

Buffering Anxiety of Pandemics: A Post-pandemic Perspective to Steven Soderbergh's

Contagion

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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary study aims to explore the psychological impact of pandemics in cinema with a special reference to Steven Soderbergh's movie *Contagion*. The study refers to Orhan Pamuk's essay, "What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us" (2020), about Pandemic novels where he traces the common initial responses to the outbreak of a pandemic by comparing the current coronavirus pandemic and the historical outbreaks of plague and cholera pinpointing the traits attributed to pandemics and suggesting other psychological defense mechanisms. In this respect, the study attempts exploring the re-contextualization of Pamuk's ideologies in cinema through shedding the light on the functions of camera angle shots, colors, sound effects, point of view, and flashbacks.

1. Introduction

"Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise." (Albert Camus' *The Plague*)

Pandemics are for the most part disease outbreaks that become widespread as a result of the spread of human-to-human infection. There have been many significant disease outbreaks and pandemics recorded in history, including Spanish flu, on Kon flu, SARS, H7N9, Ebola, Cholera, plague and recently the new COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, there are common features of pandemics, including wide geographic extension disease movement, novelty, severity, high attack rates and explosiveness, minimal population immunity, infectiousness, and contagiousness. The novelty, infectiousness and contagiousness of pandemics stimulate a sense of hazard, mystery, uncertainty, and probably a sense of "uncanniness". Moreover, this will develop a sense of the absurd and meaninglessness resulting in a sense of despair, loss, and fear. These pandemics will develop more psychological core issues like fear of loss, fear of intimacy, fear of death, and fear of abandonment. Accordingly, one starts to attempt overcoming these psychological core issues by anxiety buffers represented by Sigmund Freud as ego defense mechanisms and later by Terror Management theorists. These anxiety buffers include the Freudian defense mechanisms of denial, displacement, selective memory, and avoidance. In terms of Terror Management Theory (TMT Hereafter), this will be overcome by a strong belief in symbolic immortality and sometimes transcendental heroism. These psychological and existential dimensions that result from the outbreak of pandemics are illustrated in literature as well as in cinema. In this respect, the anxiety buffers developed to defy the psychological impact of pandemics on humans will be explored in Steven Soderbergh's movie *Contagion* (2011).

The paper will, therefore, be concerned with the psychological impact of pandemics tracing the common psychological core issues and traumas developed due to pandemics and the ego defense mechanisms used to overcome the sense of fear, anxiety, and death resulting from the outbreak of pandemics. Since the study is concerned with the relationship between pandemics and its philosophical impact on humanity, Camus's philosophical contribution regarding existentialism and the absurd will be highlighted in relation to pandemics in the selected discourse. It is worth noting that the psychological impact of pandemics will involve classical psychological theories, mainly Sigmund Freud's contributions to psychological core issues and ego defense mechanisms. It also involves Freud's concept of the Uncanny and its relation to the fear of the unknown associated with pandemics in general. The use of Terror Management Theory – a theory that is based on existential psychology - is also highlighted in the analysis of the selected text examining the role of anxiety buffers like symbolic immortality and transcendental heroism that are used as other means of defense mechanisms. The paper will, therefore, examine Ernest Becker's contribution in *The Denial of Death* (1973) as well as the contributions of other TMT theorists like Tom Pyszczynski and Jeff Greenberg. The choice of literature of the absurd represented by a science fiction movie foretelling the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic – Soderbergh's *Contagion* - will reflect all the common psychological and existential features that are recurrent with the outbreak of any pandemics.

The recurrence of pandemics throughout history proves that there is nothing new about them and, in turn, are considered a repetition. In his article "Disasters, pandemic and repetition: a dialogue with Maurice Blanchot's literature", based on the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot's book *The Writing of the Disaster*, Leonardo Mattietto states that there are "calls for scientific knowledge of catastrophes towards preparing appropriate responses to these unfortunate events that repeatedly happen in human history." (p.1) Furthermore, history should not be ignored since humans can learn from the past in order to prepare for the future. In his article, Mattietto mentions that "all things in life that have once existed tend to recur." (Mattietto, p.2) In this respect, all disasters that happened before tend to be repeated. Mattietto adds that "[t]he way society values scientific knowledge reflects its political maturity and the ability to overcome the most acute crises. Science has been its most potent ally in favor of survival and of gaining quality of life." (p.2) These logistics could be adequately explored in Soderbergh's movie *Contagion*. In fact, pandemics have always taken us by surprise and the first cases were scary cases. The initial waves of public worry usually rise to fear, and in some cases panic specifically when it is obvious that the illness may not be controlled.

