

Contagion Nation

Bill Albertini

The potential for a global epidemic of human-to-human transmitted avian influenza has, over the past few years, produced a raft of textual response. One among many, and one of the few fictional texts focused specifically on bird flu, is *Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America*, a made-for-television movie that aired on ABC during sweeps week this past May, 2006. While not a commercial success, it is notable for two important factors: in the first place, its enactment of certain national fantasies about citizenship and national belonging, played out in its idea not of the illness itself, but of recovery from it; and in the second place, its location (and self-location) within a constantly evolving, ever-expanding set of authorized discourses about influenza, transnational movement, and national responses, discourses emanating from medical journalism, popular science, and government officials.

The film opens with text and voice-over that stakes its claim to be a part of, rather than on the border of, officially sanctioned statements about avian influenza. Large-print, all-capitals white text appears on a plain black background in the manner of an emergency warning or a newsreel, and is read by a deep male voice, stating that “The H5N1 virus is currently infecting wild birds and poultry in 48 countries in Asia, Europe, the middle east, and Africa. Human cases have been limited and have resulted in approximately 125 deaths.” It goes on to limit the threat in a manner that simultaneously opens up other possible outcomes: “According to experts [...] So far, there has not been a *known* transmission of the disease in the form which could fuel a pandemic. [...] Scientists *continue to debate* the potential for this

[...] virus to mutate and then be easily passed among humans” (my emphasis). The film ended with the actor who played a nurse who dealt most directly with patients urging viewers to visit the US government’s website for information about avian influenza, a site managed by the US Department of Health and Human Services.¹ The film thus opens and closes with text that claims forms of legitimacy (by simultaneously referencing expert scientific knowledge and the limits of that knowledge) while also thrusting itself into the public sphere as authorized public discourse. Despite its tendency toward melodrama (a genre de-authorized from official truth-telling), *Fatal Contact*’s self-location within the realm of official discourse seeks to create an authority, an authority that is actually underwritten by the national fantasy of belonging—the intimate public sphere of which Lauren Berlant writes—in which the film actively participates.

News as Advertising

Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America, ABC’s television movie about a possible global pandemic of human-to-human transmitted H5N1 Avian Influenza, premiered during the May 2006 sweeps week amidst much discussion, although not amidst as much actual attention from viewers as the network would have liked.² The television film suffered from a lack of investment from ABC’s advertising department and from poor pre-sweeps reviews. It perhaps suffered most from “disaster fatigue,” since its premiere came at a time when avian influenza has already long been a presence in television news while also not obviously changing much, at least in the eyes of American viewers (avian influenza has had a much stronger effect on daily life in poultry-producing areas of Southeast Asia).

¹ See <pandemicflu.gov>. The site is mirrored at <avianflu.gov>.

² According to ratings reports, *Fatal Contact* lost heavily in the ratings game to Fox’s *American Idol* and *House*. *Fatal Contact* earned a 4.1 rating and a 6 share over its two hours, meaning that roughly 4.5 million households reported watching it, along with a reported 6% of televisions in use at the time. In comparison, *American Idol* is estimated to have been watched in over 18.5 million households and on 25% of in-use televisions. (“Fox Does ‘House’ Cleaning”)

CONTAGION NATION

ABC located the film well within the flurry of news about avian influenza, promoting the film not so much with traditional advertising as through its infotainment apparatus—effectively working to make the film an integral part of the avian flu news cycle (a move that saved advertising dollars). Andrew Bridges’ review of the film, written for the Associated Press wire service, serves as a good example of the use-value, for ABC, of the collapse of the border between news and entertainment, a collapse that is endemic in mass-media depictions of epidemic illness.³ The story’s ostensible role is that of a standard television-film review. But the Bridges’ article is carefully positioned such that his tepid review, at times focusing on the film’s inaccuracies or exaggerations (he calls it “Hollywood’s version of bird flu, a blur of fact and fiction that some scientists say could confuse the public”), serves instead to authorize the film’s take on bird flu, placing it within the field of sanctioned discourse.

