've been chatting with Robert Alpert, Merle Eisenberg, and Lee Mordechai about their book 'Diseased Cinema: Plagues, Pandemics, and Zombies in American Movies'. Let's get back into things. What do you think makes people want to watch diseased-themed movies? I mean and maybe this question could be answered separately before and after COVID or before and during COVID. But in general, is it an escape from reality? Is it a search for optimism? Is it validating fears, providing a survival handbook? Like what are some of the reasons that people are drawn to these movies?

Robert Alpert

I have a theory which is that it's sort of the flip side of why I think audiences are also drawn to sci-fi movies. I think we're going through a very troublesome time for a variety of reasons that we touch on in our book. I mean yes, it's escapism and people like the blood and the zombies and all the rest. But I think it's a kind of way for them in the audience to address their unease with their physical being and the physical world that they're in that sort of makes each of us feel like we have no value in the world anymore. And I also think it's part of sort of a compliment to all the AI movies that are very popular as well which is all about the mind and these are movies about the body. And there's a kind of struggle I think we're going through about our minds and our bodies. And these movies are really about a feeling of not belonging, not having a presence, and literally a physical rot. So it's an escapism but I think it appeals to almost a dark despairing sense of what's going on in the global climate that we have today.

Lee Mordechai

The very question of why are these movies so popular, I mean, that was essentially topic for discussion at the beginning of COVID, right. So early on during COVID, we're talking like January to let's say April, maybe May 2020, many of these movies exploded in popularity, right. So movies such as Contagion for example ended up in like I think 2nd place on iTunes, Outbreak got to maybe like 3rd place. And these are like old movies at the time, right. So Outbreak is like 25 years old and people are going back to these movies and watching them. And there were quite a few commentators who were trying to make sense of, and then asking exactly this question, right. So why are we going back to these movies especially when we're kind of like seeing something similar outside?

And then our research on this really revealed that there was no one answer, right. And people just like made up their own answers or hypotheses really. You get answers such as I wanted to see how COVID is going to develop, right, so I watched Contagion. Or in the UK for example, where 28 Days Later was made again like two decades before COVID. But it still became a talking point, right. So people would say oh, I feel like Jim in 28 Days Later, right. I woke up and the world seems to have changed, right. So this was in a sense a way in which people could communicate around the disease with other people, become optimistic. I mean some of them were clearly more optimistic because these movies, some of the movies, right, show some kind of happy ending. Or we can debate about whether that is or is not a happy ending but some people decided to accept it as such. And others just wanted to see how bad it could get, right. So I mean it's kind of like one of these answers that every person would kind of like provide their own answer.

Erin Welsh

You mentioned that the idea to write this book came about in 2019. So how did this book take shape and then how did that shape sort of change as the COVID pandemic evolved?

Merle Eisenberg

Lee and I are early medieval historians and we actually specialize in a 6th century pandemic called the Justinianic Plague which is the first plague pandemic. And we'd written a lot of various historical work on this but we kept arriving back at the same question really, which is why no matter what we say, because we provided evidence that we don't have much evidence of this actually being a huge pandemic, but no matter what we said, everyone would say but it's still a big pandemic. And so we asked why do these people keep saying this despite us showing them all the evidence? And there's not much empirical evidence that's conclusive. So why do we have this idea that this pandemic or all pandemics, some have mass death tolls, some don't. And what we realized was this was much more of a 20th and 21st century question than a 6th century question. And it was much more about the cultural views of disease that people, when they were writing about the 6th century, had, right. So if you were writing in say the 1950s, you basically thought like a 1950s movie vs if you were writing in the 1990s, you were thinking like a 1990s movie.

But naturally, Lee and I were trying to figure out well what changed in our culture? And this is the book that we think answers that question to explore it through film. You could ask why did we do film? Well we decided that would be the way in through culture. And we reached out to Robert, who obviously writes and teaches about film. And I should say as the reveal in the podcast, although it's not explicitly in the book, is that Robert's also my father. And so he was obviously someone with whom I had gone to movies with at a young age, so that's obviously why I decided to do movies and then I brought Lee on board. And we had a lot to say, it was a lengthy process. And then during COVID we had most of the book management actually done before COVID but we used COVID to go through it, to rewrite it, I'm sure we'll talk about the influence of COVID on the book shortly. But one thing Lee was really great on early on was tracking as he just talked about people watching disease movies. And so that became an obvious chapter to add to the book.