According to Freud, the uncanny is something threatening, terrifying, uncomfortable, and unknown. Additionally, Freud writes that "[w]e can understand why linguistic usage has extended *das Heimliche* into its opposite, *das Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression." (*The Uncanny*, p. 13) In other words, Freud stresses on the concept of the uncanny because it appears to reflect the process of repression figured out in repetition. Since the feeling of the uncanny is triggered by repetition, Freud states that "finally there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character-trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime, or even a same name recurring throughout several consecutive generations." (*The Uncanny*, p.9) In this respect, there is a repetition of the same thing, features, characters, virus and even pandemic; this triggers the type of anxiety that might be defined as the "fear of the unknown." He also the following in this context:

[t]he most remarkable coincidences of desire and fulfillment, the most mysterious recurrence of similar experiences in a particular place or on a particular date, the most deceptive sights and suspicious noises—none of these things will ... raise that kind of fear which can be described as "a fear of something uncanny." For the whole matter is one of "testing reality." (*The Uncanny*, p. 17)

Freud further elaborates on this saying that “[a]n uncanny effect is produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality” (*The Uncanny*, p.15). In other words, through using a psychoanalytical perspective, it takes an effort to know how the pandemic is being handled in the depths of our unconscious. Using Freudian concepts like the "uncanny" or the "unknown" sheds light on how the disease affects our inner reality. In her paper “The Ravaged Psyche: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Human Mind,” Parul Bansal says that “[f]ear and anxiety have been as contagious as the disease.” (p.5) In this respect, fear and anxiety have been the most common feelings associated with any kind of pandemics. In fact, when the pandemic hits any place, the people are aware that it exists, but they deny that it is going to affect them. However, the threat becomes immediate and real when people notice its immediate increase and spread in a matter of days. Therefore, whether or not they become physically ill by the disease, the pandemic becomes a pressing reality that infects both their individual and collective subconscious and create fear and anxiety in them. People feel afraid because they do not understand the cause of their anxiety. In other words, they do not know the purpose of the disease, how is it spreading? What are its symptoms? Is it visible or invisible? Is it a new thing? Its novelty remains to be its most unknown part and, in turn, triggers an extreme sense of fear and anxiety.

As long as Freud's concept of “the uncanny” is associated with the unknown, the meaningless and the vague, it could be related to Albert Camus' concept of *L'Absurd* or “The Absurd.” The word absurdity derives from the Latin word *absurdum*, which also means “out of tune” or “irrational”. It is also mentioned that the word "absurdity" has two more meanings. The first aspect is concerned with the meaninglessness of human existence, which results from its absence of ultimate meaning or purpose. In the second aspect, absurdity transcends the boundaries of logic and entails humans' power of feeling and belief to be accepted. An individual experiences absurdity when the world around him differs from his expectations and understandings due to the irrationality and the absence of coherence. This absurdity drives an individual to feel hopeless, anxious, frightened, and depressed. In his article “Camus's Critiques of Existentialism”, Richard Raskin explains that according to Camus, “existentialism was seen as life-denying, and as such, as diametrically opposed to Camus's own life-affirming outlook.” (p.163) In other words, existentialism was considered as a denial of life.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1979), Albert Camus further explains absurdism as being “born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.” (p.32) In this respect, the absurdity or the irrationality of a meaningless universe clashes with people's desire for a meaningful existence, establishing the conflict known as the absurd. Camus adds that “[t]his divorce between man and his life, the actor and the setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.13) Meaninglessness is accentuated in times of pandemics and epidemics; the lack of meaning is intensified as people question why and what a virus is. This further links the concepts of the absurd to that of the uncanny and supports the relevance of using such concepts to analyze Soderbergh's movie.

In fact, one of the most well-known movies that best represent the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic before it takes place is Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011). The American medical Sci-Fi thriller *Contagion* is directed by Steven Soderbergh and written by Scott Z. Burns. It is worth mentioning the definition of medical Sci-Fi thriller before exploring what *Contagion* speaks about. In his article “Differences between Sci-Fi Genres”, Guy Morris explains that “A sci-fi thriller will want to blend the story and reader reality to increase the plausibility of an imminent threat. While the emotional response is subconscious, the sense of safety or tension is real.” Soderbergh is interested in medical thriller movies; therefore, in a medical thriller story, the setting is typically a hospital. It is a medical suspense thriller that leaves viewers guess from one scene to the next and keep watching to see where the characters end up. This fascinating medical thriller challenges viewers to think about the dangerous developments

taking place in our world today and the necessary worldwide measures to overcome them. It is noteworthy that medical thrillers usually portray or predict horrible scenarios where diseases become epidemics.

Exploring the existential and psychological impact of pandemics in the movie entails a detailed summary of it as each single detail is significant in contributing meaning to the focal point of the study. The movie starts with Beth Emhoff, an AIMM Alderson global marketing operations manager, who engages in a physical relationship with her ex-lover during a Chicago layover while travelling back from a business trip to Hong Kong. After she comes back home to Minneapolis, Beth feels ill and suffers a seizure; meanwhile, Mitch takes her to the hospital, but she dies of an unknown virus. Beth spreads the virus to her son Clark and her husband, Mitch Emhoff. When Mitch gets back home, he discovers that his 6-year-old stepson, Clark, has also passed away. Thus, the doctors isolate Mitch only to discover that Mitch is immune to the unknown virus while he is quarantined in the hospital.