On the ABC News website, the article is blended nearly seamlessly with news content—not such that it would trick a casual reader, but in such a way that the aura of newsworthiness attaches to the film despite its perceived shortcomings (it is placed under the “Entertainment” banner, but is otherwise visually identical to the rest of the site). Most notably, the second and third paragraphs of the film review are interrupted by a web link declaring, “For coverage of the spread of bird flu, click here.” That link takes readers to the section of the ABC News website dealing with avian influenza, and to a series of medical and public health articles. It follows immediately after text heralding the film’s arrival “just as scientists are to begin testing of wild birds in Alaska that could herald the arrival of bird flu in North America. Scientists fear the bird flu virus could evolve so it could be passed from human to

³ For example, Oscar Petersen’s film *Outbreak* (1995) also makes claims to being about a possible epidemic of an Ebola-like illness. Perhaps most famously, Richard Preston’s 1997 novel *Cobra Event*, about a fictional terrorist plot to release a bioengineered infectious disease, was famously read by then-President Bill Clinton, who authorized the Federal Bureau of Investigation to look into the possibility that the novel’s events could come to pass.

human, sparking a global pandemic.” A still photograph from the film, showing a scene in which Chinese officials collect chickens for slaughter, accompanies the article and bears a nearly identical caption.⁴ The text of the article, its accompanying photograph, and the photograph’s caption, place the film in conversation with ongoing events, while the link blurs the line between entertainment and news; the possibilities of new media attach film an authorized voice.

That claim to authority is echoed by ABC executives. Diana Kerew, an executive producer on the film, states that *Fatal Contact* is “a plausible, worst-case scenario. This could actually happen. It may not be this bad but it could be this bad. The reason to portray it this way is to kind of give a wake-up call to everyone and this is something we shouldn’t ignore and we should be as prepared as we should be” (Bridges). That claim appears in the story as a foil to the review’s skepticism (although not outright denial) of the film’s claims, bolstered by references to public health doctors who praise some aspects of the film and condemn others.

ABC continued that connection between the film and sanctioned public health discourse on its own televised news programs. ABC followed the film’s Tuesday-evening airing with coverage of avian flu on its local news affiliates as well as on its long-running national late-night news program, *Nightline*. Both shows utilized the same headline for their segments: “Bird Flu: Fact vs. Fiction,” again simultaneously raising doubts about the veracity of ABC’s own film while at the same time placing that film at the center of discursive investigations of avian influenza. In each news segment, scenes from the film compel the news program’s investigation of medical and public health “facts.” As with the placement of review articles about the film alongside medical journalism about bird flu, these news reports extend the significance of *Fatal Contact*, bleeding it beyond the boundaries of its prime-time slot, and in the

⁴ Source: ABC News Website, accompanying Andrew Bridges’ Associated Press article. <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory?id=1902688>

CONTAGION NATION

process locating it within the constantly evolving set of stories about the risks of avian influenza.

In each of these cases, ABC uses doubt to their advantage. The blurring of lines between fact and fiction, between news and entertainment, becomes a means for generating certain forms of discursive content. In the skepticism of the Andrew Bridges review, and in that implied by the local news and *Nightline* reports, audience suspicion and curiosity are aroused for the sake of binding audience desire to outlets that are preset: “click here” takes the reader deeper into the mass news media’s reportage on avian influenza as it marks out a space for accepted discourse, in which *Fatal Contact* has been placed.⁵

Illness and National Fantasy

Despite, or perhaps because of, its self-location within sanctioned discourses, it is tempting to read *Fatal Contact*, along with other narratives in the epidemic illness genre, in terms of who is rewarded and punished within the plot. That line of questioning is only productive to an extent—*Fatal Contact*, in particular, seems to want to make a space for some other sets of logic, as it seems intentionally to refuse to simply punish those who act poorly and spare those who behave with saintly self-sacrifice. (At the same time, it insists on holding on to a small portion of this logic—in particular, the Virginia governor’s son dies in a way that conveniently punishes the governor and teaches him A Valuable Lesson.) Overall, however, the film seems interested in presenting an epidemic as a moment in which those who fall ill do so randomly and without apparent meaning—a gesture towards the logic, or illogic, of illness in Camus’ *The Plague*.

