Alarums and Excursions: Plague and Its Fictions

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ABSTRACT

Plague has been a popular subject for speculative fiction throughout the twentieth century, especially as a convention to depopulate the world and consider new social arrangements. At the turn of the present century, plague is a consistent component of the near future diegesis. Plague becomes part of the background to the post-holocaust world. It is perceived as an ongoing experience and occurrence and its metaphorical use is connected to visualisations of obsolescence, ecological anxiety, capitalist logic and spiritual concerns. In other genres such as historical romance in the 1980s, plague is a mechanism of social mobility. Here it is a natural, God-given, horrible, but transient experience. This account of plague sees it as survivable and the consequences of survival become the focus of the story. Plague is a way of achieving social change, especially social mobility.

By the 1990s, the plague scenario was still attractive, but it had become mediated to encompass anxieties around high-level conspiracies. Plague and fatal epidemic disease were consequences of scientific, military and political decision-making to which the victim of the plague had little access. It thus becomes a contingent event which must be averted either by collective or individual heroic effort. The narrative therefore becomes much more of a thriller, to uncover the crime which set the potential of fatal epidemic disease in motion. At this point, the plague is often displaced and narrative attention focuses upon the exposure of fictional medical, business or scientific malpractice. Plague can therefore become a fictional convention for ex-

trapolating high level and commonplace corruption, ethical dilemmas, exploitative practices and the formal/informal intricacies of international relations, economics and ecosystems.

In the thriller, plague is an ambivalent entity often seen as a necessary evil. A first warning allows us to mend our ways. As well as the consequence of scientific advances, malpractice and corporate economics, plague is also seen in a variety of narratives as the logical, but unforeseen, consequence to a dependence on technology, e.g., Tepper's *A Plague of Angels*, Piercey's *He, She & It*, Longo's film version of "Johnny Mnemonic" and Patrick Lynch's novel *Carriers*. However, in rare instances it is humanity's salvation and it becomes a metaphor for transition both physically and materially or in terms of attitude and worldview. This paper looks at the contemporary mythology of plague in popular fiction. It aims to explore the meaning of plague in its eschatological manifestation either as savior or destroyer.

KEY WORDS

Diegesis
disaster narrative
corruption
conspiracy
epidemic disease
ecosystems
ecological anxiety
Black Death
eschatological warning
dystopia
mythology of plague
obsolescence
post-holocaust world
plague

Originally, I started to examine plague narratives as a way to devise a means of studying popular fiction across a contemporary period without the restrictions of genre. At that point, I was interested in medievalism, as this provided a diegetic background for romance, detective fiction, fantasy, science fiction, saga and the thriller. To narrow the field to a manageable size, I decided to focus on the way that this popular fiction, across media, represented and utilised the Black Death (1348) in Europe or the recurrence of plague during the medieval period. This left me with a sub-set of fifteen texts, which used plague as a convention to render ideological accounts of social mobility resonant with their readership in Britain during the late 80s and early 90s.

The project has now grown, and the thematic cluster that I am studying stands at an inexhaustive number of over a hundred texts; they address a range of themes pertinent to popular fiction as a whole (see appendix).[1] Their representation of plague in various guises offers a means for a popular examination of the recurrent imagery of Revelation, the Dance of Death, Apocalypse, Millennialism and the Black Death itself. They reveal how popular fiction has to be understood in relation to a cultural climate, multi-media production, a flexible use of genre and in relation to wider cultural practices. The plague narratives identify shifts in the way that Western culture perceives death and the body, science and eschatological visions because they are open to both rational and irrational discourse. They are closely related to media fictions and moral panics regarding HIV, BSE and fatal epidemic diseases in the Third World. Plague is also central to many texts employing the archetype of the vampire and the

metaphors of addiction, sexuality and blood. In recent fiction they are much more concerned with issues of conspiracy and complicity made manifest in the fictional outbreak of fatal epidemic disease. It is this last aspect that I intend to concentrate upon in this discussion.

Plague has been a popular subject for speculative fiction throughout the twentieth century, particularly as a convention to depopulate the world and through which to consider new social arrangements or displacements. At the end of the last century, with a major bubonic plague epidemic in Southern India, Hong Kong, Canton and most Asian seaports, fiction visualizing plague was very much connected with anxieties concerning foreign invasion, although these narratives could be neatly inverted, such as the Martians' demise courtesy of common Earth microbes in H.G. Wells's serial *The War of the Worlds* (1897). At the turn of the present century, plague becomes part of the background or fictive authenticity of the post-holocaust world.[2] It is perceived as an on-going experience and occurrence and not necessarily a sudden catastrophe that can be brought under dramatic control by the intervention of science. Its metaphoric use is associated with visualizations of human obsolescence, ecological anxiety, capitalist logic and spiritual concerns. This new account of the plague in the late 80s and 90s predominantly connected with science fiction (especially the cyberpunk 'dark future' diegesis) and thriller genres contrasts with a very specific use of the fictional experience of plague in narratives of the slightly earlier period.