After the end of his isolation in the hospital, Mitch keeps his teenage daughter, Jory, under quarantine at home in order to protect her from the disease. In Atlanta, Department of Homeland Security representatives talk with Dr. Ellis Cheever, who works for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) based on fears that the illness might be a bioweapon. Therefore, an Epidemic Intelligence Service officer works for the CDC named Dr. Erin Mears is sent by Cheever to Minneapolis, where she tracks down everyone who has been in touch with Beth. Immediately after meeting many people, Mears catches an infection and passes away. Soon after, several cities are quarantined as the unknown virus spreads, leading to panic, massive looting, and violent outbursts. Dr. Ally Hextall, a research scientist at the CDC who is devoted to the study and development of a vaccine, concludes that the virus is a merging of genetic material from pig- and bat-borne viruses.

According to the scientific researchers in the movie, the recently discovered MEV-1 (foreshadowing the COVID-19) cannot be grown in a cell culture. Moreover, Cheever controls all research to one government site because he believes the virus is too destructive to be studied at several labs. Hextall urges Dr. Ian Sussman, a researcher at the University of California, San Francisco, to damage his samples. Sussman continued his MEV-1 research in San Francisco and created the first MEV-1 cell culture in a fetal bat cell line, from which Hextall develops a vaccine after being ordered to close the BSL-3 lab he was working in by the CDC. Scientists know that the virus is transmitted via respiratory droplets and fomites – reminiscent of the COVID-19 pandemic's forms of infection. In addition, they predict a mortality rate of 25–30% and an infection rate of 1 in 12 of the world's population.

As per the synopsis of the movie, it is noticeable that there are many psychological and existential dimensions that could be inferred and are in alliance with the examined movie. As far as the psychological impact is concerned, it is worth noting that the sense of uncanniness envelops the whole movie. This is illustrated at the beginning of the movie in the parts when Mitch asks Dr. Arrington about the name of such a disease. Mitch states, “what was it?” Dr. Arrington says “we don’t always know.” He adds that “some people get the disease and live and some get sick and die.” (*Contagion*, 2011) In other words, it is an unknown disease because they are still searching to find out what this disease is and where it came from. As for repetition which is inherent in stimulating the sense of the uncanny, it could be traced in the following example. Dr. Cheever says the following regarding a case in Hong Kong: “[t]hey’re using the same protocols established for SARS. They Quarantining the complex and screening for symptoms.” (*Contagion*, 2011) In this respect, this unknown virus causes respiratory illnesses like SARS, and later the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the same prevention of the virus's spread during SARS is highlighted in many parts in this movie. For example, the officer is seen in the movie doing many precautions, including masks for the patient, body temperature measuring, and recording the quarantine procedures.

Since the sense of the uncanny stimulates the fear of the unknown inside the individual – in this case the fear of death resulting from facing the unknown pandemic - as stated above, a study of the existential and absurd ideologies embedded in the movie would be required to meet the objective of this paper. Based on Camus’ definition of the absurd as being meaningless and illogical, the characters in the movie reveal their denial of the existence of the disease and its uncontrollable nature. For example, the doctor tries to share the news in the hospital and to tell Mitch that his wife Beth passed away in the hospital.

Dr. Arrington: So, despite all our efforts, she failed to respond.

Mitch: Okay.

Dr. Arrington: And her heart stopped.

Mitch: Okay.

Dr. Arrington: And unfortunately, she did die.

Mitch: Right.

Dr. Arrington: I am sorry, Mr. Emhoff.

Social worker: I know this is hard to accept.

Mitch: Okay. So, can I go talk to her?

Dr. Arrington: M. Emhoff, I’m sorry, your wife is dead. (*Contagion*, 2011)

According to Mitch, Dr. Arrington’s answers are absurd answers because what the doctor said is illogical. For doctors, such a disease belongs to the unknown as they cannot figure it out until scientists begin their examinations. In Freudian terms, the fear of the unknown stimulates the sense of uncanniness as reflected in the above quotation.

As stated above, the original Scott Z. Burns movie pictured a SARS-like virus escaping Asia and spreading over the world. Soderbergh examines the different drastic impacts of the pandemic using different camera angle shots. He discusses a lot of objective scientific facts as well as subjective experiences. It is worth noting that the focus in *Contagion* is on the response to the pandemic not on characterization. In fact, there are many types of camera angle shots; however, this study will be concerned with the close-up, extreme close-up, medium, long, extreme long, and bird’s eye shots.

The screenshot below (figure 1.1) reflects a close-up camera angle shot which is “one of the most commonly used shot sizes in film.” (Studio Binder, 2019) Sometimes, the close-ups are meant to be extraordinary to get an added emotional effect. This is reflected in the screenshot below where the close-up angle shot is extraordinary reflecting the wide-open-eyes of the patient signifying her fear and horror not only from the symptoms of the pandemic, but probably of the unknown accompanying it.