Tracking illness as a series of random interactions is as common, in its own way, as imagining illness as a punishment for transgression, and those seemingly contradictory logics interpenetrate in *Fatal Contact*. Early in the film, after an opening

⁵ Thanks to Leanne Gilbertson for pointing this out while reading an earlier version of this essay.

BILL ALBERTINI

credit sequence largely organized around visuals of disease-tracking systems (geese in flight with serial numbers near them, as if tracking tagged animals or incoming enemy planes, maps with widening circles marking possible disease epicenters), a quick series of edited-together scenes puts the film's avian plague into motion, in doing so stressing both the popular image of a world without borders, connected intimately by easy plane travel (for the global elites who have access to easy travel). We first see a scene of chickens being culled in Guangdong, in southeast China. An American businessman visits a bottling plant where he crosses paths with an ill worker, who had earlier been seen hiding his chickens from the frightening military and medical officials who were violently enforcing the culling program. Soon we'll see the white American businessman, hovering between looking ill and merely looking tired, talking with his wife from an airport bar, saying that he might not be back in time for a son's little league game.

Thus in only its first few moments, the film sets into motion a number of different discourses surrounding illness: in the first place, the technological and military visualization of illness as a question of borders and global movement to be tracked, as if in wartime. In the second, the potential problems of globalization: while at the bottling plant, the white American businessman, Connelly, responds to the ill worker by asking the Chinese executive whether how long the shifts are, raising the specter of American companies benefiting from abusive labor practices. Further, Connelly says to his wife that he might miss his son's game, raising the image of the absentee father who invests time in work rather than with his family. In the third place, and with the most visual fanfare, the film raises the issue of random and fast-paced infection, as it traces a series of paths from Connelly: from his drink napkin to the fingers of the bartender to another customer's drink; from his hot towel on the airplane to food served to other passengers; and quickly on to a dazzling array of figures, each infecting others, laid out in a grid like a wildly extended, and much less pleasant, opening sequence from *The Brady Bunch*.

CONTAGION NATION

Here, contagion is primarily random, without the same moralizing force so often attached to that other catastrophic worldwide pandemic, HIV/AIDS. The second discourse, that of the punishment for bad behavior, is contained by the fact that Connelly makes it home in time for the game, a dedicated father and loving husband. The discourse of military-style visual tracking of potential contagious invaders is effectively paired with a discourse of random interconnectedness. Rather than contradict one another, they are made to function complementarily. The chance encounter becomes deadly, but audience curiosity about and fear of disease is corralled toward a fantasy of observation: through the television medium, every event, just like every bird in the opening credits, can be tracked. Television functions as a cosmic eyeball, giving the viewer a range of vision unavailable to any character, no matter how well-placed in medical or governmental halls of power.

But while *Fatal Contact* enacts random happenstance at the level of who falls ill, the film enacts its other national fantasy in response. Illness might fall randomly, but children, family, and immediate (white) community become the only sources of refuge. As such it participates in something akin to what Lauren Berlant has called the “intimate public sphere,” in which the idea of a Habermasian public has been restricted to familial intimacy, itself tied into heteronormative reproduction. Save for a doctor who works for the Centers for Disease Control and whose life is yoked to the social body, every other major character is carefully located within a family. Alma, a nurse in New York City who stays on the job to care for the ill during much of the film, quits her work suddenly after two related events—the first of which, the news of her pregnancy—is obvious, but the second of which should not be overlooked. Alma descends into the massive subway station that serves as a makeshift hospital where she has been working. A woman appears and asks Alma if she works there; newly aware of her pregnancy, Alma denies her job (despite her nurse’s scrubs), turns around and takes the up escalator out of the infected space. The woman who asks Alma for help has never appeared before. She’s an interloper and thus a threat—she even enters the scene