Erin Welsh

Do you think that previous disease or pandemic movies in general set expectations for the COVID pandemic? You mentioned how people would watch Contagion as like a guidebook to see what would play out, which would have been horrifying. And in some ways like there were very many similarities too. But yeah, I want to hear a little bit more about what that process was like, what it was like to see this pandemic unfolding and then see the parallels within the movies that you had just written about.

Merle Eisenberg

I think movies did a lot to set our expectations during COVID. And if you want data, Lee's given it to you in terms of people watching these movies. Personally I watched none of these movies and I was horrified that anyone would want to watch any of these movies. But that's again, as Lee said, everyone has their own take on these things. But I also think you saw this during early New York Times op-eds or kind of opinion pieces, people would go back through and watch these things. There was a great article about I guess Jared Leto was doing a silent retreat somewhere in the West during the beginning of COVID and he didn't know about lockdown for a week and then he emerged and all the articles were like Jared Leto emerges like Jim from 28 Days Later and he doesn't even know what's happening. So clearly there's expectations.

What's a little perhaps not surprising if you watch a movie is movies have to play out with a beginning, middle, and end and they have to be kind of rational. They have to have a point that people can follow and they might be a little crazy, they might go off the deep end but people kind of assumed vis-à-vis some of these movies I think that people would follow instructions, right. If you think about the end of a movie like Contagion, everyone happily takes the vaccine as they wait in line for it, right. And obviously that's not how the vaccines went in terms of rollout in many countries around the world. And the other thing I think I would say is that they really failed to show kind of how boring pandemics are for a lot of people, right. This isn't to mitigate the horror and the deaths and the awfulness and the sickness. But by boring here I mean movies show the collapse of the world, right. Matt Damon in Contagion finds a gun and like protects his daughter in his house. And you don't get probably the many, many scenes of him bored, sitting on the couch, trying to read a book because there's nothing else to do.

And so I think for many people that was their reality, right, that real life wasn't this good guys and bad guys kind of thing but that most people in the end really just followed their own values as they already existed and they looked for outcomes that they wanted. And so I think probably the the best comparison example that I always think about is there's this scene in Contagion where a congressman like steals a plane and it leads to one of the characters dying. And the congressman steals a plane to save his own life very clearly and looks out for himself. But the only example you get during COVID of that is a bunch of Republican senators selling stock when they went into this secret meeting back in February because they heard things the American public didn't and they sold all their stock to make a ton of money, right. So that's the difference. One group just making a ton of money and the other group at least looking out for themselves in the movie.

Erin Welsh

Let's take another break here. We'll be back before you know it.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Welsh

Welcome back, everyone. I'm here chatting with Robert Alpert, Merle Eisenberg, and Lee Mordechai about their book 'Diseased Cinema'. Let's get into some more questions. You mentioned how good guys and bad guys and how in the movies there are these clear labels that can be applied to the heroes and the villains in these movies. And it was interesting as you discussed how those changed over time and who became the trusted individuals, starting out with these doctors affiliated with the government or with these institutions to then those being the bad guys essentially. Do you feel like that also played any sort of role in expectations during the COVID pandemic and setting these guidelines for who to trust and who not to trust?

Lee Mordechai

For sure. And I think the movie that maybe does the most of that for me is Contagion, right. So in Contagion, I think it's like Jude Law I think, his character, right, the blogger who has been compared to I mean anyone from Alex Jones to US President Donald Trump with regards to the misinformation and essentially the self-interest through which he is portrayed there. But there are maybe more interesting answers to that question as well which is to try to reflect on how if we stay with Contagion, how exactly is the CDC portrayed, right? And then you have like different levels within the CDC and then some are portrayed more positively, others are portrayed more questionably, let's say. Merle I think mentioned earlier The Invasion in which the CDC is actually portrayed as the bad guys.

And we could go further back, right. So in Outbreak, for example, the military is portrayed as the bad guys. So that as well I think really ties into how we started this discussion, right, which is the moment in time when outbreak was made in the mid 90s, kind of critiquing the military was seen as something fashionable to do or something positive to do. Which post 9/11 I think is much more difficult if at all possible, right. And I think one of the questions is how does COVID change all this, right. I mean how does COVID, how does the CDC's performance during COVID, the government's performance during COVID, how are these going to change in subsequent movies about disease?