Figure 1.1: 0.08:46

In other words, this scene reflects the extreme close-up “[f]or amplifying emotional intensity, the extreme close-up puts the camera right in the actor’s face, making even their smallest emotional cues huge -- and raises the intensity of the problems behind them.” (Studio Binder, 2019) In light of this definition, this camera angle shot in the above figure best expresses the excessive fear the patient is undergoing and stimulates the sense of the uncanny in the movie viewers.

In fact, there is another example where a close-up camera angle shot is used to reflect the emotional effects of the character. In his book *Cinema Techniques: The Different Types of Shots in Film*, Timothy Heiderich mentions that one of the functions of a close up angle shot is that the viewer starts to “lose visual information about the character’s surroundings, but the character’s actions are more intimate and impacting.” (p.8) The screenshot (figure 1.2) depicts how shocked Dr. Erin Mears is after knowing that Aaron Barnes was the one who picked Beth up from the airport and, in turn, got the infection from her and becomes a carrier of this fatal disease. In this screenshot, the close-up camera angle shot shows Dr. Mears as scared and worried because she tries to protect people from this new virus.



Figure 1.2: 0:25:39

Bird’s Eye Shot (also called an extreme long shot) is another type of camera angle shots. In his book *Cinema Techniques: The Different Types of Shots in Film*, Timothy Heiderich says that bird’s eye shot “is an opportunity to be completely divorced from character, and let the shape of a grove of trees, the tangle of a freeway overpass, or the grid of city lights on a clear night dazzle the viewer.” (p.10) The screenshot below (figure 1.3) is considered a bird’s eye shot because it is panoramic, and it reflects the disastrous impact of the unknown pandemic.



Figure 1.3: 1:02:58

In light of this description, this camera angle shot used in the image above best portrays and reflects the huge number of dead bodies to the extent that they cannot be counted. Moreover, the panoramic camera angle shot reveals the very big number of these dead bodies inside the ambulance cars indicating that all the dead bodies are buried in a mass grave. In addition to this, viewers cannot figure out the facial expression or even see how sad they look. Thus, it is more of a bird's eye shot than a long shot, because of the indefinite number of victims of the new pandemic.

According to Heiderich, the medium camera angle shot “is where we are starting to engage with the characters on a personal level.” (p. 8) One of its functions is that “it is used for dialogue scenes, but also depict body language and more of the setting.” (Studio Binder, 2019) Many shots of the movie could be considered as a medium long shot as they are not too close to make close-up or too far to make a long shot or too emotionally distanced to the viewer. The screenshot below (figure 1.4) best expresses the type of medium angle shot through a dialogue between Mitch and Dr. Arrington at the hospital while the doctor tries to explain the fact of Mitch's wife's death, which sounds absurd to both Mitch and the viewers.



Figure 1.4: 0.10.08

Thus, it is considered a medium camera angle shot because Mitch's body language and his denial of his wife's death can be seen in this screenshot. The camera angle shot also reflects how Mitch feels sad and angry because doctors cannot figure out the cause of Beth's death from this unknown virus.

In cinema, the subjective and objective points of view are employed in the movie to serve a specific purpose. The subjective point of view in cinema transmits to the viewers not only the visual point of view, but also the emotional intensity experienced by the characters in the movie. When the point of view in a movie is subjective, we are more directly immersed in the action which intensifies our experiences. For example, in (figure 1.1) above, the cinematic point of view is subjective as the viewer identifies himself/herself with Beth and they can feel the horror she is going through. Therefore, the feeling of the uncanny is heightened in this scene by the existence of the fear of horror.

As far as the objective point of view is concerned, the audience feels that they are watching the events through a window, and they do not share the intense feelings of the characters. In other words, the objective camera implies a detachment from the subject on an emotional level. For example, in the screenshot below (figure 1.6), the viewer can observe people moving forward in order to save themselves from being infected by the virus; and this reflects how they are so scared from death. Unfortunately, by crowding, battling, and struggling for few supplies of food and vaccines, they lead to more problems. Moreover, although the virus may have first caused the anxiety, viewing the numerous dead bodies escalates this anxiety and horror.



Figure1.6: 0:58:39

In light of this explanation of the objective cinematic shot above, the viewers are clearly “sideline observers, not really involved in the action.” (Hitchcock, p.128) This shot claims the absurd feeling of fear of death. In fact, there are many cinematic points of views that could be classified as subjective and objective in the movie, but these two are the most striking and evident examples of cinematic subjective and objective points of view.