suddenly from the side, appearing in Alma's line of sight and ours, as the camera tracks over Alma's shoulder. We next see Alma as she arrives home bearing a book of baby names that she presents to her husband, effectively declaring her self-removal from the professional world (and from the state's system of treatment for the ill) and placing herself within, and only within, the logic of the reproductive heterosexual family.

Thus, the logic of heteronormative reproduction prevails. The primacy of the fetus is referenced when she tells Carlos of her pregnancy despite birth control, saying that "this baby just wants to be born." The film in this moment mobilizes its valuation of the intimate public sphere by way of the logic of "infantile citizenship" to which Berlant points in "The Theory of Infantile Citizenship" and in "America, 'Fat,' the Fetus." Alma's own life has been at risk during the epidemic, but the potential for reproduction alters the set of choices available. The heroism of Alma's decision turns on a logic that posits her pregnancy as "the unprotected person, the citizen without a country or a future, the fetus unjustly imprisoned in its mother's hostile gulag" (Berlant, "America" 97). That logic of the fetus demands the supposed safety of the intimate space of the family as projected on the fantasy-screens of television, rather than the state-mediated public engagement that had hitherto structured Alma's life in the film. Alma shifts between two forms of sainthood, and is trapped in both by the demands of the fantasy enacted in *Fatal Contact*. She is first the hero of official life—the saintly nurse who risks sacrificing all for the good of the ill—and later the hero of family life. The family becomes the primary space of recovery during an explicitly national crisis. As Alma and Carlos celebrate their familial intimacy dancing on their rooftop in one of the film's final scenes, the camera shifts to other families in moments of healing, binding familial pleasures to national ones.

The logic of intimate publicness also structures the other primary civilian storyline in the film—that of the Connelly family in (suburban) Richmond, Virginia. Following the death of Mr. Connelly, the film's "patient zero," his wife Denise retreats into a

CONTAGION NATION

traumatized waking coma as the local infrastructure crumbles. It is only when her son falls ill (from which he eventually recovers) that Denise Connelly seems to come awake. Her teenage daughter, who has been thrust into the parental role, is furious: “You’ve been hiding in here while the world’s been falling apart. There’s nothing anywhere but sickness and dead people,” she explains. Denise Connelly’s redemption comes by way of healing that rift within her family: notably by wrestling for scarce resources with another woman in an under stocked and mobbed supermarket, in order to protect the nuclear family and feed her sick-yet-recovering son. Later, she comes to the aid of a starving neighbor who had previously shunned her daughter, and organizes a neighborhood program that takes the broken social structure of the epidemic landscape and recreates all of the family values tacked onto mythical small-town America—in effect rebuilding the neighborhood as an extended upper-middle-class family. In this process, normative structures of gender, age, and family are reasserted. Order is restored as the son helps the elderly next-door neighbor with a chore, the teen daughter is inserted into the reproduction of family by caring for the neighborhood children, and Denise Connelly becomes a home economist to the larger family of the neighborhood. When the governor stops by to congratulate Denise on her work, he walks off on a tour of the neighborhood with she and her children, filling in as the missing father figure with an arm out to pat the recovering son on the back, finding in him the replacement for his own dead son (with his own wife conveniently absent from the scene). The national fantasy of destruction, then, begins with the loss of the father and concludes with family and community mutually reconstituted, absent the state. Within *Fatal Contact*, the state succeeds when it disappears: the Virginia governor succeeds when he begins a new initiative in which the state will not provide aid but will “open up those distribution pipelines” to get goods into atomistic communities who will, seemingly without expertise or training, care for themselves. He appears on television flanked by almost exclusively white citizens in a spot meant to signify urban Richmond, Virginia, touting a pandemic-response blend of a George H. W. Bush’s

thousand points of light and George W. Bush's tax cuts described as returning self-determination to citizens.