Erin Welsh

Absolutely. I mean what is the future of disease movies? What are the sort of trends that you expect to see given the COVID pandemic, how the government responded, how the CDC responded, and how people's faith or trust in these institutions and in science in general has kind of been shaken even more than it was previously?

Robert Alpert

I always thought there's a key line and I actually wanted it to be kind of the subtitle of our book. And there's a line in the movie that I think really stands for what's going on. And frankly it's going to inform I think all the future movies, which is, and I'm just quoting from, it says "like you said, baby, just taking care of everybody that's in my lifeboat." And I think that really to me at least has summarized where these movies have gone. And yeah, they'll have different plots and different narratives. But what they're gonna have in common is to the extent there's distrust and so forth, it's because I'm taking care of people in my lifeboat and I don't care about anybody else. And these movies now reflect that. And they'll take different forms I think. And the distrust will be about someone else.

But I think underlying it is a change and that's the change I think our book has reflected from the idea of a common public good, assuming you're the right kind of American of course, to everybody supposedly is equal. And I emphasize supposedly even though that's clearly not the case. And where everybody is out to get their own people in their lifeboat. And that's probably in real life also what I think really the movies reflect. And in real life how we treat disease and how we view the CDC and how we work together as a country is informed by that unfortunately. It's funny, we haven't used the word capitalism at all in this whole podcast yet. You can't kind of talk about disease movies without actually using that word because that is what these movies are a reflection of as we talk about, it's from managed capitalism to a neoliberal form and the effects that that has. And disease is one aspect obviously, that's what we focus on because disease is impacting us globally.

Merle Eisenberg

I do think interestingly enough, if you recall, I think they faded pretty quickly. There was actually a wave of disease movies that came out kind of in 2020, 2021, bleeding into 2022, and they all seem to completely flop. What I think is what is happening overall is to an extent the same thing that's happening with academic scholarship as well which is a sharp increase that happened initially and now there's actually a massive drop off in people doing infectious disease research, interestingly enough, and grant funding and all the like. So I think that there's kind of a moment for infectious disease research that happened and I think we shouldn't necessarily expect maybe disease movies to be as forefront at least in the short term. But I do think that movies could play a role in shaping change narratives. So if you want to be more positive than Robert's take on it, you could say because movies shape culture, right, if you give new desires, new ideas to people, that might actually help shape change moving forward in terms of people not just looking after people in their lifeboat.

Erin Welsh

Today some of the movies that I think about, disease movies that I have enjoyed in the past tend to have happy endings where there's optimism at the end. But I do think it's really interesting like what these different endings give us in terms of optimism, pessimism. What are the ones that people enjoy or just... Because personally I don't like just feeling pure despair, there's enough of that on like the news. So movies for me are an escape. But yeah, I was wondering if you had any thoughts on that.

Lee Mordechai

It's a great question. And I think that maybe I would say a few things here. One is that several of these movies try to keep the ending ambiguous on purpose, right. So Dawn of the Dead, right. So I mean some people survive, escape on that boat, and then you have post credit or during credit like brief footage I think from like a camera that they found there or something. But you actually do not see them all die, right. So the camera falls and then they kind of like run back to the boat and they may have survived and they may have not survived and you don't really know, right. So in one way this leaves up the opening for a sequel. But then you have other kind of ambiguous, let's say, endings, right. And I can return to Contagion. On one hand, you have a happy ending, right. I mean they beat the disease, the last scene is essentially them taking the virus and kind of like putting it in in the freezer near SARS and I think it was like a swine flu, if I remember correctly, right.

And then what does that actually mean, right? So is that like a happy ending or not really happy or a bad ending? And you could probably understand it in both ways, right. So yes, they defeated the virus and it kind of like went there. But that together with the constant references especially to swine flu and the SARS throughout the film kind of implies that this is not something that's gonna go away, right. So yes, we defeated this virus but another virus is gonna come in some number of years, right. So is this positive or is this negative? And it's I would argue purposefully ambiguous just for that reason, for every person to be able to kind of like come up with their own solution and people could discuss this film like we're doing right now.