In Orhan Pamuk’s article entitled “What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us” published in April 2020 during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, he states that “[e]ventually I realize that fear elicits two distinct responses in me, and perhaps in all of us. Sometimes it causes me to withdraw into myself, toward solitude and silence. But other times it teaches me to be humble and to practice solidarity.” The statement suggests the traditional/normal psychological reaction to pandemics, mainly solitude and silence. However, it contributes an important anxiety buffer/defense mechanism – namely solidarity. These anxiety buffers/defense mechanisms become part of people’s reaction to pandemics throughout ages. In this sense, this study is concerned with the defense mechanisms introduced by Sigmund Freud and their development as anxiety buffers introduced by Terror Management Theory, as stated above, to explore the psychological impact of pandemics in the examined discourse. The defense mechanisms suggested by Sigmund Freud reflect the people’s reaction to any kind of fear – the fear of death/unknown in this case. According to Pamuk, “[t]he initial response to the outbreak of a pandemic has always been denial.” This is a common defense mechanism introduced by Freud and experienced by people during the outbreak of pandemics.

Over a century ago, the phrase "defense mechanisms" was first used to refer to a set of psychological techniques for resolving and overcoming intrapsychic problems. In his article, “Human Mechanisms of Psychological Defense: Definitions, Historical and Psychodynamic Contexts, Classifications and Clinical Profiles”, Giulio Perrotta says that “The defense mechanisms are psychological processes, often followed by a behavioral reaction, implemented to deal with difficult situations, to manage conflicts, to preserve their functioning from the interference of disturbing, painful and unacceptable thoughts, feelings and experiences.” (p. 6) In addition, Sigmund Freud was the first one who used the term defense and according to him, defenses are [unconscious](#). Freud explains the term ‘defense’ in "The neuro-psychoses of defense"(1894). In his paper “Defense Mechanism”, Sehyeon Baek explains how Freud defined defense. He says that “in order to ward off unacceptable ideas or feelings that would cause "distressing affect," a person unconsciously resorts to certain mental processes that oppose these ideas or feelings and render them less disturbing.” (p. 4) In other words, defense mechanisms are psychological tactics that people employ unconsciously to shield themselves from distress caused by undesirable thoughts or feelings. The study emphasizes the idea that, while times change, human behavior remains constant. Living under fear, danger and threat have serious psychological effects. Therefore, there are a lot of consequences

resulting from fear, such as anxiety, exile, anger, and depression. The selected discourse could be regarded as a very good exemplification of the above ideologies and entails a study of the TMT main thematic concerns.

As the contributions of TMT theorists such as Ernest Becker, Michael B. Salzman, Tom Pyszczynski, Jeff Greenberg, and Sheldon Solomon should be examined, this entails providing a detailed account of the emergence and development of TMT and the anxiety buffers people use to shield themselves against the fear of death. The anxiety buffers examined in the study are mainly transcendental heroism, symbolic immortality, and the need for human solidarity.

The study is concerned with the 20th century cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's ideas regarding how the fear of death haunts the human being, shaping one's experience of reality. We look at how Becker thought individuals alleviate this fear by striving to live meaningful and significant lives. Ernest Becker is a 20th century cultural anthropologist and writer who maintained that the idea of death is in fact inherent in humanity as he wrote in his book *The Denial of Death*. He states that "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity." (p.17).

It is important to note that TMT was developed by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszcznki, and it is based on psychoanalytic and existential ideas. In their article entitled "Clash of Civilizations?", they turned Becker's concepts into a theory that could be empirically examined. Therefore, TMT is a social psychological theory based on Ernest Becker's existential psychoanalytic writings. This existential aspect is emphasized much further in "Cultural Trauma and Recovery: Perspectives from Terror Management Theory" when Michael B. Salzman says that TMT considers "the terror inherent in human existence, and self-esteem. It appears to offer a powerful explanatory framework for understanding critical social and psychological phenomena occurring in naturalistic settings across persons, time, and place. Death, which is undoubtedly a universal human concern addressed in culturally different ways, offers a solid theoretical anchor for TMT." (p.175)

According to Salzman, human awareness of their limited existence is frightening. In her "The Politics of Fear and Its Defense Mechanisms: A Terror Management Theory Perspective to Ahmad Khaled Tawfik's *Utopia*", Dalia Mansour states that "[i]n case this existential terror is unbuffered, humans will get a feeling of being paralyzed and unable to function adaptively." Therefore, she adds that "TMT views this as an essential psychological conflict in humans resulting from the clash between humans' desire of life and their awareness of the inevitability of death." (p.12) In his book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker comments on the function of death fear in the human desire for meaning and states that "[f]or behind the sense of insecurity in the face of danger, behind the sense of discouragement and depression, there always lurks the basic fear of death, a fear which undergoes most complex elaborations and manifests itself in many indirect ways." (p.38)

Becker also proposed that in order to act in this world with relative composure with the decline in commitment to religion, human beings relieve their fear of death by attempting to avoid death's fatality, or by denying in some way that death is the final destination for men. In addition, most of those who have survived have learned to cope with their fear of death by seeking to live a life that will have an impact on the world long after they have passed away.