When I examined the medieval narratives, I wanted to reconsider Umberto Eco's (1976) thesis that recurrent Western fascination with the Middle Ages is an expression of a cultural desire to go back to their roots and explore the origins of capitalism (*Travels* 65).[3] I was mindful that in Britain during this period, plague was a prominent term, frequently employed by media headlines in the 80s as AIDS and HIV came into public consciousness. I anticipated that these medieval narratives would place an onus on morality and sexuality in their representations of the plague. Instead, these accounts of the Black Death largely engaged with a discourse and articulation for individual social mobility and aspiration. Repeatedly the Black Death is portrayed as a

period of opportunity rather than a bleak eschatological landscape. In several instances, this is emphasized by a narration of events which employs a rhetoric of business and financial transactions and these dealings are most definitely neither ethical nor moral. The action in the novels focuses on middle class professionalism, which benefits from a cull of the labor force.

> For those with initiative, the 1350s were good years at Sarum. Despite the shock of the Black Death, the area soon picked itself up again, and in this respect the south and west of Wiltshire was more fortunate than any part of the country.
>
> For not only was the wool trade recovering there, but a new and formidable business was starting to grow: the manufacture of cloth. (Rutherford 539)

Under these circumstances the enterprising villein or younger son of a noble family could prosper; whereas before (the fiction posits) they had been held back by the antiquated regulation of a curiously welfare-oriented feudal system. Not only do these representations of the plague see it as a catastrophe which is eminently survivable, like a stock maket crash; for some it is even profitable. Taken to its extreme in novels such as Rutherford's saga *Sarum* (1987) and Gregory's medieval whodunit *A Plague on Both Your Houses* (1996), protagonists can even plan for it and take advantage of the local disarray found in the wake of fatal epidemic disease.

The sense of the medieval in this British fiction of the 80s is being used to confront the concerns of the cultural climate in which it is either produced or circulated. The narratives are restorative and consensual, laying claim to the return of an individualistic moral order. The plague is linked to the prospect of inevitable material, social and intellectual change which will sweep away the constraints of outmoded social order. For example in the film *The Hour of the Pig* (1993), a young Parisian lawyer goes into the provinces to cool his heels after becoming involved in radical medieval student philosophy.

He hopes to gain experience in the field, but to his horror he finds that he must defend a pig charged with murder in a rural ecclesiastical court. He successfully manages to have the pig acquitted, but he is less successful in his defense of a woman accused of witchcraft. He decides to leave and go back to the sanity of the city at the moment that the plague enters the village. The narrative closes with the implied sense of relief that the plague will cleanse this backward society of feudalism, offering the prospect of the Renaissance in its wake. Many of these texts adhere to motifs and concerns identified by Eco, particularly the rebuilding of the city. They celebrate an idealization of the coming development of citizenship and the birth of democracy in the new towns. Comfortingly, the death toll is rarely as high as has been predicted and, despite personal loss, there is a sense of a definite, civilized future of technological and social progress promised to those who survive.

Eco describes a narrative form of medievalism which values authenticity.[4] Many of the narratives in this sample do consult fourteenth century accounts of the plague (which were written within living memory of the experience) in order to authenticate their historical fiction. They are used in the twentieth century narratives to give a sense of 'local color', a vocabulary and specific examples of tragedy. However, the later re-tellings of the plague choose to ignore the conspiracy narratives that are often accommodated in the original testimonies. The existence of these beliefs in the medieval period resulted in the blame for the plague being placed in some European countries on the Jewish community in particular. They were accused of well-poisoning and executed in their thousands during the late 1340s.

Corruption and conspiracy are a major part of narratives produced in the late 90s which have come more and more to depend upon the thriller format for their structure. Cinematic, televisual or print fiction narratives which use plague as a narrative imperative located in a contemporary or near future setting have a pattern of sequence and form which is very similar to those identified by theoretical accounts of the thriller. The thriller is predicated upon the battle between the innovation of the hero and the motivation of the villain.[5]

However, its central characteristic and structural feature is the presence of a conspiracy that drives the plot. In contrast to the medieval narratives, plague is not seen as a naturally occurring God-given event but the consequence of human activity or passivity often configured narratively as a consequence of conspiracy, incompetence or corruption. I would suggest that narrative development in this category combines these elements:

Category Five-Consequence

Starting points (may be interchangeable)

1. Presentation of the identity of the maverick hero
2. Presentation of the identity of the victims in ordinary life
3. A kerygmatic moment when the hero is identified as a leader/medical genius/great scientist[6]
4. The introduction/arrival of the plague (usually haemorrhaging virus) which may start the countdown of hours or days until catastrophe
5. Presentation of the identity of corruption/ incompetence/terrorism/conspiracy which will allow the virus to effect a catastrophe

Narrative development

6. The maverick hero selects their team (this may be construed as the hunt for patient 0)
7. Battle against the epidemic or predicted epidemic commences
8. A member of the team is sacrificed
9. There is a personal confrontation between the hero and the plague and/or the agents at 5 above
10. The plague situation is temporarily (o = open narrative)/ permanently (c = closed narrative) resolved.