Both within the logic of its fictional narrative and through its self-location within sanctioned journalistic discourse about avian influenza, *Fatal Contact* enacts a series of fantasies. By describing itself as "a fictional answer to the question what if," as it does in its opening screens of text, it claims to speak as quasi-documentary of a possible future. The film itself need not fulfill that claim—it only gestures vaguely towards documentary conventions. Its self-location instead places it inside a web of ongoing medical and public health conversation about avian influenza, made a part of the conversation without needing to claim truth. Within *Fatal Contact*, the horror of pandemic illness is confronted not through questions of access to care or state intervention. The film accesses viewer fears about pandemic illness,⁶ as well as their accompanying narrative desires, and directs those fears toward previously demarcated avenues.

The intermixed fear and visual pleasure attached in the opening scenes to tracking cases of influenza is, by means of the film's narrative, transferred and bound to spaces of familial intimacy. The geography-spanning movement of the camera's eye, in the opening scenes a means of tracking illness, at the end envisions a nation formed of domestic spaces. It is both intimate and public, at once familial and national, the reconstitution of home and community. While the film claims to speak with some authority at bird flu, and while it ostensibly raises questions about national preparedness, the desires and pleasures attached to the national fantasy of intimate citizenship work to minimize those calls.⁷ Viewers are offered

⁶ For a different response to the possibility of an avian influenza epidemic, see Mike Davis, *Monster at Our Door*, or the interview with Davis conducted by Amy Goodman for *Democracy Now!* For an influential description of very different means of thinking about epidemic illness, see Paul Farmer.

⁷ The film *actually* ends with its C.D.C. doctor uncovering a newly mutated, and far more deadly, form of the virus in Angola, in a scene seemingly stolen from that more famous apocalyptic disease narrative *Outbreak*. This event theoretically puts a tragic spin on the healed familial moments, but it seems so

CONTAGION NATION

criticisms of the state—a way of thinking about the national public and the rights of every citizen to health care and protections—but then are suddenly asked to ignore the state and embrace the national family, instead.

Sources:

“Bird Flu: Fact vs. Fiction.” *Action News*. ABC. WTVG, Toledo, Ohio. 9 May 2006.

“Bird Flu: Fact vs. Fiction.” *Nightline*. ABC. WTVG, Toledo, Ohio. 9 May 2006.

Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997.

Berlant, Lauren. “America, ‘Fat,’ the Fetus.” 83-144.

Berlant, Lauren. “Introduction: The Intimate Public Sphere.” 1-24.

Berlant, Lauren. “The Theory of Infantile Citizenship.” 25-53.

Bridges, Andrew. “Bird Flu Hitting TV Screens May 9.” Associated Press Wire Service. *ABC News Online* 28 April 2006. 1 September 2006.
<<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory?id=1902688>>.

Davis, Mike. *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu*. New York: The New Press, 2005.

out of place within the narrative logic of the film that, rather than revising what has come before, it simply gets overrun by the familiar fantasies previously enacted.

BILL ALBERTINI

Farmer, Paul. *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1999.

Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America. Dir. Richard Pearce. Scr. Ron McGee. Perf. Joely Richardson, Justina Machado, Stacey Keach, Ann Cusack, Scott Cohen. Sony Pictures Television. ABC. WTVG, Toledo, Ohio. 9 May 2006.

“Fox Does ‘House’ Cleaning.” *Internet Movie Database*. Studio Briefing. 10 May 2006. 1 September 2006.
<<http://www.imdb.com/news/sb/2006-05-10#tv2>>.

Goodman, Amy. “Mike Davis on The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu.” Interview with Mike Davis. *Democracy Now!* 19 October 2005.
<<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/10/19/1332209>>