In fact, culture is examined as a psychological defense mechanism that controls existential terror inherent in human existence and this is further highlighted when Michael B. Salzman in "Cultural Trauma and Recovery: Perspectives from Terror Management Theory" states that culture is construed to "allow anxiety-prone human creatures to operate adaptively" (p.172) In addition, Salzman mentions that Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszsynski, suggested that "culture serves this essential psychological function by providing a potential buffer against the terror inherent in human existence." (p.173) In "Cultural Trauma and Recovery: Perspectives from Terror Management Theory", Salzman highlights the function of culture in providing an anxiety buffer as he states, "culture is a roadmap that tells us how to live and what kind of person to be to see ourselves as having value and significance in a meaningful world, thereby achieving the necessary anxiety buffer." (p.186)

TMT describes the connections between cultural elements, the terror inherent in human existence, and self-esteem. Furthermore, TMT examines two hypotheses: the first one is the anxiety- buffer hypothesis that states that “[i]f a psychological structure provides protection against anxiety, then ...that structure should reduce anxiety in response to subsequent threats.” (Salzman, p.175) Self-esteem is considered as a psychological structure and “cultural construction” and it is an essential anxiety buffer. (Salzman, p.186) Salzman adds that self-esteem is a “result of one’s having faith in the culturally prescribed worldview and seeing oneself as living up its standards. (p.176) Therefore, humans have to control existential fear and strengthen their self-esteem. Achieving high self-esteem or strengthening faith in the cultural worldview would reduce anxiety in response to threat and protect from death- related fear. The second hypothesis is the mortality- salience hypothesis which states that “[i]f a psychological structure provides protection against the terror inherent in human existence, ...then reminding people of their mortality should increase their need for the protection provided by that structure by activating the need for validation of their sense of value (self-esteem) and their faith in the cultural worldview.” (Salzman, p.175) Denial is the first response to mortality-salience hypothesis and this could be seen in the movie when Mitch refuses to be quarantined at the hospital because he is immune.

In her “The Politics of Fear and Its Defense Mechanisms: A Terror Management Theory Perspective to Ahmad Khaled Tawfik's *Utopia*”, Dalia Mansour states that “[a]s far as symbolic immortality is concerned, it means that death is transcended by man’s belief in immortality or the extension of one's being into eternity.” (p.21) In this respect, this might be depicted in an artistic work, in writing books, stories, and novels, or someone’s children “[a]s an extension of parents into the future.” (p.21) In reality, parents put their own selves into their children because they see them as having a future after death. People have to set their minds out on the idea that nothing lasts except good reputation and trying to always leave a good effect on people around you whether at work, in life, or as a father, mother, child and every such thing, it lasts.

According to TMT theorists, achieving self-esteem can also be found in suicide behaviors, such as bombings that suggest possible heroism and immortality. People participate in such activities in order to enrich and add value to their lives. In her “The Politics of Fear and Its Defense Mechanisms: A Terror Management Theory Perspective to Ahmad Khaled Tawfik's *Utopia*”, Dalia Mansour states that “[s]uch suicidal acts might make them of primary value in the universe and strengthen their sense of heroism.” (p.23) Moreover, Mansour adds that Becker describes the concept of heroism as “an outstanding phase of self-esteem and a reflex of the terror of death as well.” (p.13) Accordingly, in his book *The Denial of Death*, Becker says: [H]eroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration; it moves us deeply in our hearts because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be. (p.33) According to Becker, the desire for heroic action derives from a transcendental motivation to overcome the feelings of powerlessness and despair that are inherent in the existentially scared human beings.

As far as Soderbergh’s *Contagion* is concerned, TMT ideologies could be clearly explored through examining the cinematic techniques of color, sound effects, and flashback and their significance in the movie. In *Contagion*, one of the best precautions that should be taken into consideration is quarantining and checking for the symptoms in order to avoid the spreading of the virus. This is shown in the movie where Jory Emhoff, Mitch Emhoff’s daughter, was visiting her father in the hospital. Doctor: “Your Dad is in Isolation. You can go up the window, you can pick up the phone and you can talk to him.” Jory Emhoff: “Hey, dad. Are you sick?” Mr. Emhoff: “No, no, uh, it is all just, you know, a precaution, you know, just making sure.”



Figure1.7: 00:16:20

Therefore, this scene shows that precautions such as, quarantine and separation are taken for the people who do not have symptoms of the disease as well. This is illustrated in the case of Mr. Emhoff who had a close physical contact with his wife who was a victim of this contagious virus. Isolation is, therefore, another precautionous action taken by the government. In his article “The Reflection of the Pandemic Experience in *Contagion* (an operant conditioning theory criticism)”, Mister Gidion Maru, Sergio Reanaldy Mantouw, and Fivy Andries define isolation and state that it “refers to the separation between sick people due to the symptoms of infectious diseases with the aim of protecting uninfected people.” (p.423) For example, Dr. Mears is shown carrying a message when she establishes a building for the patients and saying “Okay, we’ll put the airlock here, I want 25 rows with 10 beds apiece. The most febrile cases at this end. We’ll set up a triage outside, FEMA can handle food in the basement and we’ll need to be operational within the next 24 to 48 hours.”