Figure 1

The only one connection between these texts and the medieval ones is their interest in financial metaphors. The designer virus is part of an economic as well as ecological environment. *Insecurity* (1997), a recent virus thriller by Matthew Lynn, views the 70s and 80s in Britain as corrupt decades which gave a research corporation the opportunity to develop bioweapons.[7] In the 90s, Kizog Pharmaceuticals wants to market a vaccine for a virus which is reaching epidemic proportions in Africa. They have the vaccine in pre-production, because they are the creators of the virus. To validate the product, they must hire a researcher to 'discover' it and present her findings convincingly to the media and scientific communities. For the most part this straightforward account of corporate conspiracy and immoral greed is structured by the manoeuvres of a hostile take-over bid between rival companies, as well as by the thriller format.

So plague in this context is part of a new fictive construction which responds to the cultural experience of rapid change in work and leisure during the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century. The prospect of fatal epidemic disease and the healthy paranoia required to achieve political agency in this fiction is predicated upon representations of the rise of the multinational, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the rise of the Middle East.[8] Interest in such scenarios is not confined to fiction. Richard Preston's 1997 novel *The Cobra Event* is a fictional account of bioweapons manufacture in North America. However, its style of international reporting means that it has much in common with Preston's own non-fiction investigations as well as recent BBC documentaries.[9] Stephen King endorses Preston's popular science narration of Ebola in Washington as "one of the most horrifying things I have read in my entire life."[10] Preston is trained as a scientist and journalist, and his narratives retain the sense of investigation and exposé relating the secret histories of anthrax in the Middle East, and plague and smallpox in the Soviet Union in order to underpin his thriller with a sense of media verisimilitude. Using the detective formula in conjunction with conspiracy, these narratives become puzzles suitably laced with postmodern paranoia, which are resolved through detection, integrity and, frequently, science.

Increasingly films and novels use plague as a convention which is more open-ended in order to debate whether a single dedicated professional can or cannot challenge the conspiracy of corporate structures or government. Plague is anticipated in these narratives because the public is portrayed as vulnerable in the face of new social organization and technologies. These anxieties manifest themselves for debate through the representation of plague. In summary, this group of texts are concerned with political intrigue and government corruption, the collapse of medical services and fatal epidemic disease contingencies, the prospect of mass or individual death, scientific integrity and other moral configurations which all lead to eschatological confrontations with the breakdown of presumed order. In the future and near-future diegesis, plague is often just a horrible but commonplace event, a signifier of the social and moral collapse.

The narratives that I want to focus on in particular consider the economics of plague and its relation to a drastically altered twentieth century social environment in much greater depth. They tend to see the virus and epidemic as an eschatological warning, but something that could be resolved by drastic social change. There are three main themes within this sub-set of narratives which belong to the consequence/evolution categories (see appendix): plague and technology, plague and the city, and the relationship between plague and human evolution which is presented to the reader as the acquisition of knowledge on a global scale.

In the 1950s and into the 1960s, the medical practitioner when confronted with the plague usually has to overcome either superstition or the blind incomprehension of local authority that such things can exist in the modern world.[13] These prejudices stand in the way of medical intervention and the social management required to prevent an epidemic. The narratives present the sweeping powers granted to the medical profession and public health inspectors as being very specific, logical and scientific. Alongside this faith in new technology, speculative fiction, particularly science fiction, begins to re-establish the disaster narrative as it renegotiates broader cultural anxieties, values and concerns. The envisaged disaster ceases to be nuclear and

gradually becomes ecological in such fiction during the 1970s. Epidemics in television fiction such as the British television series *Survivors* (1975-7) or the reprint of George Steward's 1949 novel *The Earth Abides* in that period (as well as various children's books of the late 1970s and early 80s) leave protagonists to make a post-plague decision. They must decide whether the emergent society should persevere with the low-tech world in which they find themselves or aspire towards the high-tech paradise they have lost. Increasingly the narrative resolution in the 90s is that technology needs to be rethought, but the solution to the dangers of technology *per se* rests in the exploitative social system, which has developed a dependence on technology. Plague and its indiscriminate effect upon the population is used to sharpen the debate about alternate lifestyles.

An interesting precursor to the contemporary debate is a British book by Robert Foreman published in 1976 called *The Ringway Virus,* which gives a good account of new epidemic disease and the recurrence of the plague in contemporary times. He opens the book by quoting from a treatise written by Barthold Niebuhr in 1816, which I think illustrates the way that this subset of the fiction moves from narrative grounded in a formula of combat to one of ontological challenges:

> The plague not only depopulates and kills it gnaws at the moral stamina and frequently destroys it entirely . . . times of plague are always those in which the bestial and the diabolical side of human nature gains the upper hand. Nor is it necessary to be superstitious or even pious to look upon great plagues as a conflict of the terrestrial forces with the development of mankind.