Merle Eisenberg

I'll just briefly add in this is where you see the big contrast with older movies, right. So something like Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet, which is from 1940, it's a Jewish scientist finds a cure for syphilis, tests it on people in problematic ways but that obviously is not the end of the world or bad even though it's deeply problematic medically. But he dies, right, as a saint and there's this great scene where he has light around him literally like a halo, right. Or you think of Panic in the Streets from 1950 in which the doctor has a relatively speaking, we would say today, pretty crappy life. He has no money, his family life is not the best. But he saves the city and everyone kind of praises him for it.

And so you see that direct contrast from movies from 50, 60, 70 or more years ago where you have that much more positive message. So I would say to you, Erin, if you want to watch positive movies, you have to watch the older movies rather than watching the more recent things. Where even now sometimes, right, I'm thinking of the Planet of the Apes movies where everyone dies in the apocalypse of the pandemic and it's just in the end credits and it's not even shown, it's just like kind of airplanes moving on a map showing the spread of disease. So we're all going to die and we're all so worthless that we can't even show how we die.

Robert Alpert

Yeah, let me also suggest you watch the 1978 George Romero Dawn of the Dead because at least that's a little more positive. I mean they fly off, the two main characters fly off in a helicopter and the woman's pregnant. Yeah, they're low on fuel but you know what, they may not make it to Canada but there's a possibility. As opposed to the remake where they're gone. Okay, I'm sorry. And in Contagion, the probabilities are, because you see as Lee pointed out, you know this is gonna happen again in some other place. So yeah, I agree with Merle, watch an old movie. Old movies are much more comforting. Again, as long as you're the right kind of American, I gotta emphasize that.

Erin Welsh

Right. So I want to, yeah, I want to get into that if we can sort of this narrow definition of what an American is in some of these movies. How do disease-themed movies tend to represent marginalized groups? Or what do they tend to leave out in terms of the impacts of epidemics, pandemics, disease on marginalized groups?

Merle Eisenberg

In the early movies we don't basically see marginalized groups at all, right. So to give you the example, I was just talking about Panic in the Streets. Panic in the Streets is filmed on location in New Orleans and there's not a single black person in the movie, right. So that's effectively impossible in the city of New Orleans and it's obviously done on purpose for various racist reasons. And also non-Western Europeans, those are also shown as the problem in the movie and they're quarantined. So that's kind of how those early movies effectively are just openly racist in many ways and there's other examples that we could talk about.

By the time you get to the more recent movies, it's not as if they discuss race where they're somehow better on it, they just take characters who are black or who are from various different backgrounds, for example, and they kind of turn them into everyone else. In most cases, not in all cases. But so in something like Dawn of the Dead, it's actually quite a diverse cast but none of the people in the cast do anything with race or talk about racism or it's not really prevalent at all. It doesn't have a role in the film. They're just kind of built in as other individuals. And in fact I think if you look at old scripts of that, they just changed the race of some of the characters and it didn't seem to make a difference to the lines they gave or anything. So that kind of tells you what they were thinking in that movie overall.

And what I think movies failed that perhaps the most in many of these examples is when it came to COVID, right. We know COVID had a higher case fatality rate for anyone who is basically not a wealthy white person for all intents and purposes. And you would never know that in any of the movies, right. So in Contagion, the thing the disease does, MEV-1, is it kills everyone equally without regard to any socioeconomic demographic profile whatsoever, right. And I don't think, you would be the expert more than us, that any disease in the history of humankind actually works like that.

Robert Alpert

And everybody gets to a shot at getting the vaccine equally. It's just a lottery. I mean like really?

Erin Welsh

Oof, yeah, just a few minor details left out by these movies. All right, I've got one last question for you all. If you were to write a disease movie, what would it be like? What would the title be? Would it have a happy ending? Would it have a sad ending? Would it be more on the zombie side of things or on the more Contagion realism side of things? What's the message that you'd want to get across?

Lee Mordechai

Right, so I think my film would probably emphasize, I mean to continue this discussion, right, would emphasize the aspect of social justice, to use disease just to show inequities in society and try to present an optimistic way of working together, right. So drawing from earlier movies that optimism but kind of refracting that through the issues we have in current day society. Just to try to speak to the present, speak to again the inequalities that we've seen, inequalities with regards to who gets sick and who doesn't get sick, who can just run away and who cannot run away, right. So have maybe...