Figure1.8: 0:58:39

This scene presents Dr. Mears who represents the CDC and the government and provides a building for the patients to be isolated because the hospitals are already full of other patients.

In addition, there are many policies and regulations presented by the government for the public to survive and to avoid the spreading of the virus. Moreover, the government takes another action such as restricting access to public spaces, like schools where the illness has already infected victims, as in the next scene.



Figure1.9: 00:23:41

This scene shows that the Newscaster says that “[g]overnment officials are reporting the closing of Mondale Elementary School in suburban Minneapolis in response to the recent outbreak of a still unknown disease that has so far taken the life of a school nurse and three students.” (00:23:41, *Contagion*).

As for the Defense Mechanism of projection, Anna Frued defines projection as “the prohibited impulses outward. Its intolerance of other people precedes its severity toward itself. It learns what is regarded as blameworthy but protects itself by means of this defense mechanism from unpleasant self-criticism.” (*The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, p.119) In her book *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson states that projection is “ascribing our fear, problem, or guilty desire to someone else and then condemning him or her for it, in order to deny that we have it ourselves” (p.15). In *Contagion*, after the government knows that this disease is contagious, it sets up many regulations and precautions. The appropriate response in preventing the spreading of the virus consists of measures like isolation and quarantine, along with punishments for offenders. For example, Dr. Cheever describes how one can take care of themselves as shown in the screenshot below.



Figure1.10: 01:04:02

In the above screenshot, Dr. Cheever further explains the precautions taken to avoid the spread out of the virus as he says, “But right now, our best defense has been social distancing. No handshaking, staying home when you’re sick, washing your

hands frequently.” (01:04:02, *Contagion*) In this scene, according to Dr. Cheever, such steps like avoiding physical contact could prevent the virus from entering the body.

Denial is another type of defense mechanism. In her book *Critical Theory Today*, Tyson states that displacement means “believing that the problem doesn’t exist or the unpleasant incident never happened.” (p.15) For example, Dr. Arrington and one of the social workers try to tell Mr. Emhoff that his wife Beth died, but Emhoff denies what he heard from the doctor:

Dr. Arrington: “I am sorry, Mr. Emhoff.”

Social Worker: “I know this is hard to accept.”

Mitch: “okay. so, can I go talk to her?”

Dr. Arrington: “Mr. Emhoff, I am sorry, your wife is dead.” (*Contagion* 2011)

This scene shows how the shocked Mitch could not accept his wife death and denies it.

As mentioned above, the mortality- salience hypothesis is a psychological structure that provides protection against the terror inherent in human existence and it increases the cultural worldview and self-esteem. Self-esteem is an anxiety buffer which is considered as a psychological structure. In this movie, social distancing is illustrated in the dialogue between Emhoff and Andrew as follows:

Mr. Emhoff takes a strict reaction when Andrew comes to his house

Mr. Emhoff: “No, don’t open that door! Don’t, don’t open the door!”

Jory Emhoff: “What? it’s Andrew”

Mr. Emhoff: “Uh, Sorry, Andrew. I can’t let you in.”

Andrew: “I just came to give my condolences, Mr. Emhoff.”

Mr. Emhoff: “I understand, Thank you. But I can’t let you in.” (*Contagion* 2011)



Figure1.11: 00:41:02

In this scene, Mr. Emhoff does not allow his daughter’s boyfriend to come and bring flowers due to Mrs. Emhoff’s death. This behavior shows that Mr. Emhoff restricts his family’s contacts with strangers because he is afraid of losing his daughter. In addition, Mr. Emhoff was unaware of whether Andrew had been infected by the virus or whether the items he touched had also been exposed. Therefore, his action had a significant impact. Emhoff’s action of restricting people access to his

home is considered a kind of achieving high self-esteem that would reduce anxiety in response to threat and protect from death-related fear.

The significance of the family as a representation of symbolic immortality is highlighted in the movie. This can be seen when Mr. Emhoff took great care to ensure that his daughter was not exposed to any dangerous situations that could cause the virus to stick through touch. Mr. Emhoff: “Take your gloves off. Here, give me your hands. Now really rub this in.” (00:59:37, *Contagion*)



Figure1.12: 00:59:37

Thus, after they leave the store, Mr. Emhoff tells his daughter to apply the hand sanitizer immediately to avoid the infection.

Moreover, the movie depicts the value of the society as a symbol of symbolic immortality. For example, the government tells the people to take care and to take all the precautions into consideration, such as quarantine, social distancing, isolation, exile, self-prevention, washing hands, using hand sanitizers, and putting masks on while going out in public places. This is clear in *Contagion* when Dr. Cheever describes a case in Hong Kong as follows:

Dr. Cheever: “They’re using the same protocols established for SARS. They are quarantining the complex and screening for symptoms.” Therefore, the people must avoid physical contact with others to avoid getting infected.



Figure1.13: 00:12:37

In the above screen shot, the doctors and public health authorities are seen taking action to contain the spreading of the disease between the people and it is the same precaution of SARS.