Foreman's book is quite remarkable as a work of fiction because he has a very firm grasp on the terrestrial forces which would be activated by a planetwide pandemic. All of the debates we continue today and which popular plague-oriented non-fiction offers as revelation flourish in this novel. We follow the progress of an influenza-type

disease contracted by the survivors of a plane crash. Foreman is clear that he is extrapolating from the contemporary experience of Lassa in 1969 and Marburg in 1967. He connects the epidemic with larger ecological concerns:

> Put at its grimmest, the child Barbara Lambert (see Ringway File) may have been a benefactor in that the virus which developed in her body saved countless millions of people from dying in appalling misery and conflict from the year 2000 on through starvation caused by overpopulation and the social upheavals consequent upon it, and the inevitable shortages of resources capable of sustaining bearable life. (Foreman 281)

The book has an implicit global scale. It also has a significant lack of closure; society does break down and medical professionals have to concede that they cannot produce a vaccine. As Foreman has suggested a definite political agenda, then such a non-formulaic ending could be expected. However, open plague narratives which neither find a cure so that the original state of order can be restored, nor establish a new and satisfactory post-plague culture, are far from uncommon.

In cyberpunk fiction of the 1980s the option to reorganize social life and become a better caretaker of the environment has not been taken up by the near-future society. In fact, the cyberpunk texts contrast quite significantly with feminist utopian and dystopian writing of the same period. Both sets of writers, however, are attempting to negotiate similar cultural tensions concerning technology and changes in work, citizenship and global economies. The rural wastes surrounding the city in the cyberpunk diegesis are rarely occupied, and the inhabitants either live in the strictly corporate enclave or exist nomadically in the shifting street cultures of the decaying postmodern environment. The cyberpunk examples have definite economic premises to their diegesis, and when they represent fatal epidemic disease, it is viewed from this perspective. The protagonist of Kadrey's

Metrophage (1988) is a drug dealer who has walked out of the corrupt committee for public health and has become a pusher of medicines, through which he becomes involved with the activities of the Croakers—outlaw anarchist physicians.

One of the most interesting plague motifs in cyberpunk is the relationship between plague and obsolescence which is present in various cyberpunk narratives and was added to the 1996 cinematic version of Gibson's short story, "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981). Here the plague affects the body's ability to interface between the human nervous system and the prosthetic implant. Therefore the characters lose the edge. They are unable to work and face little chance of survival in a society which lacks a social welfare system and demands that the workforce must upgrade the body in order to meet the requirements of the work environment. Corporeal structure is realized to suit the demands of intensified work discipline. The plague gives characters in this situation a little respite to decide whether they want to continue to live in this fashion. Plague is not a discourse of evil (in some narratives the virus is anthropomorphised as a villain), or conspiracy (although the cure might be so linked); it becomes a logical or inevitable consequence of a technologically-accelerated social system and way of living.[12]

Such passages of reflection and consideration visualize plague as something which is natural and foreseeable, part of a process of evolution rather than a glitch in the maintenance of civilization. In this mode, plague is very often related to technology. The example that I am going to look at is Sheri Tepper's *A Plague of Angels* (1994). Tepper's novel is the type of narrative examining sex and morality which I was expecting to find in the earlier medieval thematic cluster.[13] All the characters live out their lives in an alternative future diegesis with the constant threat of contracting a range of sexually transmitted immune deficiency diseases (IDDIs). In folklore, it is believed that their ancestors fled to the stars to escape the epidemic. On this planet there is a contrast between the Edgers, who are farmers and keep their population stable, and the cities, which have a fluctuating population because of gang wars. The Edgers explain their

current existence as a consequence of ecological collapse through population crisis:

> Could have been most anything: the climate heating up, or an ice age coming, chemicals getting into the oceans that killed the coral, killed the fish; too much ultraviolet getting through the atmosphere, burning everybody. Or it might have been one group fighting another who knows? I do know men went to the stars just in time. For if they hadn't gone then, there'd have been nothing left of the Earth at all. (Tepper 183)

The narrative speculates on the city's inability to learn to respond to the plague and the continuing fascination held by technology for those who are still unreconstructed in their economic and social practices. Therefore, rather than directing resources to solving serious local problems one group of protagonists has accumulated enough power to attempt to emulate their ancestors and go to the stars. The IDDIs become a renewed crisis as a drug is circulated which acts as a catalyst for the dormant variants of the virus. As the main protagonist journeys through this world, he discovers that there are other ways of living which are under the jurisdiction of the Mankind Management Group and which do not seem immediately attractive to him:

> In Sages' Land we have no nonsense, no children without proper preparation and care. No sexual diseases passed about to kill us or our children. (Tepper 296)