I mean in that sense it might look like a Contagion type story with lots of different characters from lots of different backgrounds. I would definitely make other choices than the ones made in Contagion, I would show more working class people, for example, I would show definitely less elites. Broadly speaking that would be the kind of story I would try to tell about how our society interacts with, I mean, not really unprecedented but supposedly unprecedented situation. How different institutions struggle and how individuals within those institutions struggle. I think that both of those things I think Contagion did well. And I would move away from the zombie apocalypse survivor like family group type, Walking Dead like genre of gratuitous violence which I think is less... I mean I guess more popular, right, but less interesting.

Merle Eisenberg

I have lots of hopes and dreams of what you could make a movie like that in the sense of showing lots of people, like Lee said. But I also know the struggle of a movie, you have to have characters and there's only so many people. So showing structures that have to be in interaction with those human beings. I mean I would suggest a movie that focuses more on to an extent more mythologizing figures in which we can have positive things from. So returning to the more 50s mold of, which are somewhat mythical, right, of someone like Jonas Salk obviously of not patenting the polio vaccine which is not really true.

But the message it implies and that it shows and how that can help change society and how people think about society very differently. So someone like that, focusing on a couple again returning to the heroic people figures but obviously bringing in some of the things I think Lee pointed out when it comes to aspects of race and class and all those types of issues that certainly need to be shown. But not making it so everyone dies or we're inevitably going to die or all the government officials are incompetent, right. Because all of that just continues to degrade the overarching situation and the problems that we face in America today. And probably Robert will say something about how it's critiquing capitalism but maybe he has a different take on this.

Robert Alpert

So when I decided, if I were to make a movie about disease, I'd actually... What I would want to do is try to have a drama where people represent different perspectives on our lives today and what the problems of our lives are and how we deal with each other. Because I think ultimately if we're gonna change things, we have to change it on a very personal level at the same time that it will affect the larger change. So if I were to do a movie, it would be a handful, maybe a dozen people, put them in a house or room, they're affected by a disease. No, there are not gonna be any zombies, I'm sorry. And they have to decide well what do they do about practical things? Like what do they do about how do they get food? How often do they wash? What happens if somebody hasn't washed? What happens if they disagree amongst themselves about what the precautions are that they have to take? How do you reach decisions?

Because at the end of the day, the personal is political. And so if you want to develop an idea of what disease is about and what the problems of disease are that these big movies are attempting to address, I think you have to do it at that level. Many people, I will acknowledge, are gonna be bored out of their minds. I can't help it. But for me a disease movie I want, I would want to express what I think the problems are and what diseases represent. And now I'm thinking is this gonna be a happy or sad ending? Maybe it's just enough if you just in some way can portray it and you leave open whether it's happy or sad. Because in a way that's not the point of movies. Movies should enlighten us, they should move us and help us understand things in ways that as we go about our daily lives we don't quite come to grasp. So that's the kind of movie I would like. A low budget independent movie that I could actually talk about some of these issues that all these movies raise.

Erin Welsh

Robert, Merle, and Lee, thank you all so much for joining me to chat about your fascinating book. I'll never watch a diseased movie again without thinking of what it's trying to tell me about society. If you also enjoyed this episode and want to read more, check out our website [thispodcastwillkillyou.com](http://thispodcastwillkillyou.com) where I'll post a link to where you can find 'Diseased Cinema'. And send us your disease movie recommendations or your favorite disease movies. I'm curious to hear what your thoughts are. I'll also include a link to Merle and Lee's excellent podcast, Infectious Historians. Erin and I were on an episode just a few months ago and we had an absolute blast. Don't forget, you can also check out our website for all sorts of other cool things, including but not limited to transcripts, quarantini and placebo recipes, show notes and references for all of our episodes, links to merch, our [bookshop.org](http://bookshop.org) affiliate account, our Goodreads list, a firsthand account form, and music by Bloodmobile.

Speaking of which, thank you to Bloodmobile for providing the music for this episode and all of our episodes. Thank you to Lianna Squillace and Tom Breyfogle for our audio mixing. And thanks to you, listeners, for listening. I hope that you liked this bonus episode and are loving being part of the TPWKY Book Club. A special thank you as always to our fantastic patrons. We truly appreciate your support. Well until next time, keep washing those hands.