In fact, transcendental heroism could be explored in *Contagion* when viewers see that Dr. Hextall is a research scientist with the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and she is considered the symbol of sacrifice who devotes her time and energy to the search for a vaccine. She injects herself with an experimental vaccine after developing it.



Figure1.14: 1:16:05

Furthermore, Hextall puts herself in danger by going to see her father who is dying in the hospital in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the vaccine. Hextall's injection with the experimental vaccine could be considered an act of transcendental heroism as she sacrifices her life to save people's lives in the world. In addition, in *Contagion*, the vaccine is developed for the majority of people, and they start taking their dose of vaccine and this is considered a happy moment that gives them a glimpse of hope.

Since the study is mainly concerned with a movie, cinematography is considered of utmost importance. The sound effects, for example, are supposed to grab the audience's attention. An example of this is the scene where Beth is talking on the phone with her affair at the airport.



Figure1.15: 00:01:47

This shot signifies that her cough and swallow attract the audience's attention despite the airport's background noises. This foreshadows her sickness. During the conversation, the man she talks to hears her cough and asks if she is okay. She replies, "No, I'm fine, I'm just jet-lagged".

Flashbacks are considered a significant cinematic technique as they sometimes disrupt the present in order to show the audience something important from the past. As a result, the information presented during a flashback has to be essential to understand the characters and the story deeply. For example, a flashback in the final scene in *Contagion* reveals how the virus was first spread. The movie tells that a bulldozer from AIMN Alderson takes down a palm tree, which throws several bats into the air. One bat eats a banana and drops some of it into a pig pen. The infected banana is taken by one of the pigs before being sent to the chef, who cooks it for dinner. Then, the chef goes outside to shake hands with Beth after being asked to go and take a picture with her.



Figure1.16: 1:41:17

In other words, this scene reflects how the virus was transmitted from Beth to the other people at the beginning of the movie; thus, she is considered as a “patient zero” for the entire outbreak.

In *How to Use Color in Film*, it is explained how color can convey meaning and it is stated that “color can affect us emotionally, psychologically and even physically, often without us becoming aware. Color in film can build harmony or tension within a scene, or bring attention to a key themes.” (p.1) In *Contagion*, colors like yellow, green, and blue shades are used to color many settings and scenes.



Figure 1.17: 0:58:32

For example, the yellow color has been shown to raise “Madness” and “sickness”, while a green color denotes the “danger” and “darkness” effect. (p. 4,5) Therefore, in the above screenshot, the effects of the yellow color reflect madness, anxiety, and illness, whereas the green color indicates danger, immaturity, and how those people are unlucky because there is not enough vaccine for them as presented in this scene. This effect reflects the stressful situation that surrounds the virus.

In *The Role of Color in Films*, the yellow colour is defined as “a contradictory colour that is disliked and increases anxiety; however, it is associated with happiness, wealth and knowledge/wisdom” (cited in Berens, 22). It is added that “people in the doldrums believe yellow is light and sunny and will cheer them up. But yellow creates anxiety and makes you more stressed out... In yellow’s presence, you’ll be more apt to lose your temper” (cited in Berens, 22). In this respect, the yellow color signifies the oppression of the characters in the movie with the consequences in the pandemic and accordingly it increases anxiety. Moreover, in his book, *The Role of Color in Films*, Daniel James Berens states that “red, orange and yellow are very stimulating and aggressive colours which stand out. They are used in warning signs in nature as well as manmade signs.” (p.28) This was employed/reflected in the movie in so many scenes to function as a warning sign to the uncontrollable to the outbreak of pandemics.



Figure 1.18: 1:03:02

In the above screenshot, the dead bodies are seen buried in a mass grief and wrapped in plastic bags. The blue color in this screenshot reflects the “cold, isolation, calm...melancholy and passivity.” (p.5)

In conclusion, this study examined the most recent article written by Orhan Pamuk on pandemic novels where he traces the common initial responses to the outbreak of a pandemic that has always been a denial. Denial, therefore, is considered a common defense mechanism/anxiety buffer highlighted by Freud and experienced by people during the pandemic outbreak. Moreover, this paper introduced some of the existential fears experienced by the characters in the movie, such as suffering, isolation, exile, denial, and fear of death. Added to this is exploring the anxiety buffers like symbolic immortality, transcendental heroism, culture worldviews, self-esteem, the mortality silence hypothesis as defense mechanisms with a special reference to Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* and other TMT contributors like Tom Pyszczynski and Jeff Greenberg. In this respect, the ideas of Ernest Becker are used to uncover further layers of meaning in the selected discourse. It is worth noting that this study highlighted some of the existential problems resulting from the outbreak of pandemic in *Contagion* foreshadowing the outbreak of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and presenting defense mechanisms and anxiety buffers to overcome these existential problems. This is explored through examining the significance of cinematic techniques like sound effects, flashbacks, camera angle shots, points of view, and colors, and how they are used to best deliver the main messages of the movie.

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