The hero is faced with the prospect of being examined in order to enter the country in search of knowledge, and the consequences of examination are "neutering, implanting or being properly outfitted." Under this social system citizens can protect themselves from the disease, but for the outsider it represents serious changes in lifestyle, particularly intergenerational and gendered relationships. Tepper reiterates in the text that there are no acceptable solutions to some prob-

lems. The plague is there to wipe out the city:

> When places grow too large for peace and health, with people who are not countrymen, but warring tribes, they inevitably die. All such places carry their own destruction within them. (Tepper 336)

Drugs and disease are seen as scourges of civilization alongside fantasy monsters. Those who remember and celebrate technology retreat to 'places of power', and it is this which is accelerating their destruction. The resolution of the narrative is the emergence of six groups who have been battling to save the planet through environmental technologies and tasks such as tree planting, ozone plants, animal husbandry, soil management and cleaning up pollutants. These activities can now take place in the open. The novel presents a gradual coming to terms with the destruction of the city, the rejection of earlier cultural forms and ways and of living established and fostered by the urban experience and the expediency of the new social order as being one of willed rather than enforced transformation. Its epic scale is effected through the climactic battle which figures fantasy monsters and armies. The presence of fatal epidemic disease in this discursive matrix reinforces a link between visible current concerns and more nebulous accounts of projected ecological eschatology.

Pat Murphy's novel *The City Not Long After* (1989) treats this conceit, i.e. the relationship between plague and the death of the city as an event that results in peace, with a similar combination of the fantastic and the revolutionary. Throughout the novel, which is set in a depopulated, haunted city whose inhabitants must confront aggressive outsiders, Murphy reiterates the phrases "Before the Plague," "After the Plague" and "When first the Plague." In her explanation of the plague's origins, it is conceived quite literally as a gift of peace. The aftermath of the plague allows characters to mediate the affects of their experience of urban life and re-make their way of living.

These narratives invite the reader to consider plague as a stage of social evolution and a process of change whereby alternative ways

of living and facing up to malpractices of the past are viable propositions. There are a set of texts which also do this directly; for example, Walter Miller's "Dark Benediction," Jeff Noon's *Pollen* and Brin's "The Giving Plague," all see disease as actually changing humanity for the better, physically and more particularly in terms of emotional predisposition. Brin's short story is delightful, as the virus, in order to sustain its human host, makes it eat better, take regular exercise and be nicer to fellow humans with a single scientist left trying to cry plague in a world that is happier and healthier.[14] Plague then becomes, as in Bear's novel, *Blood Music*, a convention through which to confront the prospect of massive social change. The characters witness urban conurbations coming to a shuddering spasmodic halt, and their inhabitants have to live by alternate means. Or similarly, in *Twelve Monkeys,* where plague is at the root of the social change and the dystopia, we are not shown its effect and escalating potential; fatal epidemic disease no longer results in a closed narrative of technological control. Instead, its major victim is the city itself and the certainty of social systems, values and beliefs.

Examining popular fiction is a way of assessing cultural values and particular changes to them. Therefore, what is particularly interesting about these texts is that they have a tendency to share a consensual resolution needed that implies a desired change to the status quo. This is realized either physically or materially, such as the solution of choosing not to restore the city, or socially, such as the widespread rejection of capitalist ideology which underpins the city in favor of more ecologically concerned beliefs and social practices. The consensual resolution to this group of novels is the prospect of change and an understanding of a crisis discernible outside the fictional world, which may lead to the emergence of a real epidemic.

The last thematic concern is frequently associated with the presentation of knowledge, and to explore this I am going to look at Patrick Lynch's *Carriers*.[15] This novel combines the thriller format with the larger scale ecological concerns of the previous texts, all of which use a less well-defined structure so that it is difficult for them to effect closure through the revelation of the conspiracy and confrontation

with the villain. Like *The Ringway Virus*, they are interested in presenting information about the relationship between exploitative capitalist practice and ecological collapse through the fictional manifestation of fatal epidemic disease. *Carriers* has a series of protagonists and a synchronistic presentation of the puzzle and the experience or progress of the disease, rather than the stages of an investigation focussed on a single professional hero. The most significant aspect of this example, however, is that it offers a causal account of global inter-relatedness and the breakdown of ecosystems after unmindful human interventions which result in plague. Lynch chooses to represent a full variety of potential characters involved in the crisis.[16] The corruption and/or conspiracy is relatively straightforward. In striving to perfect fertility treatment, a drug company transgresses the guidelines for genetic research, and the result is the birth of twins who, when they move out of North America, come into contact with an unknown antigen in the new environment which produces a virus. They are immune, but it is fatal to other forms of life, including human. Onto this basic biothriller format Lynch grafts an open-ended discussion about the place of disease in everyday life which he feels will be of interest to his readers:

> Marshallton, Delaware. August 4th
>
> Standing in front of the empty cage, Carl Reiner struggled to suppress the feeling that something bad was happening in Room D. The death of a monkey in quarantine, *macara nemestrina* 014 in this case, was not an unusual event. When you moved an animal from one part of the world to another you inevitably exposed it to new microbiological environments to which its immune system was not adapted. When European and native Americans first started coming into contact with each other, epidemics were often the result; a bacterium or virus that gave a Mayan Indian laryngitis could kill a Spaniard and vice versa. That was what ecosystems were all about. Yet there was

> something about this, about the way all eight monkeys had fallen sick at the same time, within hours of each other, and just the look of the dead animal, that felt—it wasn't easy to find a word for it—*unnatural*. (Lynch 77)

Plague has then become a convention, not just for depopulating the Earth, or for formulaic drama, but as a mode for exploring narrative belief in high level and commonplace corruption, exploitative practices and the nature of international relations. Indonesia, in Lynch's *Carriers,* is differentiated with a series of specific living arrangements and locations rather than having one 'very jungle' and one 'less jungle' location. Understanding the plague and recognizing it as 'un-natural' by turning to other sciences to explain local politics at an ecological as well as social level is the thrust of the tale. Once the heroine has done that, she is ready to confront the activities of scientists in her own country, which have rendered her children vulnerable. To do so she has to understand the interconnections between her own environment and that of others. The virus is not the enemy. The image of the fiend invading the body is displaced by a more prevalent metaphor that sees humankind as an invading virus. There is a definite shift in cultural consciousness as far as the plague narratives are concerned which relates to current cultural understanding and popular debate concerning medicine and technology. The fictional scientist no longer spends so much time trying to understand the virus as a separate entity and instead tries to ascertain or demand knowledge of the eco-system from which it originates, as well as the political and social systems in which the consequence of plague will be manifest. Therefore ignorance of such areas of concern is punishable quite literally by death. Plague in this fiction is not perceived as a natural disaster that must be endured. It is a consequence that requires human agency, an alarm concerning other social, economic and ecological issues prompting forays of imaginative speculation to solve these problems through drastic action. Whether this is a consensual or subversive mental activity has yet to be determined.

NOTES

[1] This list of texts used for the development of the discussion in this paper is limited to a preliminary (and ongoing) survey of twentieth century, predominantly post-Second World War fiction. At a later age the project aims to examine nineteenth century fictional accounts of fatal epidemic disease including narrative painting at a later stage.

[2] However, the connotative associations between corporeal disease and foreign invasion still exist. In the BBC drama *Black Easter* (1995), the strict immigration laws on the German border enacted to hold back a Soviet and Muslim 'invasion of immigrants' is legitimated by an ideology of quarantine.

[3] The page numbers cited relate to the 1986 Picador edition of collected Eco essays, *Travels in Hyperreality*.

[4] Eco suggests that philological reconstruction is a form of medieval narrative which contrasts and disputes quasi-medieval fantasy (90).

[5] J. Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* 8, 16.

[6] Palmer 64. Palmer uses the term which is drawn from early Christian theology and refers to the proclamation of the gospels to equate the hero with the quality of inspiring others and announcing their ability to meet the coming battle.

[7] A title made all the more interesting as Eco notes "insecurity" as a key term through which to understand the cultural fascination with the Middle Ages in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

[8] The popularity of *The X-Files* is another strong example of the narrative logic of paranoia.

[9] Two programmes broadcast in 1998 under the series title *Plague Wars*, 'Russia-Apocalypse Delayed' and 'South Africa-the Secret Killings', broadcast in 1998 were interested in the same causes for concern dating from the 1970s, i.e., Biopreparat in the Soviet Union and anthrax bio-terrorism in South Africa.

[10] Cover endorsement for the British edition of *The Hot Zone* (1994).

[11] As an example of this see Kazan, *Panic in the Streets* (1950).

[12] In film, notably *Black Death* (1993), a common motif is the regular image of the virus's development shown on a microscope slide. Sound cues anchor the impression that the virus is acting aggressively. Some print fiction narratives represent the virus as almost sentient and an entity bent on immoral destruction.

[13] Although the 1995 film *Terminal Virus/Last Chance* which depicts both parties after sexual intercourse succumbing to blistering sores after a few hours and death in twenty-four hours is an extreme example of these cultural fears.

[14] Robin Cook's novel *Invasion* inverts this. Flu-like symptoms result in the revival of an alien virus implemented in mankind's genetic code at the beginning of the species' evolution by potential alien invaders. The virus modifies humans, accentuating their sense, but then suppresses their will and mutates their corporeal form. The changes signify the prospect of invasion.

[15] This book was made into a film by an American/European financed consortium a year after its publication. Metzger, *Carriers* (1997).

[16] In the month of August as well as the narrative action in Delaware from which the quote is taken, the story unfolds from Muratebo, Padang, Riau and Jambi Provinces in West Sumatra, New York, Maryland, Fort Detrick, Florida, Jakarta and London. All these points are interconnected to the local outbreak of the genetically engineered virus in Indonesia.

Appendix

Thematic Cluster-Fatal Epidemic Disease (20th Century)

Date	Author/Dir	Title	Period	Genre	Category
1842Pf	Poe, EA	*The Masque of the Red Death*	Med.	Horror	———
1893Ss	Poe EA	"King Pest"	Med. 1348	Horror	———
1894Ss	Wells, HG	The Stolen Bacillus	Present	Science Fiction	Terrorism
1912Pf	London, Jack	*The Scarlet Plague*	Future	Science Fiction	———
1945F	Robson, Marc	*Isle of the Death*	1912	Horror	Mystic

1949Pf	Stewart, GR	*Earth Abides*	Present	Science Fiction	Consequence o
1950F	Kazan, Elia	*Panic in the Streets*	Present	Thriller	Consequence c
1962Ss	Miller, Walter	"Dark Benediction"	Present	Science Fiction	Evolution
1963F	Guest, Val	*80,000 Suspects*	Present	Thriller	Consequence c
1964F	Corman, Roger	*The Masque of the Red Death*	Med.	Horror	————
1966Pf	Harrison, Harry	*The Plague from Space*	Future	Science Fiction	————
1969PF	Crichton, Michael	*The Andromeda Strain*	Present	Thriller	Alien
1971F	Segal, Boris	*The Omega Man*	Near Future	Science Fiction	Evolution
1974Pf	Slaughter, EG	*Plague Ship*	Present	Medical Fiction	Consequence c
1975Tv	Nation, Terry	*Survivors*	Present	Science Fiction	Consequence c
1976Pf	Canning, Victor	*The Doomsday Carrier*	Present	Thriller	Consequenc c
1976PF	Yabro, C Quinn	*The Time of the 4th Horsemtid*	Future	Science Fiction	Consequence o
1977Pf	Christopher, John	*Empty World*	Near Future	Science Fiction YA	————
1977Pf	Foreman, R	*The Ringway Virus*	Present	Science Fiction	Consequence o
1978Pf	King, Stephen	*The Stand*	Near Future	SF/Horror	Evolution
1980Pf	Plaidy, Jean	*The Vine on the Heron*	1314-1369	Romance	Background
1982Pf	Herbert, Frank	*The White Plague*	Present	Thriller	Terrorism
1983Pf	Bear, Greg	*Blood Music*	Present	Science Fiction	Evolution
1985Pf	Rayner, Claire	*The Virus Man*	Present	Medical Fiction	Consequence o
1987Pf	Rutherford, Edward	*Saram*	1348-1381	Saga	Social Mobility
1988Ss	Brin, D	"The Giving Plague"	Future	Science Fiction	Evolution
1988PF	Kadrey, R	*Metrophage*	Near Future	Science Fiction	Consequence c
1988F	Ward, Vincent	*The Navigator*	1348/1988	Drama	Background
1989F	————	*Quarantine*	Future	Science Fiction	Consequence c
1989Pf	Holland, Cecelia	*The Lords of Vanmartin*	Med. 1346-1358	Historical Fiction	Social Mobility
1989Pf	Murphy, Pat	*The City Not Long After*	Near Future	Science Fiction	Background
1989Pf	Riley, Judith	*A Vision of Light*	1355	Romance	Mystic
1989Pf	Ure, Jean	*Plague 99*	Near Future	Science Fiction YA	————
1990Pf	MacCoun, Catherine	*The Age of Miracles*	Med. 1345-48	Romance	Mystic
1991Pf	Anand, Valerie	*The Ruthless Yeoman*	Med. 1330-1350	Romance	Social Mobility
1991Ss	Egan, G	"Blood Sisters"	Near Future	Science Fiction	Consequence c
1991PF	Nikiforuk, Andrew	*The Fourth Horseman*	His	Non-Fiction	Popular Science
1991Pf	Piercy, M	*He, She & It*	Future	Science Fiction	Background
1991Pf	Roberts, Wm Owen	*Pestilence*	Med. 1347	Historical Fiction	————
1992F	de Rouvre, C	*The Plague*	Near Future	Thriller	Consequence c

1992Pf	Willis, Connie	*The Doomsday Book*	1340/2054	Science Fiction	Consequence c
1992Pf	Wills, C	*Plagues*	Non-Fiction	Popular Science	
1993Pf	Compton, DG	*Nomansland*	Future	Science Fiction	Consequence c
1993Pf	Constantine, Storm	*Signs for the Sacred*	Alternative	Fantasy	————
1993F	Larry, Sheldon	*Black Death*	Present	Thriller	Consequence c
1993Pf	McClure, Ken	*Pestilence*	Present	Medical Thriller	Consequence c
1993F	Megahey, Leslie	*The Hour of the Pig*	1348	Historical Fiction	Social Mobility
1994Pf	Garrett, L	*The Coming Plague*	His	Non-Fiction	Popular Science
1994Pf	Jauncey, James	*The Maymaker*	Med. 1345-48	Historical Fiction	Social Mobility
1994Pf	Prescott, R	*The Hot Zone*	Contemporary	Non-Fiction	Popular Science
1994Pf	Tepper, S	*A Plague of Angels*	Future	Science Fiction	Consequence c
1995Tv	Bolt, Ben	*Black Easter*	Near Future	Drama	Consequence o
1995F	Golden, Dan	*Terminal Virus/Last Chance*	Future	Science Fiction	————
1995F	Haynes, T	*Safe*	Present	Drama	Consequence o
1995Pf	Karlen, A	*Plague's Progress*	His	Non-Fiction	Popular Science
1995Pf	Noon, J	*Pollen*	Near Future	Science Fiction	Evolution
1995F	Peterson, W	*Outbreak*	Present	Thriller	Consequence c
1995Pf	Ransom, Bob	*Burn*	Near Future	Science Fiction	Terrorism
1995Pf	Robb, Candace	*The Nun's Tale*	1365	Detective	Background
1995Pf	Unsworth, Barry	*Morality Play*	1361	Historical Fiction	Background
1996Pf	Bragg, Melvyn	*Credo*	657-684	Saga	Background
1996Pf	Clancy, Tom	*Executive Orders*	Present	Thriller	————
1996Pf	Fullilove, Eric	*Circle of One*	Future	Science Fiction	Evolution
1996F	Gilliam, Terry	*Twelve Monkeys*	Future/Near Future	Thriller	Terrorism
1996Pf	Gregory, Susanna	*A Plague on Both Your Houses*	Med. 1348-9	Detective	Social Mobility
1996F	Laneurville, E	*Doomsday Virus*	Present	Thriller	Consequence o
1996F	Longo, R	"Johnny Mnemonic"	Near Future	Science Fiction	Consequence c
1996Pf	Lynch, Patrick	*Carriers*	Present	Thriller	Consequence c
1996Pf	McCormick, J & Susan, Fisher-Hoch	*The Virus Hunters*	Contemporary	Non-Fiction	Popular Science
1996Pf	Ouellette, Pierre	*The Third Pandemic*	Present	Thriller	————
1997Tv	*Bliss* 'All Fall Down'	Present	Medical Fiction	Consequence c	
1997Tv	————	Breakout	Present	Drama	Consequence c
1997Tv	*Police 2020*	Pilot	Near Future	Detective	Background
1997Tv	*Stargate SG1*	"Singularity"	Present	Science Fiction	Terrorism

1997Tv	*Star Trek: Voyager*	"Macrocosm"	Future	Science Fiction	Evolution
1997Pf	Anderson, Kevin	*The X-Files: Antibodies*	Present	Horror	Evolution
1997Pf	Antieau, Kim	*The Gaia Websters*	Future	Science Fiction	Evolution
1997F	Carpenter, John	*Escape from LA*	Near Future	Action Adventure	Background
1997Pf	Cook, Robin	*Invasion*	Present	Medical Thriller	Evolution
1997Pf	Cornwell, Patricia	*Unnatural Exposure*	Present	Detective	Terrorism
1997Pf	Desowitz, Robert	*Tropical Diseases*	His	Non-Fiction	Popular Science
1997Pf	Kiple, Kenneth	*Plague, Pox and Pestilence*	His	Non-Fiction	Popular Science
1997Pf	Lindsay, Paul	*Freedom to Kill*	Present	Thriller	Terrorism
1997Pf	Lynn, Matthew	*Insecurity*	Present	Thriller	Consequence c
1997F	Metzger, Alan	*Carriers*	Present	Thriller	Consequence c
1997Pf	Preston, Lincoln	*Mount Dragon*	Present	Thriller	Consequence c
1997Pf	Preston, Richard	*The Cobra Event*	Present	Thriller	Terrorism
1998Tv	*Millennium*	'The Fourth Horseman'	Near Future	Horror	————
1998Tv	*Millennium*	'The Time is Now'	Near Future	Horror	————
1998Pf	Case, John	*The First Horseman*	Present	Thriller	————
1998Pf	Goonan, Kathleen	*Queen City Jazz*	Future	Science Fiction	————
1998Pf	Kerr, Philip	*The Second Angel*	Future	Thriller	————
1998Pf	McCormac, Rory	*Outbreak*	Present	Thriller	Terrorism
1998Pf	Roe, Caroline	*Remedy for Treason*	Med. 1353	Detective	————
1998Pf	Ryan, Frank	*Virus X*	Contemporary	Non-Fiction	Popular Science
1998Pf	Sutherland, Tricia	*Dreaming in Smoke*	Future	Science Fiction	Evolution
1998Tv	Syddall, Clive	*Plague Wars*	His	Non-Fiction	Popular

Abbreviations

Med.	Medieval	Science Fiction YA	Young adult	SF	Science Fiction
His.	Historical survey				